

Talking Class and Race at the Same Time

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Most progressive policies have the potential of unifying people around class interests, but a convention in talking about these things often seems to purposely lean against pointing that out. Cory Booker's baby bonds, all versions of Medicare for All, and the $15 minimum wage, for example, would all disproportionately benefit blacks and Latinxs, a point often highlighted by politicians and in the press, especially the advocacy press. What they usually don't say, however, is that though lower *percentages* of whites will benefit from these policies, very large *numbers* of them will. What would be wrong with uniformly mentioning that while people of color are disproportionately affected, the largest groups of poor, uninsured, and negative-wealth Americans are white folks?

Maybe candidates and reporters assume that everybody knows this, but I'm pretty sure they do not. Though I have only anecdotal evidence, I suspect large numbers of white people don't realize how substantially they would benefit from these policies. Every time a politician or advocate says proudly that their policy would "especially benefit people of color," to white folks it can sound like the policy is geared mostly toward people unlike them. Because whites are still a large majority

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of the population (67%) and an even larger proportion of voters (72%), this should be seen as political malpractice. But beyond political pragmatism, there's a moral and truth deficit to mentioning one but not the other.

Almost any policy, existing or proposed, that aims to improve the economic circumstances of the bottom half of the population by income will end up benefiting larger percentages of people of color (what is meant by "disproportionately"), while the largest group of beneficiaries will be white people. While whites are under-represented among the bottom half, they are still the largest group as we define our races and ethnicities. A $15 minimum wage, for example, would benefit the majorities of blacks and Hispanics and only a little more than a third of whites, but of the 60 million people who would benefit, 33 million would be white.

To take a more complicated example, consider this headline from *Vox*, "Study: Cory Booker's baby bonds nearly closes the racial wealth gap for young adults." The black-white racial wealth gap is huge, and it is clearly tied to a centuries-long history of structural racism that continues today in many forms, including education, housing, and lending practices. The mean average wealth of white households is nearly 9 times higher that of black households. What's more, about 20% of black households have zero or negative net wealth versus only 10% of white households. But while it may seem paradoxical, more than twice the *number* of white households have zero or negative net wealth than black households – 7.7 million white households compared to 3.3 million black households. This is simple arithmetic – lower percentages of much larger groups mean more actual people, but most of us can't and don't do this arithmetic in our heads. And, unless it is pointed out, we don't often infer it as a background fact.

So if Cory Booker says his baby bonds would "especially benefit people of color" in building wealth, is that actually true? If we look at just those with negative net wealth who would benefit the most from Booker's means-tested proposal, more than 7 million white households would benefit while only about 3 million black households would. What is "especially" about that? Booker assumes that people only go by percentages, and his proposal would indeed substantially reduce the black-white wealth gap in median incomes, but the largest group of beneficiaries will still be white. Booker's baby bonds scheme reduces not only the racial wealth gap but also the class wealth gap. Families of color will benefit disproportionately, but white ones will "especially" benefit too. Wouldn't being explicit about that make the proposal more attractive, not less, to a big chunk of the two-thirds of the electorate that is white?

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Would that be appealing to "white" self-interest? Yes, in part it would, but it would not appeal uniformly across white income classes, 20% of whom would likely see their benefit from baby bonds as insignificant. But this is also true of people of color. By mentioning that a policy "disproportionately benefits people of color," we might think we're appealing to the interests of all people of color, but we're undoubtedly appealing most to those for whom baby bonds could be a generational game changer – a group defined by class, not by race. Baby bonds benefit almost everybody (up to $126,000 in annual income), but they make the most difference for people of little or negative wealth regardless of race or ethnicity. Calling out not just how a policy benefits almost everybody, but specifically how it benefits larger *numbers* of white people at the same time as it benefits larger *percentages* of people of color is to talk about race and class at the same time – and we need to do more of that.

It feels awkward, because calling white people white can seem provocative. But if we're going to divide ourselves into racial groups as we do – white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and other – then we need to stop talking as if all poor people are people of color and all white people have the full array of privileges that come with whiteness. Though nearly everybody would get it right on a true-false test, well-educated journalists and politicians routinely use "poor" as if it were a racial category and "working class" as if it were wall-to-wall white (and often just blue-collar white men). This implicit usage not only makes building class unity more difficult, it makes it nearly impossible even to envision.

It also encourages politicians and pundits to pose false dilemmas pitting Trump's working-class white base against the Democrats' rainbow coalition, as in suggesting that the Party must choose to "Win Back Trump Voters or Rally the Base?" It makes it impossible to see that 33 percent of the rainbow are whites without bachelor degrees – the reigning definition of the white working class and the largest single group in the Democratic base. Dems need class-based policies that appeal across our racial categories, and candidates running for the Democratic nomination have a potpourri of such policies on offer. But they need to learn how to talk about class and race at the same time.

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