We have had no work since last season. A great many have been on federal relief. When they tell us to register for civil work hundreds do so. Then they give all the work to the whites except three days before thanksgiving when about sixty Negroes was put in the Flamingo Swamp to work in the mud. After Thanksgiving no other Negroes have had a single hour’s job. Hundreds of whites work every day.

—Anonymous black man, 1933

The modern story of partisan politics, race, and social policy begins with the abolition of the Freedmen’s Bureau and the overturn of Radical Reconstruction. The fate of social policy was sealed by the economic relations, dominant ideologies, and party alignments then constructed.

The Democratic Party, as the party of the Old South, came out of Reconstruction bent on restoring white skin privilege in every domain. To do so, the Democrats played a key role in reinventing just who was white and what it meant to be white. A new racial alchemy developed in which a wide range of Europeans, an earlier era’s Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, and Iberians among them, were now granted the “scientific” stamp of authenticity as members of a unitary Caucasian race.1 The Democratic president James Buchanan, for instance, called Mexicans a “mongrel” race unfit for freedom but characterized “Americans” as a “mixed” population of English, Welsh, French, Scotch-Irish, and German ancestry. Senator Thomas Hart Benton (D-Mo.) harped on a “Celtic-Anglo-Saxon race,” superior to, in descending order, the yellow, brown, red,

and black races. The latter groups came to be lumped together as the inverse of whites: “nonwhites.” In short, the Democrats in the post-Reconstruction era constructed a line around whiteness, turning diverse Europeans who were once identified according to national origin into one big white identity group, based largely on opposition to a “nonwhite” or “colored” other.

This new social construction of race had material consequences. By the early decades of the twentieth century, most nonwhites had experienced dramatic setbacks. Almost all Native Americans had been forced onto reservations controlled by the federal government. Not surprisingly, reservation land was usually of so little value that nobody wanted it. By 1930, 55 percent of all Native Americans had a per capita annual income of less than $200 and only 2 percent had incomes of more than $500 per year. By 1933, Indians had lost about 60 percent of the 138-million-acre land base they had controlled at the time of the Dawes Allotment Act in 1887.

Meanwhile, through conquest Mexicans had become the cheap labor force of the Southwest and West. Mexican farm workers became destitute as their average wage dropped from 35 cents an hour in the 1920s to 15 cents in the 1930s, and the average time worked was drastically reduced.

During the same period a vocal and often violent anti-Chinese movement coalesced in the West, especially in California, where white workers decried the labor competition of “Mongolians” and demanded a “white man’s republic.” Racial antagonism in the mines, factories, and fields of the West forced thousands of Chinese into self-employment—small stores, restaurants, and particularly laundries.

“Different strokes for different folks” may have applied to America’s treatment of its diverse people of color, but all the strokes had oppression based on color in common. In Democratic propaganda of the day, this was how things should be. Drawing a line around all of Europe was the way for this southern-based party to encourage groups like the Irish, who had once been treated as

5. Ibid., 201.
“a race apart,” to join the Democrats, thereby giving the party an important electoral toehold in the North.

But constructing whiteness was not just a Democratic project; the Republicans, too, were contributing to the construction. Rutherford B. Hayes, Republican governor of Ohio, not only agreed to the Compromise of 1877 when he was brought to the presidency but made it clear where he stood on race. The “present Chinese invasion,” he argued in 1879, was “pernicious and should be discouraged. Our experience in dealing with the weaker races—the Negroes and Indians.—is not encouraging. . . . I would consider with favor any suitable measure to discourage the Chinese from coming to our shores.”6 Three years later Congress prohibited Chinese immigration; six years after that the prohibition was broadened to include “all persons of the Chinese race.” Renewed in 1892, the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended indefinitely in 1902.7 Indeed, as the twentieth century began, the race question surfaced in every region of the nation and most of the world. Henry Stanley’s reports from Africa aroused tremendous popular enthusiasm for the adventure of taming “the dark continent.”8

In the midst of these national and international developments, hypocritical and conflicting racial discourses indicated the political character of race in America. At the same time that Hayes was denigrating the Chinese, blacks, and Native Americans, the Republican Party, as the party that had “freed the slaves,” ritually called every four years in its platforms for congressional action to end lynching and disfranchisement and to provide “equal justice for all men, without regard to race or color.” In fact, however, the Republicans’ appeal to people of color, especially African Americans, was illusory; as Ira Katznelson has so pithily expressed it, the party’s “most attractive quality was a memory.”9 For all the magic of the name of Lincoln, no late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Republican had sought to emulate Lincoln’s image as an even halfway responsible leader for blacks. With both parties staunchly supporting white skin privilege in practice and neither party ready to make the fundamental

commitments that might have elicited African Americans’ support, those few blacks who could vote (almost all of them in northern cities) remained passively with the Republicans. The hard fact of life was that Republican pledges were not redeemed because African Americans had nowhere else to turn. It would take a crisis of major proportions to move them into the Democratic Party and take even a tiny step toward promoting policy change. The Great Depression and the Hoover administration gave African Americans ample reason to turn their backs on the GOP.

This deep and staggering economic crisis was brought about in part by the introduction of new labor-saving technologies (the internal combustion engine, the automobile, electric power) and new management practices (the Ford assembly line, the General Motors organizational revolution). These developments combined to increase productivity and concomitantly to displace workers, especially between 1919 and 1929, with a resultant sharp drop in sales. In response, labor unrest, particularly in the East and Midwest, racked the nation and raised questions about the white working class itself.

It was people of color, however, that were disproportionately afflicted. Last hired, first fired, African Americans in particular figured prominently among workers uprooted from jobs when factories closed, farmers and sharecroppers forced off the land, families evicted from their homes, and hundreds of thousands forced to roam the land begging for food and seeking a job—any job.

President Herbert Hoover not only was slow to respond to the failure of the economy; he rigidified racial segregation in federal employment, ignored black Republican leaders in the southern states, made other mistakes on racial questions, and virtually littered his speeches with racial slurs. For the first time African Americans began to look seriously at the Democratic Party as a potential ally.

