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America is Very Much a Racist Country, Part Three: The Congress

The Party Incentives That Keep Racial Inequality in Place



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We've arrived at Part Three after first covering the Supreme Court and the Executive Branch. I started writing only about SCOTUS and, while writing, decided I must expand to include the other branches of government. I'm wondering if I can complete the saga without a section on The People? I'm not suggesting that America is 100% racist with no redeeming voices among us, but how racist are the American people? Is it not they who keep electing known racists? Among those who we don't consider racist, how many stand by when they see others persecuted, children caged, or votes suppressed? When I finish this piece, I'll decide whether The People get a turn in this series.

The Congress is supposed to be representative of the people. If our government worked as designed, it would be the people's voice, but sadly, the members are generally addicted to power, where re-election, not

representation, is the main thing. Power is inseparable from money. The average wealth of U.S. Congress members is $1.5M–$4.4M, with median net worth varying across chambers and datasets. The Senate is significantly wealthier than the House, and Republicans have a higher median net worth than Democrats.

The typical incoming House member reports a net worth in the low-to-mid six figures, generally between $300,000 and $1 million. House members' wealth often increases substantially during their tenure, with some members seeing triple-digit to quadruple-digit percentage gains. This is documented across multiple independent analyses.

The Public Wealth Transparency Project (PWTP) is the most comprehensive dataset available — it tracks net worth changes for U.S. officials since 1980 and includes a dedicated section for Top House Gainers. The PWTP lists hundreds of House members with documented increases in net worth during their time in office.

Examples of extreme increases among House members include:

- Barney Frank: +2700%
- Dave McCurdy: +2650%
- Bill Lowery: +2150%
- Bob Goodlatte: +1967%
- Bill Paxon: +1900%

All five left Congress years ago, and several have been out for decades. But best believe that many House members who weren't wealthy when they

arrived have managed to become so.

A successful run for the Senate usually requires one to be wealthy to begin with. Incoming U.S. Senators typically report median net worths well above $1 million, and many enter office already as multimillionaires. Given that 73 of 100 sitting Senators have a median net worth above $1 million, and the median Senator sits at roughly $4.4 million, the typical incoming Senator generally falls in the $1–4 million range. Like House members, they usually add to their wealth while in office.

PWTP's Senate leaderboard includes figures such as:

- Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) — +14,900%
- Daniel Inouye (D-HI) — +3,233%
- Dan Coats (R-IN) — +2,900%
- Edmund Muskie (D-ME) — +2,300%
- Birch Bayh (D-IN) — +2,233%
- Don Nickles (R-OK) — +2,150%
- Evan Bayh (D-IN) — +1,900%
- Ernest Hollings (D-SC)

None of these members of the Senate is still in office, but don't doubt that the trend continues. Politicians getting richer crosses party lines with both Democrats and Republicans taking advantage. The House and Senate lists happen to contain no women and are almost all-white. Make what you will of that.

While the Congress is supposed to represent the people directly, that wasn't true from the beginning. The electorate was a tiny fraction of the population. In 1789, the only people who could vote in most states were white, male, property-owning, and over 21.

That meant 90–95% of the population — including all women, all enslaved people, nearly all free Black people, Native Americans, and white men without sufficient property had no political voice in choosing the House, and no one voted for Senators at all (state legislatures chose them). So the people choosing Congress were already a narrow elite.

The men who served in the First Congress were even more elite. The First Congress was overwhelmingly wealthy, land-owning, professionally elite (lawyers, merchants, planters), and educated white men from established families. The average member of the First Congress was closer to a colonial aristocrat than to an average American.

A majority of the men in the First Congress had some form of Revolutionary War involvement, but not all as soldiers. Many served in the Continental Army or state militias. Others served in Revolution-era political bodies (Continental Congress, state conventions, committees of safety). A smaller number had no direct wartime role, usually because of age, health, or occupation. The best supported estimate is that between 50% and 60% of the First Congress owned enslaved people.

It is important to note that there were no formal political parties when the First Congress convened in 1789. The framers openly disliked the idea of parties ("factions"). The Constitution was written with the assumption that parties would be avoided. That's hard to reconcile with the Supreme Court

coming down in favor of partisan gerrymandering, but that's a different rabbit hole.

Within months, two blocs emerged in Congress: a pro-administration faction that supported Washington's administration, backed Hamilton's financial program, and favored a strong national government. The anti-administration faction opposed Hamilton's financial plans, wanted more power for states, and worried about centralized authority. These were not yet parties, but they were the seeds.

The first true American political parties were formed between 1791 and 1796. The initial parties included the:

Federalist Party (1791–1792)

- Led by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams
- Strong national government
- Commercial and financial development
- Support concentrated in New England and urban centers

Democratic-Republican Party (1792–1796)

- Led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison
- Agrarian vision, decentralized power
- Support concentrated in the South and frontier regions

By 1796, these were fully functioning political parties:

- They ran candidates

- They coordinated messaging
- They organized voters
- They fought bitterly

The Election of 1796 is the first true party-based presidential election in U.S. history. By the time of the Election of 1800, the party system was fully entrenched.

