



Why We Should Talk about Racism—And How to Do It

Michael Kraus, Yale University

Discussing American racism is challenging. In the past, centering issues of racial justice has generated feelings of fear and threat among white Americans—something that galvanized support for conservative politics. Such patterns have been studied in the social sciences for decades, and messaging strategies that capitalize on white threat have [characterized conservative politics](#) since at least Reconstruction. As a response to current discussions around racial inequities, some moderate political strategists claim that politicians must denounce or downplay the role racism has played in American history in order to win elections. However, our research suggests that real progress toward racial equity in the United States must be based in an American public with a more accurate conception of the complex and constant role of race and racism in our nation.

The Path to Political Progress

There has been a persistent conflict in public discourse, particularly recently, about whether and [how to talk about American racism](#). Following from the mass participation in protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, conservative political strategists have campaigned to remove discussions of racism from our public school classrooms, because, the argument has gone, the curriculum would vilify white children, or indoctrinate people into radical ideologies. Moderate political strategies, operating from a concern that such conservative messaging campaigns work, have argued that democratic politics must denounce or downplay the narrative that racism is central to American history in order to win elections. The sum of this prevailing logic seems to be that facing American racism is a recipe for conservative political victory.

However, the evidence suggests that confronting the complex and constant role of race and racism, rather than avoiding it, is the path forward to political progress. Contrary to these conservative and moderate political strategists, public opinion polls generally favor teaching American racism in schools. For instance, a recent ABC survey suggests there is broad support for teaching the complex history of racism in the United States ([including support from 44% of Republicans surveyed](#)), and there has been [encouraging evidence](#) of white parents having color-conscious conversations with their children.

Social scientists have also been constructing messaging strategies to counter white racial threat. This research finds that messaging strategies that discuss race directly tend to be more effective than those taking the race-neutral approach favored by moderates. [In the race-class narrative project](#), for instance, a messaging strategy that directly highlights the existence of racial differences was more effective than a race neutral messaging strategy for increasing support for equity-focused economic policies.

Changing Perceptions of Racism

In [our own research](#), we found that teaching an accurate accounting of American racism is possible, and lays the groundwork for progress toward racial equity and justice. Participants in our study were exposed to one of three options for learning about the racial inequality between white and Black families. In the first, participants were given a narrative about a single Black family and their own specific struggle with American racism. In the second, participants learned about racial inequality through real data about Black-white inequality in wealth, housing, and education. The third group of participants received both the narrative and data information in a combined format. We then asked participants about how they were thinking about American society in the context of what they were learning, and to make estimates of the magnitude of wealth inequality between Black and white families—[earlier work shows that Americans misperceive this fact to a large extent](#).

In our study, the participants who heard only the narrative for one family's struggle did not change their estimate on Black-white inequality, but when participants were given facts through real data, both with or without the narrative, they were more accurate in their perceptions of the magnitude of the Black-White wealth gap. Critically, the effect of the intervention on perceptions of Black-white wealth inequality was equivalent for both white respondents and respondents of color. It is also important to note that participants who received the data information saw a change in focus in their apparent understanding of racism in America: it reduced the amount that participants saw personal success as a remedy for a deeply structural problem like racism, which is built into our laws and institutions.

Recommendations

What our study and others suggest is that the American public is both ready and able to handle the challenge of discussing American racism. The studies also suggest that these honest lessons, that contend with the past and contemporary role of race in America, can reduce the reliance on simple achievement-based solutions to racial inequality and can lay the necessary groundwork for popular support for enacting equity-enhancing economic policy. Importantly, though white racial threat remains a concern, in many ways it has always been the great concern of American politics, and simply ignoring this feature of political life does not make it disappear, or render it less animating to those who would use white grievance to galvanize authoritarian regimes. In the end, there is no race neutral path to achieving the racially egalitarian society many of us desire. Instead, the American public must bravely contend with the racism that is part of our past and present reality.

Read more in Bennett Callaghan, Leilah Harouni, Cydney H. Dupree, Michael W. Kraus, and Jennifer A. Richeson, “Testing the Efficacy of Three Informational Interventions for Reducing Misperceptions of the Black–White Wealth Gap.” *PNAS* 118, no. 38 (2021).