Yet in 1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was not much for blacks

to get excited about. He had few contacts with African Americans. He used the word “nigger” casually in private conversation and correspondence.\textsuperscript{12} And although he promised everything to nearly everybody in his presidential campaign, he did not respond when Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), sent him a questionnaire asking where he stood on eleven issues ranging from segregation to Haitian independence.\textsuperscript{13} As Walter Trattner concludes, “Roosevelt’s actual commitment to the Negro was slim.”\textsuperscript{14}

Despite some symbolic civil rights gestures by Eleanor Roosevelt, the New Deal paid only the most limited attention to African Americans during Roosevelt’s first two terms. President Roosevelt in particular did as little as possible on the race question; his constant answer to African Americans and their white allies was that he needed the southerners’ support in Congress—especially in the Senate—so he could not afford to alienate them by actively backing antilynching laws or black enfranchisement in the South. Instead he offered an early “universalist” approach, arguing that African Americans could best progress by being loyal to the New Deal, thus benefiting from the array of social and economic legislation it sponsored. In effect (as “New Democrats” would advise half a century later), the civil rights issue was submerged in order to maintain party unity. Between 1937 and 1946 more than 150 civil rights bills—focused principally on lynching, poll taxes, and fair employment practices—were introduced in Congress and not a single one prevailed.\textsuperscript{15} One main reason for their defeat was FDR’s refusal to provide public support. What Roosevelt did do was to not wholly exclude African Americans from the economic benefits of the New Deal. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence to support the view that the New Deal, in some critical instances, did little or nothing to shake up the system of white privilege and in some others bolstered it.

An impressive body of knowledge focuses on how the New Deal’s most


important legacies—social insurance and relief—disproportionately benefited whites, not blacks.¹⁶ Less attention has been paid to other policies (agricultural, housing, labor) that advantaged whites.

The First Phase of the American Welfare State

The creation of the New Deal and particularly the Social Security Act of 1935 cannot be understood without consideration of civic action. According to most scholars of the period, relief was not a high priority with Roosevelt. In his first days in office he ordered a bank holiday, began federal budget cutbacks, started the process of repealing Prohibition, and abandoned the gold standard. Initially his was an orthodox fiscal policy: he favored retrenchment, not spending.¹⁷ Even at the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, Roosevelt seemingly was as gravely cynical about relief as Andrew Johnson had been. He called welfare “a narcotic” and “a subtle destroyer of the human spirit” and proclaimed that “continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber.”¹⁸ Thus it is quite probable that the New Deal would never have happened were it not for demands blistering up from a suffering populace. Civic activists lobbied, organized disruptive demonstrations, influenced a rapid shift in public opinion regarding government responsibility, and thereby stimulated welfare proposals. Organized labor was a key player and had a substantial impact on social policy expectations (and, as we shall see, not always to the betterment of people of color). Other members of the working class—largely ignored by the unions because they were jobless or unorganized—created a militant social movement of the unemployed. Often organized by Socialists and Communists, this movement was the most cross-racial and cross-gendered in adherents. The women’s movement was largely silent, with the predictable consequences for women. African American organizations, from the NAACP to the Urban League, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the National Council of Negro


Women, sought influence but were virtually ignored. Their lack of influence on the New Deal was quickly revealed in policies that reinforced racial segregation and discrimination.

Work relief under the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA)—the first New Deal federal aid program—vividly demonstrates this result. FERA left the design of work projects and the allocation of funds to local officials, who more often than not discriminated against African Americans, especially but not exclusively in the South. Although some studies conclude that overall relief rates were higher among blacks than among whites, the same studies show that black workers and families were forced to rely on general relief, “the dole,” rather than work relief.19 While the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) created jobs for millions of out-of-work Americans at a cost of over $90 million (adjusted for inflation),20 most blacks were either placed in dirty jobs or, as the unemployed worker laments in the epigraph to this chapter, excluded from employment altogether.21 In fact, officially blacks faced a quota in the CCC. Although blacks were proportionately represented among the extremely impoverished, the CCC restricted the enrollment of blacks to 10 percent of the total—a quota not met in most places.22

There was similar discrimination against other people of color. In California and Texas impoverished Mexican Americans were heavily represented on the relief rolls at the beginning of the Depression—an unsurprising finding, given the destitution of farm workers in the 1930s. Instead of finding their way into the new government jobs, however, persons of Mexican descent became victims of a massive campaign to “repatriate” them to Mexico, even though many were U.S. citizens. Ultimately approximately 160,000, or roughly 40 percent of their population, were intimidated into returning to Mexico by 1936. New York’s Puerto Ricans, too, suffered from the same coercion, although all of them were citizens.23

Native Americans also received short shrift. Many of them lived in isolated areas where no WPA projects were set up, but they were reminded that the federal government was already subsidizing them by providing reservations for them. Some Western states actually argued that Native Americans were not entitled to any of the benefits of the Social Security Act. 24

Women of all races were excluded or segregated into stereotyped, low-wage jobs. Indeed, the way women were treated by the WPA and CCC reveals how inextricably race, class, and gender are linked. In 1936, 56 percent of all women enrolled in WPA projects worked in sewing rooms. The percentage was greater in states with large populations of racial minorities; in New Mexico it was 84 percent. The CCC, originally only for men, eventually added a complement of 85,000 women to the 2.5 million men enrolled. The program was then disbanded in 1937. 25

In these instances it is impossible to separate out gender from race and class as the basis for discrimination. Relief workers in New Mexico rationalized discrimination against Latinas by arguing that their culture required them to stay home to care for their families. The fact that most black women wage earners’ work experience was in domestic service (82 percent in 1930) was used to lock them into the unskilled category. In sum, women of color were triply discriminated against. Their need was greater because race-based poverty placed them at the bottom of the class hierarchy; because disproportionately more of them were the heads of their households, at least among African Americans; and because of direct racial discrimination. Not surprisingly, more African American than white women wrote letters to the Roosevelt administration complaining about discrimination. 26

The Women’s Bureau strongly protested gender discrimination, as civil rights organizations protested racial discrimination. The black press was full of articles denouncing racism and exclusion in New Deal work programs. 27 Instead of redressing their grievances, the National Recovery Administration (NRA), in its approval and enforcement of industry codes for the self-regulation of the economy, gave official sanction to local patterns of discrimination in employment, including lower wage rates for black and Hispanic men and all

26. Ibid., 198.
27. See discussion in Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line*, 39 and 262.
women. Although no formal racial or gender differentials were included in wage rates on federal work relief projects, there were sharp differentials in type of work done, size of community, and region. This situation, writes Dan Lacy, “had, and was intended to have, the result of fixing the level of relief payments to southern agricultural workers at levels below the minimum payments for marginal farm labor. The local authorities who administered the WPA were less concerned that black field hands have enough to eat than that the planters’ opportunity to exploit the distress of the times by getting their farm work done at a minimum cost should not be interfered with.”

There was marked discrimination in favor of whites even at the point of enrollment in federal work programs. Only after all or most whites seeking government employment had been hired were destitute blacks likely to be enrolled. On the one hand, clerical and other white-collar jobs and those requiring manual skills were especially likely to be reserved for whites. On the other hand, black men were likely to be assigned to arduous tasks such as ditch digging and road building, and black women to cleaning and other menial jobs.

