

Minimum wage wins, affirmative action loses

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The two ballot initiatives

Joe Biden lost Florida this year even while winning the national popular vote by a large margin. That's a clear sign that this longtime swing state is settling down with a distinctly reddish hue. At the same time, a referendum to [raise the state's minimum wage to \\$15/hour secured over 60 percent of the vote](#) — a clear sign that this issue appeals across party lines. [Polls from Pew](#) and others routinely show 40 percent or more of self-identified Republicans backing minimum wage increases, along with overwhelming support from Democrats.

And the support isn't just theoretical. In the 2018 cycle, states as red as [Missouri and Arkansas approved minimum wage increases at the ballot box](#).

At the very same time, California's Proposition 16 — which would have re-legalized affirmative action in college admissions and state contracting decisions — [lost soundly in a much more progressive state](#) where less than 40 percent of the population is non-Hispanic white.

Whatever the specific merits of these ideas, the *political* lesson seems fairly clear. Raising the minimum wage is *more* popular than the generic Democratic Party brand, while race-conscious admissions and contracting policies are less so. And given that minimum wage increases [very disproportionately benefit Black and Latino households](#), it's not clear that there's an actual tradeoff in terms of achieving more racial equity. Yet despite the minimum wage's wild popularity, Democrats didn't do much to highlight their support for it in the recent Presidential campaign. As the eyes of the political world shift to two Senate races in a state — Georgia — whose official minimum wage is *below* the federal wage floor, it might be smart to try to refocus on a clear winning issue.

California Democrats couldn't get affirmative action over the top

The state of California banned affirmative action practices in a [1996 referendum that had serious consequences](#) for the composition of the state's elite college campuses.

The share of African-American students at UC Berkeley fell from 6-7 percent to just 3 percent (about half their share of the state's high school graduates), while Latinos are only 15 percent of Berkeley's freshman class despite being a majority of the state's public high school graduates. Asian students, meanwhile, are [represented at twice their demographic weight at Berkeley](#).

The ballot initiative to bring back affirmative action was [widely supported by the state's Democratic Party elected officials](#), including Kamala Harris, Dianne Feinstein, Gavin Newsom, Nancy Pelosi, and the mayors of Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, and Sacramento, plus the state's Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Controller, and Treasurer.

The strength of the Proposition 16 bandwagon in part reflects the growing salience in progressive circles of [new ideas about antiracism](#) as opposed to simply being “not racist.” Ibram Kendi, in his best-selling book *How To Be an Antiracist*, argues that anti-discrimination norms are mistaken.

“The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity,” he writes. “If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist.”

Berkeley’s current admissions, on this view, are inequitable and racist, while passing the proposition would be antiracist. But [writers like Constance Grady questioned all along](#) whether the soaring sales of books by Kendi and others really amounted to an ideological watershed. And the message of the California initiative seems to be largely no. Polling from back in 2019 indicated that [large majorities of Americans of all races](#) believed race should not be a factor in college admissions, and the California results suggest that remains true in the fall of 2020, even in a heavily Democratic state where the party has lined up in favor of affirmative action.

The minimum wage promotes racial equity

Florida’s minimum wage increase, meanwhile, should be an enormous blow for racial equity in the state. According to [data assembled by University of Massachusetts researchers](#) based on the American Community Survey, slightly below 53 percent of Florida Latinos and slightly above 53 percent of Black Floridians earned less than \$15 an hour in the 2013-2017 period (this is the most recent data available, the numbers would have fallen by 2019 due to an improving economy, then been thrown off in 2020 by temporary pandemic layoffs).

The wage boost, by contrast, would lift the fortunes of only about 34 percent of white Floridians.

The situation is similar in Georgia where the U-Mass researchers say 48 percent of African-Americans and 62 percent of Latinos were earning less than \$15 per hour compared to, again, 34 percent of white workers.

Advancing universalistic programs that disproportionately benefit Black and Latino people is traditionally how liberal policymakers have tried to promote racial equity (Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson labeled it “[The Hidden Agenda](#)” in his 1987 book *The Truly Disadvantaged*), while conservatives do the opposite. When [Rush Limbaugh called the Affordable Care Act “a civil rights bill” and “reparations”](#) in 2010, he didn’t mean that as praise.

In a pre-election op-ed published in The New York Times, [UC Berkeley professors Ellora Derenoncourt and Claire Montialoux](#) argued for a renewed focus on the minimum wage, noting that this was a key demand of the 1963 March on Washington and that their research says fully 20 percent of the closure in the Black-white wage gap during the Civil Rights Era came from the 1966 minimum wage increase.

