



## Led by Trump, GOP increasingly casts White people as racism's victims

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Early barbs for President Joe Biden's Supreme Court selection process have helped crystallize a rising Republican line of attack against Democrats.

"He's saying, 'If you're a White guy, tough luck,' " complained Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas.

Cruz was referring to Biden's vow to name a Black woman to the Supreme Court for the first time in American history. But that same sense of grievance propels the drive by Republican state and local officials to shield the psyches of White students through constraints on what schools teach about slavery and modern-day discrimination against non-White people

It finds its starkest expression, characteristically, from the top Republican of all. In recent days former President Donald Trump has falsely accused Democrats of putting White people at "the back of the line" for coronavirus medical care and has blasted prosecutorial "racists" -- a jibe at Black women in New York and Atlanta who are probing his conduct.

Appeals to bigotry are nothing new for Trump. The modern Republican Party itself has been shaped in crucial ways by racial division long before he entered politics.

But what's striking now, nine months before midterm elections, is how explicitly Trump and his GOP followers have embraced a theme that inverts the onus of racism in America. Whatever history shows, they insist, White people today represent its victims at least as much as Blacks and other minorities.

The theme's effectiveness is uncertain. Unlike Barack Obama, the first African American President, who preceded him in the White House, Trump lost his reelection bid. But it has become second nature to the twice-impeached former President and a large swath of the GOP. "The message," as Democratic pollster Cornell Belcher puts it, "is to pour as much gasoline on the fire of White grievance and victimhood as possible to energize and mobilize their vote."

Trump's rise has been both cause and effect of that swelling grievance. The so-called "Southern strategy," from which Republicans harvested support from racial conservatives after Democrats nationally embraced the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, proved a formative event in the party's evolution.

Race-driven wedge issues, from school busing to welfare to criminal justice, subsequently gained increasing prominence in Republican politics. In deference to the sensibilities of more socially liberal voters, as the late strategist Lee Atwater once explained, GOP candidates over time stripped overt racial references from discussion of those issues.

But Trump cast restraint aside, opening his winning 2016 presidential campaign by smearing Mexican immigrants as criminals. He kept it up through his losing 2020 contest, when he warned that fair housing laws would destroy suburban neighborhoods, blasted the removal of Confederate symbols and assailed racial justice protesters in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

The GOP rank and file has followed suit. With the Census Bureau projecting that demographic change will make America a majority-minority nation within a generation, most White Republicans now claim the status of victim.

In October 2015, for example, polling by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that a 61% majority of White Republicans rejected the idea that White people faced "a lot of discrimination" and just 38% said they did.

By January 2021, those views had flipped. A 55% majority of White Republicans said White people face a lot of discrimination, while 45% said they did not. Among all Americans aside from White Republicans, 26% said White people face a lot of discrimination, while 72% said they did not.

Other surveys have pointed in the same direction. A March 2021 Pew Research Center poll found Republicans more likely to believe that White people face a lot of discrimination than that Black, Hispanic or Asian Americans do.

Emily Ekins of the libertarian Cato Institute, who has closely tracked Trump's following, 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." A similar proportion disagree that "American society systematically advantages white people," while an even larger 87% reject the view that "white people should feel guilty about racial inequality."

Those lopsided results explain why attacks on "critical race theory" have spread like wildfire among Republican politicians. Glenn Youngkin, the former private equity executive who won the Virginia governorship last November, began his term with an executive order prohibiting schools from teaching "inherently divisive" concepts that "instruct students to only view life through the lens of race and presumes that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive, and that other students are victims."

Against the historical backdrop that 94% of Supreme Court justices have been White men, it appears unlikely that White grievance will derail Biden's ultimate choice to replace retiring

Justice Stephen Breyer. At least one top contender, Ketanji Brown Jackson, drew support from all 50 Democrats and three Republicans for an appeals court seat a few months ago.

Nor are appeals to White grievance assured of enhancing Republican results next November. The better-educated suburban swing voters least likely to respond to them turn out at disproportionate rates in midterm elections.

"Every year these appeals are getting less and less powerful," said Celinda Lake, a pollster who advised Biden's 2020 campaign. "Just because it's happening doesn't mean it's a winning strategy."