With the federal government failing to require or enforce equal access to government jobs for all races, the ultimate effect of the New Deal employment programs was to widen the gap between the economic conditions of minority and white workers. In short, the New Deal’s labor policies contributed to, not narrowed, the racial and gender divides. The NRA fell into such disrepute that it became known among blacks as “Negro Run-Around” or “Negroes Ruined Again.”

The New Deal’s agricultural policies also had negative implications for racial minorities. In fact, nowhere was white skin privilege more firmly bolstered than in this facet of the New Deal. In the face of mountains of unmarketable cotton, wheat, and other basic crops, the administration’s first emergency agricultural action was to plow under a third of crops in the field in 1933. It then launched a program to take acreage out of staple crop production and provide price supports for the crops grown on the remaining land. The problem was that to withdraw land from use was to withdraw workers from use. While a small independent landowner could cut his cotton acreage and

29. Ibid.
use the land and time he freed up to grow uncontrolled crops, a planter whose extensive acreage was farmed by sharecroppers could get rid of them altogether when he removed from cultivation the land they worked. Sharecropping and tenant farming were not practical for the production of other than staple commercial crops that are not perishable or consumable and that commanded a steady and known commercial value, such as cotton and tobacco. Thus, while agricultural diversification and conservation practices that removed land from intensive cultivation were undoubtedly sound in respect to general regional development, they cut significantly into the need for agricultural field labor and cut off tens of thousands of black croppers and tenants and Mexican farm workers from the little income they had.31

It did not help that the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, passed to help farmers experiencing mounting crop surpluses and depressed prices for farm products, gave considerable autonomy to local landowners in the administration of the program. The result was great variation in the treatment of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Many African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers and Mexican laborers were excluded altogether and others were underpaid, as an investigation by the NAACP substantiated. One historian concluded that the AAA’s cotton program in particular “achieved about as much for the mass of the nearly three million black farm tenants as a plague of boll weevils.”32

Thus, taken together, the labor and agricultural policies of the New Deal reproduced and even expanded while skin privilege. In fact, Arthur Ross, a former commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, noted that significant disparities between black and white unemployment rates did not begin until the Depression of the 1930s. After the New Deal, the disparities increased.33

But it was not only labor and agricultural policies that granted new advantages to whites while denying them to people of color. When the federal government began to finance the construction of low-cost housing and to guarantee mortgages on private dwellings, it gave formal recognition to residential segregation, a practice that had hitherto been informal and unofficial. Under

31. Ibid., 165–66.
the New Deal, however, from the passage of the Housing Act of 1937 public policy mandated the selection of tenants by race and located new projects in racially segregated neighborhoods, ensuring that public housing developments were all white or all black. In addition, as has been well documented elsewhere, the FHA instituted “redlining,” a practice in which a red line was literally drawn on a map around areas considered too risky for loans for economic or racial reasons. This practice had long-term damaging consequences for African Americans, since most redlined neighborhoods were theirs. At the same time, appraisers who determined the size of the mortgage the government would guarantee on a private house or apartment building were officially instructed to consider the racial homogeneity and stability of the neighborhood in which it was located. Until 1949, restrictive covenants to enforce such stability and homogeneity (by banning African Americans in certain neighborhoods and refusing to insure mortgages in integrated ones) were considered to make the property insurable at a higher value and were often insisted on. As a result, less than 2 percent of all houses financed by the FHA before 196o were purchased by African Americans. Especially from the mid-1940s onward, federal housing programs helped those who could help themselves, and most of the billions of dollars in tax expenditures and public services for housing were available only to people who could afford to buy a house, and typically this meant whites only. Between 1945 and 1960, 21 million new private housing units were completed and just 536,000 public housing units; and the federal investment of roughly $800 million in low-cost housing assistance was only a small fraction of the assistance given to middle-class home buyers. In this way the FHA played a crucial role not only in cementing racial segregation but simultaneously in guaranteeing that middle-class whites would be dramatically privileged in homeownership, always the most successful generator of wealth for average Americans.


36. Ibid.
What made these developments even more problematic was the fact that housing segregation was tied to other forms of discrimination and segregation. In deciding where to locate military installations, for instance, the Department of Defense ignored local housing policies in its off-base housing programs. Doing so meant that African Americans could not work at many installations because they could not find housing nearby. Similarly the General Services Administration awarded the government’s enormous rental and leasing business to real estate agents whose housing operations were racially restricted, and the Atomic Energy Commission located the world’s largest atom smasher, a huge jobs-generating facility, in an area notorious for housing discrimination. In each instance the New Deal’s housing policy ended up depriving people of color not only of housing but also of jobs.37 Nor did the New Deal’s two most important legacies, social insurance and relief, make a dent in racial inequality.

Race, Politics, and the Social Security Act of 1935

African Americans and whites did not benefit equally from the social welfare programs spawned by the Social Security Act of 1935, the foundation on which modern American social policy rests. First, as the price for southern members of Congress’s acquiescence in the creation of old age insurance (OAI), the exclusion of the self-employed, farm laborers, domestic servants, schoolteachers, clerics, and so forth meant that blacks were twice as likely as whites to be excluded from social insurance. In 1940—the first year a decennial census was taken after the act was passed—seven of every ten whites (71.1 percent) were covered while nearly six of every ten blacks (58.8 percent) were excluded from coverage by OAI and similarly from minimum wage laws and unemployment insurance on the basis of occupation alone.38 The high representation of African Americans in just two occupations, farm laborers and domestics, virtually guaranteed this result.

Thus although the Social Security Act of 1935 made no explicit distinction on the basis of race and millions of black workers were eligible for coverage, the exclusion of occupational categories cut out the majority. Black women were particularly affected. In 1940 nearly a million black women (60 percent

of the entire black female labor force) worked as domestics in private homes. Many of the excluded farm laborers and teachers were also black women. All told, approximately eight of every ten black women were excluded from social insurance coverage (Table 2.1), leaving them worse off than not only white men and women but black men. Moreover, while statistics were not kept in the 1940s on the numbers of black women who were employed but failed to accumulate the continuous employment record required for coverage, it seems likely that many were excluded from workmen’s compensation, unemployment insurance, and OAI precisely because the kinds of jobs that women and racial minorities were (and are) most likely to have were in small enterprises, for low wages, and seasonal and "casual" employment.