But Democratic elected officials did not emphasize the issue much during the 2020 race.

Democrats should talk about the minimum wage more

Joe Biden was one of the [first major national Democratic leaders to embrace the idea of a \\$15/hour minimum wage](#) back in 2015 when the issue was associated with Bernie Sanders. Neither Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama were willing to go that far. By 2019, the idea had become mainstream among Democrats, and [the House passed the Raise The Wage Act in August of that year](#) only for it to predictably die in the GOP-controlled Senate.

Biden did not run ads highlighting his support for raising the minimum wage, and though [he and Trump ended up arguing about it in the second presidential debate](#), it was not a mainstay of his rhetoric. Certainly during his victory speech Biden did not list a minimum wage increase as among his policy priorities, instead voicing a non-specific commitment to “root out systematic racism.”

But however defined, systemic racism is not something that Congress is going to pass a law against. And the California ballot initiative showed that some in-vogue antiracist concepts continue to have very little appeal among the public. But economic measures designed to lift the low-wage workforce — whether raising the minimum wage or [expanding Medicaid](#) — are more popular these days than ever before, and they do an enormous amount in practice to close racial gaps. After a fall election campaign that was both successful and, in key respects, disappointing for Democrats — who continued to [lose a large majority of non-college white voters](#) while, this time, also [slipping with non-white voters](#) — a renewed focus on the classics could be the best way to win the two outstanding Senate races and rescue Biden’s hopes of being able to really govern the country.

Backwards politics for a strange time

Thinking about this issue reminds me of the odd extent to which contemporary progressives have started doing the politics of race and class backwards.

White people, occupying as we do a privileged position in American life, are on average considerably richer than Black people. Consequently, from the New Deal onward programs designed to help the needy have held a disproportionate appeal to Black voters who disproportionately benefit from them ([Eric Shickler’s book *Racial Realignment*](#) is a great account of how northern African-Americans got incorporated into FDR’s coalition even while he remained terrible on civil rights issues). Then, because most voters are white, conservatives try to associate economic redistribution with *racial* redistribution to try to get white people to oppose it. Progressives for generations tended to downplay racial angles to maximize the size of the coalition for redistribution, and the traditional debate inside progressives circles was what to say about the fact that race-blind, class-centric measures would never *fully* close the racial divide.

But in recent years the internal dynamics of progressive spaces have gotten this turned around. These days the perception is that if you want to generate enthusiasm for class politics you should emphasize racial angles.

Hence:

- Union Membership Narrows the Racial Wealth Gap for Families of Color [[Center for American Progress](#)]

- Minimum Wages and Racial Inequality [[Washington Center for Equitable Growth](#)]
- Medicaid Expansion Has Helped Narrow Racial Disparities in Health Coverage and Access to Care [[Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)]
- How the Affordable Care Act Has Narrowed Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Access to Health Care [[Commonwealth Fund](#)]
- How Student Debt and the Racial Wealth Gap Reinforce Each Other [[The Century Foundation](#)]

None of these points are wrong. Because Black people have, on average, less wealth and income than white people, anything that redistributes wealth and income from the haves to the have-nots reduces racial gaps. But the politics of these framings are perverse. It's particularly perverse because the kinds of people who spend a lot of time thinking about race from a progressive point of view are precisely the people who in other contexts are inclined to emphasize what a big deal racism has historically been in shaping American politics.

That's why liberals from FDR and LBJ to Obama tried to downplay it when possible — they were trying to win and help people! After all, there's no special features of unions or Medicaid or the minimum wage that leads them to close racial gaps — all egalitarian economic policy has this effect.

My suspicion is that this is a weird tic of campus politics that has followed graduates into the professional arena where they unconsciously started deploying it in less appropriate contexts. If you're in a dorm at a fancy college and you can convince an administrator that something is racist, the administrator will probably put a stop to it. At the same time, "this is bad for poor people" just isn't going to get you far as a campus argument. After all, these schools more or less openly auction off a number of admissions slots to wealthy donors (while, of course, practicing affirmative action to keep things diverse) so they can hardly take a hard line on class politics.

But electoral politics in a democracy isn't like that. And to the extent that the US political system isn't democratic, it's mostly tilted in favor of over-representing white people with no college degree. So if you actually want to close racial gaps by raising the minimum wage, expanding union membership, expanding Medicaid, and reducing student debt, the *last* thing you want to do is to sell people on the idea that this is really all about race.