The Jefferson–Adams rematch was openly partisan, nationally organized, and ideologically polarized. This is the moment when the U.S. becomes a party-driven political system, and it has never stopped being one.

You might have noticed by now that in a piece about America being a racist country, the focus is on Congress. I haven't said anything about racism except to note that most early politicians owned enslaved people. Most members of Congress in early American history were racist. Among later politicians, it's harder to tell if they were actually racist at heart or only did racist things.

I've been talking about the main things all along: money, class, and power. Race is a means to an end. We would have a class issue more than a race issue if race hadn't been identified as something to exploit to attain wealth.

When America was merely a collection of Colonies, it was the desire for cheap labor that fueled racism. Columbus (who never arrived in America) was searching for people to enslave, which was part of his initial charter. On the very first voyage, he seized Indigenous people to take back to Spain.

In 1492–1493, Columbus kidnapped Taíno people, transported them to Spain, and proposed selling them in Seville's slave markets. He wrote that they would make "good servants" and could be taken "as many as needed."

His second voyage (1493) had an explicit slave-taking agenda, which most people never learn in school. The second voyage was not an exploration mission — it was a colonial extraction mission with 17 ships, 1,200–1,500 men, orders to establish forts, plantations, and mines, and explicit authorization to enslave Indigenous people. This is where the large-scale enslavement begins.

Later Spanish expeditions that actually landed in Florida both brought enslaved Africans and attempted to enslave Native Americans. The first expedition that landed in "La Florida" in 1526 ended in revolt, with the slaves escaping into the woods and joining with the indigenous people, never to be recaptured. The Spanish didn't talk about that much. When Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine in September 1565, he brought with him Spanish soldiers, free Black militiamen, and enslaved Africans. The earliest surviving records show enslaved Africans present by 1566, and most scholars agree they were part of the founding expedition itself.

Slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619 and were initially labeled indentured servants, because there was no legal provision for slavery. Whiteness didn't exist when the first slaves arrived in the British colonies; it had to be invented when Black slaves, along with Black and white indentured servants, joined forces under Nathan Bacan and burned down Jamestown, ironically in a dispute about removing Native Americans. The thought of poor people banding together sparked such fear that everything was restructured. No longer were indentured servants of all colors treated equally.

Slavery became the bottom rung on the new economic ladder and every white person was elevated over everyone Black. Racism had existed previously, and there was a disparity of treatment that was color-based, but now race became the way to distinguish, punish, and abuse. It took Partus Sequitur Ventrum to codify the racism. Slavery was extended for a lifetime and through the children of every enslaved woman, while white men had the right to rape and procreate, while having the right to own and sell the children. When the First Congress came to be. This was the system they inherited, and being rich white men, they saw that for themselves it was good.

In the late 1820s, the Democratic-Republicans split into rival factions. The Democratic Party (1828) was a pro-slavery coalition founded by Andrew Jackson. It was dominant in the South and West. The Whig Party (1834) was an Anti-Jackson coalition. Whigs were pro-Congress and pro-infrastructure. They were strong in the North and border states. Slavery was the fault line that destroyed the Whigs. Northern Whigs opposed slavery's expansion, supported abolitionist petitions, and backed free labor ideology. Southern Whigs defended slavery and wanted federal protection for the institution. They opposed abolitionist influence. The party had no way to reconcile these positions and collapsed.

The 1850s saw the birth of the Modern Republican Party. As the Whigs disintegrated. The Republican Party (1854) formed as an anti-slavery, pro-industry party. They were a Northern coalition made up of the remnants of the Northern Whigs. By 1860, Republicans won the presidency (Lincoln). The Civil War locked in a sectional party divide. Here's a summary of what happened in Congress after the War.

1. From 1865–1877 — Reconstruction: Republicans Dominate, Democrats Become the "White South" Party. Congress played a significant role in

protecting the rights of the freedmen, pushing through the Reconstruction Amendments and the Anti-Klan Acts.

2. 1877–1900 — Redemption and Jim Crow: Democrats Take the South, Republicans Take the North. After the removal of federal troops after the Compromise of 1877, Congress did nothing while Jim Crow became the law of the land.

3. 1900–1932 — Progressive Era Fragmentation: Parties Split Internally. Inside Congress:

Republicans split into:

- Progressives (trust-busters, reformers)
- Old Guard conservatives (business-aligned)

Democrats split into:

- Southern segregationists
- Northern urban machines

Congress became a battlefield of intraparty factions, not just two parties.