Table 2.1. Total employed persons and workers excluded from old-age insurance coverage by race and sex, 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>White males</th>
<th>Black males</th>
<th>White females</th>
<th>Black females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total employed persons¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>30,931,506</td>
<td>2,936,795</td>
<td>9,563,583</td>
<td>1,542,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers, farm managers, farm laborers and foremen</td>
<td>6,490,206</td>
<td>1,202,242</td>
<td>219,492</td>
<td>244,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of employed persons</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic service workers</td>
<td>50,687</td>
<td>85,566</td>
<td>1,045,726</td>
<td>917,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of employed persons</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>59.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed²</td>
<td>689,603</td>
<td>13,927</td>
<td>146,814</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of employed persons</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, nurses, clergy, and college professors</td>
<td>431,985</td>
<td>31,240</td>
<td>1,070,312</td>
<td>58,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of employed persons</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other government and nonprofit</td>
<td>994,849</td>
<td>31,240</td>
<td>47,234</td>
<td>1,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of employed persons</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL EXCLUDED</td>
<td>9,177,699</td>
<td>1,411,218</td>
<td>2,529,578</td>
<td>1,223,324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCENT OF EMPLOYED PERSONS</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Persons on Public Emergency Work are excluded.
²Self-employed includes occupations such as fishermen, lumber-owners, architects, artists, authors, dentists, insurance agents, lawyers, musicians, physicians, veterinarians, cleaners and laundry owners, retail dealers, seamen, etc.

In short, when the Social Security Act provided protection against poverty in old age and minimum wage laws established a floor under income, it offered little of value to a substantial majority of blacks. Thus, when the Social Security Act of 1935 advanced a new definition of social citizenship based on work but socially constructed “work” in ways that deprived many workers of the right to earn benefits, it not only perpetuated both race and gender inequality but showed that the very definitions of “worker” and a right to earn benefits were politically negotiable. The political manipulation of the category “wage worker” led to the exclusion of a majority of blacks engaged in paid employment and a substantial proportion of southerners of all races and genders. In effect, these groups were left trapped in an inferior form of social citizenship.

African American interest groups decried these flaws in the Social Security Act. When Charles Houston, NAACP board member and law professor, testified against the decision to exclude agricultural workers, laborers, and domestics, he pointed out that the NAACP had been inclined to favor the creation of the contributory system that became known as Social Security, but the more it studied the proposal, the more it began to look “like a sieve with holes just big enough for the majority of Negroes to fall through.” Both the National Urban League (NUL) and the NAACP favored legislation introduced by Representative Ernest Lundeen (Farmer-Labor, Minn.). Lundeen called for a “workers’ bill” based on the belief that unemployment “was a disease of the capitalist system” and proposed that the beneficiaries of capitalism should compensate its victims.

Under the Lundeen proposal, a federal system of insurance would have been created for all categories of workers who suffered involuntary unemploy-
ment due to sickness, accident, maternity, or old age. In this system, to be administered by elected committees of workers, benefits would have equaled the prevailing local wage and been indexed to the cost of living and funded by individual and corporate income taxes and inheritance and gift taxes. All workers, including professionals, the self-employed, domestics, agricultural workers, laborers, and people who worked part-time because they were unable to find full-time jobs, would have been covered under a completely federal plan. There would be no exclusion of blacks or women from the plan.

The Lundeen bill, however, was heavily denounced by the Roosevelt administration. Virtually all of the old arguments raised against the Freedmen’s Bureau resurfaced: The bill was too expensive; it was fiscally unsound; it would require a huge bureaucracy; it would make people dependent, and so on and so on. Practically the only new criticism that emerged was that the Lundeen bill was a “Communist plot.”

What was really at stake, however, was whether the country actually needed a radical redistribution of wealth, more consumption, and less capitalization. But in the heated rhetoric aimed at defeating the bill, this debate never surfaced. Although the bill was reported out of committee, it was killed by the Rules Committee. It would be 1952 before the Social Security Act was finally amended to extend coverage to vast numbers of women and people of color.

While social insurance schemes excluded a majority of African Americans before the 1950s, Title IV of the 1935 Social Security Act did provide for welfare relief, old age assistance (OAA), and its handmaiden, Aid to Dependent Children, or ADC, albeit on a very different basis from social insurance schemes. Both OAA and ADC required that clients be “needy,” but ADC was unique among welfare programs in its subjection of applicants to a morals test. Sexual behavior became the most frequent measurement of a “suitable home” for a child. What made a home unsuitable was the presence of a man in the house or the birth of an “illegitimate” child. Protecting the line drawn around whiteness, a home could also be declared unsuitable if the child was the offspring of an interracial couple. The search for these “moral” infractions led to heavy supervision and violations of privacy.44

The most troubling aspect of relief programs was that they were often

administered on a discriminatory basis. Racial discrimination was a direct result of labor segmentation and local administration, since in theory, relief was not constructed as having any connection to race. OAA officially served all the needy aged; ADC officially served all single mothers; there was no explicit mention of race in the law. In practice, however, state regulations could be arbitrary and discriminatory. States, allocated varying amounts of ADC benefits, excluded “employable mothers,” demanded “suitable homes,” policed sexual behavior, and made similar decisions regarding which aged persons actually deserved help through OAA. African American women and the African American aged bore the brunt of these practices in the South. Indeed, as Jill Quadagno concludes regarding OAA, African Americans unilaterally received lower benefits than whites in the South during the 1930s, generally less than the subsistence furnished by planters. Not only were rates of relief lower for African Americans, but proportionately only half as many received benefits, although rates of poverty were substantially higher among blacks in the South. Table 2.2A shows that blacks were significantly more likely than whites to be poor in every region of the country, but in the South (where 77.5 percent of all blacks lived in 1940) nearly the entire black population was poor. Of course, part of the problem was that the South itself was a poor region; whites, too, were more likely to be poor in the South than in other regions. Still the gap between black and white poverty rates tended to be higher in the South; more important, as Table 2.2B shows, while other regions apparently made higher relief grants to blacks on the basis of their deeper poverty, the South did not. Whites received more a month throughout the South, from $1.43 more in the West South-Central region to $2.52 more in the South Atlantic region. A difference of $2.52 a month may not sound like much today, but it amounted to nearly 20 percent more than elderly blacks were getting—a big advantage in the late 1930s.

