

White grievance was always part of Republican identity, but now it's the very core

Laura Clawson

Tuesday February 08, 2022 10:48 AM EST

The Republican conviction that schools are teaching white kids to feel guilty and self-hating merely by teaching the history of the United States isn't an isolated belief. It's part of a broader Republican politics of white grievance and self-pity coming from the very top, CNN's John Harwood shows, as when Donald Trump insists that Democrats are sending white people to "the back of the line" for COVID-19 care. Polling data shows starkly how Republicans have committed to this "white people are the real victims" stance.

White Republicans have gone from generally rejecting the view that white people face "a lot of discrimination" to embracing it. In 2015, 38% of white Republicans agreed with that statement, according to polling by the Public Religion Research Institute, while 61% disagreed. Not great numbers, given that we're talking about 38% of white Republicans signing on to an overtly false statement, but 61% is a strong majority saying no. In 2021, though, 55% of white Republicans agreed that white people face a lot of discrimination, with just 45% disagreeing. You're talking about significant movement away from reality. Also in 2021, a Pew Research Center poll found Republicans more likely to say that white people face a lot of discrimination than that Black people do—26% to 17%.

A Cato Institute researcher who tracks Trump supporters has found that 73% of his 2020 voters believe that "today discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities," Harwood reports, and a similar number disagree with the statement that "American society systematically advantages white people."

Similarly, multiple polls show large numbers of Republicans opposed to teaching anything about racism in U.S. history.

White Republicans are looking around them at a system in which every president but one and every vice president but one has been a white man, along with all but seven Supreme Court justices, and firmly asserting that white people are the real victims, based largely on the fact

that the tiny handful of exceptions to white men controlling the positions of power have been recent.

White Republicans are looking around them at an economy in which Black households had a median wealth of \$24,100, compared with \$189,100 for white households—meaning Black households had just 12.7% of the wealth of white households—and 400 billionaires have more wealth than 10 million Black households and the Black unemployment rate is twice as high as the white unemployment rate and the tax code disadvantages Black people, and they're concluding that white people are the real victims.

What do you even say to that? To that deep a level of victim mentality, in which the mere prospect of seeing centuries of political and economic and institutional advantage seized through violence be redistributed ever so slightly leads to the conviction that you, a member of the group that has been and remains on top, are being discriminated against?

Barack Obama was elected president, and then he was reelected president, and white Republicans just could not take it. And then here came Donald Trump to tell them that they were *right* to feel that way, that even a small handful of Black people succeeding was a significant danger to all white people, and Republicans have run with that.

White grievance has long been a central aspect of Republican identity, but under Trump—and in the backlash to Obama—it has been elevated and nurtured and brought out into public as a strident demand for accommodation in a way that the previous decades of Republicans did not quite dare. In this moment, white women feel empowered to come out and demand the banning of even the most upbeat and anodyne of children's books if they're in any way about the racial history of the United States. Republican politicians run on opposition to the teaching of great books if they deal with slavery in a way that reflects the brutality of slavery. (Related, Republican school boards ban Holocaust books that reflect the brutality of the Holocaust.)

In their focus on education, older Republicans are trying to recreate their own sense of grievance in another generation of white people. If they succeed at completely centering white people in U.S. history, erasing Black people and Indigenous people and other people of color from that history and simultaneously denying the nation's voluminous history of violent racism, then when that next generation, the kids who are being taught this literally whitewashed history, is confronted with reality, they too will feel that they are losing, that something that is theirs is being stolen. Anti-CRT panic is a blatant effort to stoke white grievance for decades to come. And it's coming from a political party that has made clear that it endorses violent insurrection to maintain power.