4. 1932–1964 — New Deal Realignment: Democrats Become the Majority Party

Democrats in Congress

- New Deal coalition: Southern whites + Northern immigrants + Black voters (in the North)
- Controlled Congress for most of 1933–1994
- Passed Social Security, labor laws, and welfare programs

But the party was schizophrenic:

- Northern Democrats supported civil rights
- Southern Democrats blocked it

Republicans

- Minority party but influential in blocking or shaping legislation
- Became the party of business, suburbs, and anti-communism

Congressional politics became a three-bloc system:

1. Northern Democrats
2. Southern Democrats
3. Republicans

Civil rights legislation was passed only when Northern Democrats + Republicans outvoted the Southern bloc.

5. 1964–1994 — Civil Rights Realignment: The Parties Trade Places

The Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965) detonated the old order. To be fair, the realignment of the Parties began as early as 1948 when Truman integrated the armed forces and federal government.

Southern Democrats → Republican Party

- White conservatives migrated to the GOP
- The South slowly flipped from blue to red

Black voters → Democratic Party

- Became a core Democratic constituency
- Strengthened the party's civil rights identity

Inside Congress

- Southern Democrats lost committee power
- Republicans gained Southern seats
- Ideological sorting began: liberals in one party, conservatives in the other.

By the 1994 “Gingrich Revolution,” the realignment was complete.

6. 1994–Present — The Modern Polarized Two-Party Congress

Republicans

- Conservative, Southern-anchored
- Unified around tax cuts, deregulation, and cultural conservatism

Democrats

- Liberal, urban, multiracial coalition
- Unified around civil rights, social welfare, and environmental policy

Inside Congress

- Parties became ideologically pure
- Bipartisan coalitions collapsed
- Filibuster use exploded
- Leadership centralized power
- Committee chairs became partisan loyalists

Congress is now the most polarized it has been since Reconstruction — and the divide is once again deeply tied to race, region, and identity, not just

policy.

I didn't mean to sprint past the period in the late 1860s and 1870s when Republicans in Congress played a meaningful role in Reconstruction and authorizing protections for the freed slaves. Those same Republicans traded for power to win the disputed 1876 election and looked away during Jim Crow. The Party of Lincoln started the slide that led them to becoming the party of white supremacy today. Democrats have more historical blood on their hands but it is Republicans doing the blood letting today.

Most of the transitions in Congress over the years are directly or indirectly racism, but the motivation has been less about race than power and wealth. In what has become a two-party system, each Party has used race as a means to accomplish goals. For individual members it comes down to toeing the Party line to have the best chance at reelection.

Congress over the past two decades has been stymied and unable to address issues of race because enough members were opposed for political reasons rather than moral ones. They have been unable to pass a comprehensive immigration bill of pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act or protect the Dreamers. The Senate has used the excuse of the fillibuster to defend their inaction. When a Black man was President, one Party did all it could to make him a one-term president, though they failed.

In the end, it's too simple — and too convenient — to reduce Congress's racial failures to a handful of bigoted individuals. The record shows something far more unsettling. Even when only a minority of members are personally motivated by racism, the institution behaves in racist ways because doing so serves the strategic needs of their parties. The incentives are baked into the structure: parties protect their coalitions, defend their donors, and preserve

their power. If racial inequality helps them do that, the institution adapts accordingly.

Across eras, the pattern repeats. Whether it was Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights backlash, or the modern fights over voting rights and representation, Congress has repeatedly chosen the path that secures partisan advantage — even when that path deepens racial harm. Individual morality becomes irrelevant when the machinery of the institution rewards obstruction, punishes dissent, and treats racial justice as a negotiable commodity rather than a constitutional obligation.

So while it may be comforting to imagine racism as the work of a few bad actors, the historical record tells a harder truth: Congress does not need a racist majority to produce racist outcomes. It only needs parties willing to use race as a tool — and a structure willing to let them.

While writing Part Three, I decided that Part Four should focus not on America's people, but the church, which sadly has played a major role.

Next: America is Very Much a Racist Country, Part Four: The Church

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Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?



Niki J Davis they/she/her
6 days ago

Keep up this excellent work! It should be required reading for my students!

52 Reply

Indigo Colossus
6 days ago

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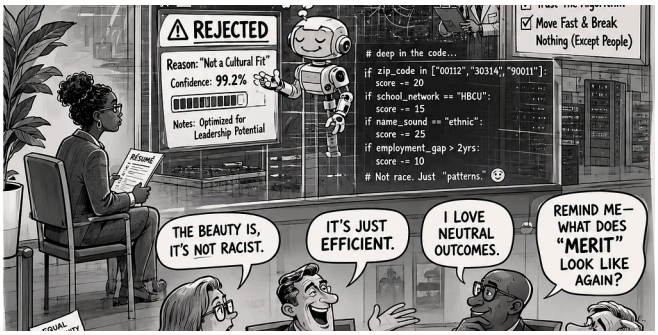
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