Furthermore, at planters’ requests, relief offices in many rural counties were closed for two months at the height of the cotton-picking season. In one county in Alabama no OAA grants at all were paid to older black persons because local authorities feared they might subsidize whole African American families. Similarly, in 1937 the governor of Louisiana arbitrarily ordered that payments to African Americans—but not to whites—be cut in half during

Table 2.2. Percentage of wage earners earning less than $1,000 in 1939, and average monthly old-age assistance grant by race and region in fiscal year, 1938–39

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Percent earning less than $1,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>−23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>−27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East North Central</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>−25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West North Central</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>−23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Atlantic</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>−32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East South Central</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>−27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West South Central</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>−31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>−24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>−32.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Average grant per month per recipient</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East North Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West North Central</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Atlantic</td>
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<td>West South-Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A negative sign (−) indicates the amount/percent of black disadvantage relative to whites; a positive sign (+) indicates the amount/percent of black advantage relative to whites.

1According to a Works Program Administration study in 1935, this figure is less than the average minimal income required to maintain a family of four ($1,261).

2New England states in the table are: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

3Mid-Atlantic states in the table are: New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

4East North Central states in the table are: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

5West North Central states in the table are: Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

6South Atlantic states in the table are: Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

7East South Central states in the table are: Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi.

8West South Central states in the table are: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

9Mountain states in the table are: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada.

10Pacific states in the table are: Washington, Oregon, and California.

June and July.46 Southern white planters had few or no objections to “keeping their peons alive during the slack season on pork and meal,” but they wanted all relief suspended during the work season “so these niggers will be good and hungry,” as one official of the Tennessee Valley Authority (VA) put it in the early years of the New Deal.47

In sum, the Social Security Act of 1935 created a two-tier system. The superior social insurance programs applied mainly to whites and men, as they were designed to do. The inferior relief programs—or “welfare,” as they came to be known—applied mainly to people of color and women, as they were designed to do. And even in the latter case, relief was distributed on a discriminatory basis in favor of whites.

The first major amendments to the Social Security Act deepened the racial divide. The 1939 amendments, which restructured OAI to provide benefits for survivors, separated the widowed mothers (disproportionately white) from the never-married or divorced mothers (disproportionately black). The widowed mother was cast as “deserving” (because she had depended on her deceased husband, who had qualified for social insurance) in the developing morality play, while the never-married or divorced mother was cast as “undeserving” (because she did not have a man to mediate her relations with the state even from the grave). Thus the 1939 amendments provided widows and their children survivors’ insurance (old age survivors insurance, or OASI) while poor single mothers received ADC (changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, in 1962). Unlike the federally set survivors’ insurance, as previously noted, ADC consisted of federal funds matched by the states, which ran their own programs with minimal federal supervision. Initially ADC funds covered only children, not caregivers; a grant for caregivers was authorized in 1949 in the belief that “it was necessary for the mother or another adult to be in the home full time to provide proper care and supervision.”48 In effect, the 1939 and 1949 amendments meant that white women at least benefited from their husbands’, fathers’, and brothers’ coverage under the superior federal programs, but to be a survivor or dependent of a black man was also often to be

left out of the primary beneficiary stream. The treatment of both survivors and
dependents varied according to the status of their men. By 1967, the average
benefit to a child of a deceased worker under OASI was $62; under AFDC the
average benefit was $37. The premier losers were not women and children in
general but those of subordinated races and classes.49

In effect, both symbolically and practically two tiers of social citizenship
had been created in two arenas: federal on the one hand, state and local on the
other. White men were usually covered by federal programs, women and racial
minority men by state-controlled programs. The federal programs had higher
standards, more generous stipends, a bigger tax base to support them—and
dignity. The state programs were far more vulnerable to political attacks,
decreasing tax bases, interstate competition—and stigma. The exclusions of peo-
ple of color from Social Security programs and the defeat of federal standards
for welfare programs in 1935 were directed, implicitly if not explicitly, at
minority and low-wage labor of both genders.50 To be sure, protecting white
skin privilege was not the only factor that led to the splitting of social insurance
from relief programs,51 but it was not a negligible one.

Why White, but Not Black, Interests Were Secured in 1935

The bifurcated welfare state with its differential impact on whites versus people
of color and men versus women was not accidental or incidental. This outcome
was due in part to the ideology of the men who shaped the legislation; southern
Democrats’ inclusion in the New Deal coalition practically ordained it. And it
was due in part to the general restorative rather than structurally reformist
(much less revolutionary) goals of the New Deal. A brief look at these three
factors demonstrates why the result in 1935 was increased security for whites,
especially white males, and continued peril for people of color of both genders.

First, neither people of color nor white women were key players in shap-
ing the legislation. To be sure, white women were at first intricately involved
in developing the new social policies. Aid to Dependent Children was grafted

49. Ibid., 294.
50. For several excellent analyses of factors beyond racial matters that led to a segmented
welfare state and alternative explanations of the policy decisions involved, see Weir et al., Poli-
tics of Social Policy: Brown, Race, Money, and the American Welfare State; and Michael B. Katz, The
51. Gordon, Pitted but Not Entitled, 287.
onto the Roosevelt administration’s economic security proposal by the female leadership of the Children’s Bureau as a way of expanding and regularizing state mothers’ pensions. In congressional deliberations, however, the Children’s Bureau lost operational control of ADC, which was given over to the Social Security Board to run alongside the social insurance programs to which its leadership was more committed. Thus, ultimately, the Social Security Act was written by two kinds of people, sometimes by the same people in two roles—white male social planners and politicians.\footnote{See Lee J. Alston and Joseph P. Ferrie, “Paternalism in Agricultural Labor Contracts in the U.S. South: Implications for the Growth of the Welfare State,” \textit{American Economic Review} 83 (September 1993): 852–76; and Quadagno, “From Old Age Assistance,” 244–47.} Whereas in earlier years welfare had been almost totally a state and local function and white women had predominated in shaping it, both the social planners and the politicians who constituted Roosevelt’s Brains Trust were white men who had little interest in relief but discovered a profound interest in the social insurance schemes developed in Europe. The crux of events in 1935, from a gendered and racialized perspective, was that as federal social policy grew in size and importance, white men took it over. Behind this development were factors ranging from the increasing professionalization of social work which made men more interested in these and related occupations to the weakness of women’s voting habits and the fact that most blacks remained deprived of the vote. If politicians in the 1930s had had to be concerned about securing the women’s vote, the black vote, the Latino vote, and so forth, they might have been more willing to listen to the concerns of these groups. Without the constraining influence of these groups, the white men shaping the Social Security Act of 1935 viewed social citizenship from the standpoint of white male workers. This tendency need not have been conspiratorial or bereft of good intentions; more likely it was simply the prevailing conception of the day in the 1930s. Masculinist and racialized visions of what constituted useful work shaped law.

Equally important were coalitional politics. Before FDR was elected president, the Democratic Party was dominated by southerners, who despite their minority position in Congress maintained a controlling influence on national legislation through the organizational and procedural structure of that body. FDR’s landslide victory in 1932 brought many states outside the South under the Democratic umbrella for the first time. The result was an uneasy coalition. Northern Democrats, representing not only northern capital and midwestern...
farmers but also organized labor, favored permanent national programs operated by the federal government; southern Democrats opposed any possibility of federal intrusion in the South’s cheap labor system. The compromise was to strengthen the committee system and thereby the southern hand in legislative outcomes. In 1933, southern whites chaired twelve of the seventeen major House committees and nine of the fourteen major Senate committees. In control of these key veto points, southern legislators were able to hold the Democratic Party hostage to their demands for regional autonomy on questions of race, gender, and class.

The Social Security Act of 1935 grew out of this kind of compromise. It balanced the desires of organized labor for a permanent, bureaucratically controlled old-age pension program with the demands of southerners to keep relief for the aged and female poor decentralized. Thus the legislation created two different programs to provide economic assistance to the aged. The nationally administered OAI program (Social Security) was financed entirely by payroll taxes collected from employers and employees in industries and was from the start federally controlled. OAA (welfare relief) was from the first (as the southerners wished) locally control. Eliminated from initial proposals was a “decency and health” provision, leaving the states free to pay pensions of any amount and still recover 50 percent of the costs from the federal government. States were also granted the right to impose additional provisions that would make criteria for eligibility more stringent than those stipulated in the bill, such as the ability to exclude people on the basis of age, residence, or citizenship. So while federal authority became the path of social insurance, it was narrowly circumscribed when it came to relief.

Given the power to control assistance, the South did what it wanted, and what it wanted was to manipulate federal funds in a way to maintain its cheap labor force. Cash grants to African Americans were monitored so as not to undermine prevailing wage rates and to intrude as little as possible into the sharecropper system. Thus the political economy of the southern cotton plantation areas dictated the structure of public assistance and guaranteed that relief would not undermine the control of African American labor by the dominant

54. Quadagno, “From Old-Age Assistance,” 244–47.
white planter class. Few of the nation’s leaders saw this as a problem; it was simply taken for granted that African Americans earned substantially less than whites. Indeed, until well past the half-century mark, some African Americans never even knew the meaning of wages. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told of his astonishment when he visited a plantation in Alabama in 1965 and met sharecroppers who had never before seen United States currency.

In sum, the political economy of the South, southern dominance of the committee system in Congress, the political needs of FDR and the Democratic Party, and the concomitant politics of race dictated the structure of the American welfare state at its official birth. The result was segmented policies that would not undermine the control of African American labor by the dominant planter class. In consequence, the private practices that isolated blacks in the plantation South and in low-paid unskilled employment in declining areas of the economy and in ghetto areas of the North received tacit official sanction and reinforcement from the federal government.

The general thrust of the New Deal was not to transform the American system but to restore the existing economy to effective operation and to protect every individual’s established stake in it. Dan Lacy sums up the situation: “The landowning farmer was assured an income. The depositor’s bank account was guaranteed. The investor was assured an honest securities market. Credit was made more easily available to land-owning farmers, the real-estate developer, and the homeowner or purchaser. The industrial worker was protected in his right to join a union, and the union in turn in its right to represent employees, to strike, and to negotiate union, or closed-shop agreements.”

These measures, however, benefited only those who already had a stake in the economy as property owners or industrial and commercial labor, and by and large, that meant white men and their families. Federal mortgages meant nothing to the black worker who could not dream of buying a house, or federal deposit insurance to one with no money in the bank. The protection of the National Labor Relations Act and the creation of Social Security were worthless to domestic servants, agricultural workers, and unskilled laborers whose occupations were not organized or covered—jobs held by the vast majority of black

55. Rifkin, End of Work, 74.
56. Lacy, White Use of Blacks, 168.
57. Ibid., 166–67.
58. Ibid., 167–68.
workers. The minimum-wage and pro-union legislation, while clearly important bulwarks for white male workers, denied or reduced the competitive position of the many blacks who were not welcomed by the unions. Similarly, the housing legislation and administrative practices of the New Deal strengthened the barriers that protected the exclusivity of white neighborhoods and suburbs. Even welfare relief flowed disproportionately to the nonblack.

Thus—and to be certain—the New Deal restored and strengthened the American society and economy and bolstered the economic position of many citizens, but it was a racist society and economy that were strengthened and whites whose economic lives were secured. The jobs, the homes, the farms, the savings, the statuses and futures of many Americans were protected by federal action, but one of the things these values were protected against was the intrusion of blacks into “white jobs” and “white neighborhoods.” The New Deal did little to end segregation, to improve black education, or to open jobs to blacks; and it did nothing to restore the vote to blacks or even to end lynching.59 Throughout the New Deal, black peril and its flip side, white skin privilege, continued. In effect, the New Deal granted a modicum of economic security to whites while denying to people of color the full perquisites of democracy.

Thus the official birth of the American welfare state in the 1930s reproduced, not transformed, the subordination, domination, and oppression of African Americans and other people of color. Although African Americans were not excluded outright from New Deal programs and many benefited from them, the institutional arrangements by which blacks were incorporated in or eliminated from programs meant that the new American welfare state had little or no effect on the subordination of blacks. The relative advantage of whites continued in every regard throughout the New Deal.

Exclusion of African Americans in Phase 2 of the Welfare State

Still, economic recovery for many whites hardly occurred overnight. With many workers still suffering as the 1940s began, organized labor stepped up its pressure on Congress for further protections. When Republicans took control of Congress in the 1946 off-year elections and coalesced with southern Boll Wee-

vil Democrats, unions’ hopes for protective legislation vanished. At a time when many European nations were expanding their welfare states, the United States failed to enact programs such as full employment and national health insurance, and expanded existing programs such as Social Security slowly. The chief barriers to expanding social protections were business interests and congressional conservatives.

Realizing that new social spending initiatives were politically infeasible, unions expanded collective bargaining negotiations to include such fringe benefits as health care, disability insurance, life insurance, and pensions. Labor’s strategy received support from the executive branch and the Supreme Court.60 The Truman administration helped to broker a deal in 1946 between striking mine workers and owners that included welfare and retirement benefits. In 1948 the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled in Inland Steel Company v. United Steel Workers of America that private pensions were equivalent to wages and thus could not be excluded from collective bargaining agreements. The board even suggested that since Social Security benefits were not large enough to provide a comfortable retirement, employers had a social obligation to provide pensions for their workers. The Supreme Court upheld the NLRB ruling in 1949. Then in 1954 Congress passed legislation to exclude from employees’ income all employer contributions to health and retirement programs, so that they were not subject to income tax.61

These decisions were motivated primarily by the desire to secure labor peace during and after World War II. Employers had good reason to agree to labor’s demands: their contributions to pension plans were exempt from taxation; they were legally required to bargain over pensions; union strength was substantial even after the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 gave the NLRB new powers to enjoin or curtail any strike it deemed to imperil national health or safety; employers in such capital-intensive industries as steel and autos, usually among the first to offer pensions, could ill afford work stoppages; and most companies were largely unfettered by international competition and could thus afford to provide benefits. As a result, the number of workers with fringe benefits soared.


The number of workers covered by private pension plans more than doubled between 1940 and 1950, from 4.1 to 9.8 million, and almost doubled again to 18.7 million by 1960. This increase was not solely a function of an expanding labor force. Pension coverage increased from 15 percent of all private wage and salary workers in 1940 to 41 percent in 1960.

These benefits, developed in lieu of openly provided public ones, were rooted in favorable tax treatment, and most economists agree that federal subsidies (tax expenditures) for fringe benefits are analytically equivalent to budgetary outlays. The only difference is that the federal government, rather than write checks to a particular group, simply indicates to the favored parties that they can write smaller checks to the government. In effect, most fringe benefits are “hidden welfare.”

These hidden welfare benefits flow disproportionately to people who work in manufacturing and large firms, those in unionized or professional occupations, full-time and high-wage workers, and those with long tenure on the job. Since white men, at least partially as a result of past and current discriminatory practices by both employers and unions, predominate in these categories, they gained the most from the establishment of hidden welfare in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, when fringe benefits are added to wages or salaries, the development of hidden welfare actually broadens racial and gender gaps in total compensation. By settling for winning new fringe benefits in the 1940s and 1950s only for the best-off sector of workers, organized labor ignored and scuttled the interests not only of most people of color and women but of poor, marginalized agriculturalists as well.

In sum, both the first and second phases of the New Deal system hardly tinkered with the system of unequal racial opportunities or outcomes “normal” in the United States. This was in large part a result of discrimination in the labor market, which laid the groundwork for even race-neutral policies to be reproductive of inequality. To the extent that the welfare state is designed to de commodify labor, differential treatment of black and white workers and female and male workers was a central mechanism generating this result. Segregated jobs and industries were the order of the day in the 1940s. Facing unemployment at worst or working disproportionately in agriculture or the

secondary labor market of small, nonunionized businesses in jobs with little security at best, most blacks suffered not only lower wages and more temporary employment than whites who worked in the developing unionized corporate world, but also lack of access to the new hidden welfare benefits. Even the benefits of those blacks in occupations covered by Social Security at its initiation lagged behind those of white workers because of lifetime wage differences and work histories. As Michael Brown explains, “wage-related contributory social insurance forges a right link between work and eligibility. . . . Job discrimination undermined the eligibility of black (and female) workers for unemployment benefits as well.” Moreover, the Wagner Act, which legitimated the closed shop, tended to reify the perverse relationship between race and labor market processes. By refusing to add an antidiscrimination provision, as black political leaders had sought, the Act in an era in which many unions excluded blacks “left black men and women with little protection from white workers who believed that their racial privileges were more important than class solidarity.”63 In effect, it is impossible to separate the effects of labor market discrimination from the effects of social policy. Social policy need not mandate overt discrimination to advantage whites; whites’ access to greater social benefits is generated by more favorable treatment in labor and housing markets, segregated education systems, and so forth. A policy universally applied in a system that already advantages some and disadvantages others tends to reproduce, not eradicate, inequality.

Thus it is not surprising that a system that stratified workers by race and gender was reproduced in a welfare system that recognized two arenas of social citizenship: one federal, one local. White men were usually covered by federal programs and hidden welfare, women and men of color by locally controlled programs. Both the federal programs and hidden welfare had higher standards, more generous benefits, and a bigger tax base to support them. State programs, from the start, were more vulnerable to political attacks, declining tax bases, and interstate competition.

These differences among welfare programs exacerbated group resentments. As we shall see, the resulting politics of resentment ultimately weakened both the welfare state and the Democratic Party. As taxes increased, recipients of the more stingy targeted programs became scapegoats. Mean-

63. Gordon, Pitted but Not Entitled, 301.
while, the rise of hidden welfare lessened the support of organized labor and professionals for a shared social citizenship and further distanced them from those who could not obtain or could not afford private health insurance and pensions. Many beneficiaries of hidden welfare did not recognize their dependence on the welfare state. Nonetheless, the gains “welfare” offered to the poor—disproportionately racial minorities—were undercut by the reverse redistributory effects of the programs not labeled as “welfare.” Benefits to white middle- and upper-working-class men and their dependents were greater absolutely and proportionately than contributions to the female and minority poor.64

Even in the 1930s and 1940s, African American interest groups understood the flaws in the emerging American welfare state and predicted dire consequences for their constituency. As each bill that constructed the welfare state in this period was debated (especially the Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938), African American interest groups sought, unsuccessfully, to address its faults. Time after time they testified in favor of fair and full employment as the key welfare program needed. Again and again they lobbied in favor of comprehensive programs with universal coverage and federal administration. Over and over these groups, realizing that without adequate safeguards African Americans would not benefit equally from New Deal policies, sought to secure antidiscrimination amendments to legislation. But consistently their hopes were dashed. Lacking the political capacity to achieve their goals, African American organizations reluctantly supported social welfare policies that reproduced racial segregation, discrimination, and white skin privilege in exchange for sharply delimited economic benefits for their constituents.65

Indeed, more than just the leaders and activists of the NAACP, the NUL, the National Council of Negro Women, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—the key African American interest groups of the era—recognized that the social policies of the first two phases of the American welfare state were seriously flawed. The testimony of contemporaries clearly demonstrates that most African Americans were not so seduced by rhetoric, style, and symbolism that they were unable to perceive the inequities in the way they were being

64. Hamilton and Hamilton, _Dual Agenda_, 8–42.
65. Weiss, _Farewell to the Party of Lincoln_, 14, 244.
treated. However, there was nothing most African Americans could do about their unequal treatment under New Deal–era social policy; the basic problem was the relative insignificance of the black vote. The great majority of African Americans still resided in the South, and the vast majority of the southern black population remained disfranchised throughout the New Deal era. Of the 6 million African Americans of voting age in the states of the Old Confederacy in 1940, only about 275,000 were registered to vote. Change, however, was in the making.

National Electoral Instability and Embryonic Signs of Policy Change

The one section of the nation where many blacks could vote in the 1930s and 1940s was the North. The pattern of that vote shifted dramatically in the New Deal period. In 1932, when many other Republican constituencies supported FDR, the northern black vote stayed with the GOP. Then in 1936, despite racial inequalities in New Deal program distribution and critical flaws in legislative intent, strong African American support shifted to Roosevelt’s Democrats. In the crucible of economic despair, a strong majority of African Americans bade farewell to the party of Lincoln.

The reasons were straightforward: blacks endured such excessive suffering in the Great Depression that they appreciated any efforts to ameliorate it. In the crucible of despair, objective not relative gains were key. Thus, as Nancy Weiss concludes, African Americans became Democrats in response to their small share of economic benefits from the New Deal, and they voted for Franklin Roosevelt in spite of the New Deal’s lack of a substantive record on race. It was notions that Democrats favored the “little man” and FDR’s ability to provide at least some jobs and cash assistance, not his embrace of civil rights and equal opportunity, that made him a hero to African Americans.

Perceptive observers recognized the irony in the outpouring of northern black support for the New Deal in the election of 1936. One need not have been a diehard Republican to wonder at the marriage between a black electorate and the party of the Old South, which purposefully evaded any important issue related to race. How could a president who sidestepped antilynching leg-

66. Weiss’s *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* provides an excellent description of African Americans’ transformation from Republicans to Democrats in this period.
67. Ibid., 168.
68. Ibid., 241–77.
islation, seemed undisturbed by disfranchisement and segregation, and pre-
sided over relief programs teeming with discrimination win an overwhelming
majority of African American votes?

First, the masses of African Americans did not hope for much on race in
those days. There was no reason for them to hope for an attack on white skin
privilege. The federal government had not done anything significant for the
particular benefit of African Americans for as long as most could remember.
Racial expectations and racial consciousness were considerably more limited
than they became after World War II. The struggle to survive took precedence
over the struggle for racial equality, and in the struggle to survive, even the
crumbs of many New Deal programs made the crucial difference. Moreover, as
blacks moved out of the South, more, especially more black women, became
eligible for relief. Thus meager economic assistance paid large dividends to the
Democratic Party. The transcendence of economic over racial concerns during
the Depression—indeed, the close congruence of race and class for African
Americans—made it possible for the Democratic Party to win African Ameri-
can voters by the simple expedient of not totally excluding them from the eco-
monic benefits that it brought to suffering Americans generally.

To be sure, the New Deal’s excursions into racial symbolism, especially
the rhetoric of Eleanor Roosevelt, helped appreciably to cement the bond
between African Americans and the Democrats, but the essential political tie
was forged in the cauldron of economic despair. Roosevelt was singled out as a
personal hero in plain defiance of the facts. It may be tragic that it took so little
to win African Americans’ support for the New Deal, but the hard facts are
that the black embrace of the Democratic Party was a realistic response to the
economic and political circumstances of the time.69

The shift to the Democratic Party was, however, part of a larger process
of politicization that was changing the political habits of African Americans.
The New Deal not only changed blacks’ partisan presidential preference; it also
increased their interest in political participation. Further stimulating African
American political activism was migration from the rural South. Migration and
the continued urbanization of African Americans was the upside of the down-
side of the New Deal agricultural policies, which stimulated the mechanization,

69. Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (New York: Pantheon, 1977), chap. 4.
The constraint of race

consolidation, and internationalization of American agriculture and in turn drove out millions of African American sharecroppers. The massing of African Americans with similar economic and civil rights needs in limited geographical areas outside the South (the African American populations of northern cities roughly doubled between 1920 and 1940) made possible the articulation of common political interests. It fostered the development of specialized interest groups with particular political objectives. It created an environment conducive to the emergence of African American political leadership. It brought African Americans under the sway of local Democratic political machines, and it made the black vote a sufficient force in northern cities to warrant attention from the national parties.

One of the first results of growing African American electoral influence in the North and political consciousness nationally was Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, issued in 1941, to make discrimination in government employment illegal and to establish a Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC) to enforce a nondiscrimination policy in all defense areas. Issued largely in response to the threat that African Americans, led by A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, would mount a march on Washington, Executive Order 8802 was soon followed by Executive Order 9346, which extended the scope of the FEPC to include all federal contract areas. Both executive orders concerned only federal employment; provisions often were not enforced; and the FEPC was abolished at the end of World War II. In short, both orders had only a very limited effect on employment discrimination. Nonetheless, Executive Order 8802 proved to be an important development, principally as a precedent. For the first time the equal treatment of blacks in employment had been defined as a national policy and a matter of appropriate governmental concern. Before 1940 few whites, whatever their feelings about the injustice of employment policies that closed opportunities to blacks, would have thought it legal or proper for the federal government to tell a private employer, even one with a federal contract, whom he might or might not hire. Nor did most whites see anything unusual or improper about the closing of whole categories of jobs to blacks. The categorization of some jobs as “white” and others as “black” had been taken for granted. For the first time, such segre-

70. Carmines and Stimson, Issue Evolution, 32.
71. Lacy, White Use of Blacks, 179.
gation and discrimination in private employment—even if only in private employment in the fulfillment of government contracts—was defined as a wrong, and as a wrong remediable by government action.72

A second result of growing black political participation—both conventional (voting and filing lawsuits) and unconventional (protest)—was a Roosevelt-oriented Supreme Court that declared the white primary unconstitutional in the early 1940s. Even such minor concessions in Roosevelt’s final years marked the beginning of a new posture by national Democratic leaders toward the black cause. These acts also, however, engendered intense antagonism among white southern leaders, thus creating a deep strain between the northern and southern wings of the Democratic Party.

Increasingly it appeared that a coalition of southern whites, northern blacks, and white liberals could endure only so long as the issue of race was ignored. As late as 1944, Edward Carmines and James Stimson conclude, the Democratic Party managed to submerge the race debate so well that it remained clearly the conservative party on issues of race. While the 1944 Republican platform provided a clear, specific, and detailed call for a congressional inquiry into the mistreatment, segregation, and discrimination of African Americans in the military, federal legislation to deal with abuse found, the establishment of a permanent FEPC, a constitutional amendment abolishing poll taxes, and legislation to make lynching a federal crime, the Democratic platform contained only the simple assertion: “We believe that racial and religious minorities have the right to live, develop, and vote equally with all citizens and share the rights that are guaranteed by our Constitution.”73

But the politics of the Democratic Party was perched on the precipice of change, largely as a result of its need to maintain a biracial coalition in the North if it were to continue to be the majority party. Maintaining this coalition proved to be an increasingly daunting challenge after FDR’s death in 1945. On the one hand, the spiraling racial consciousness of African Americans as a consequence of World War II, further urbanization, and the diminution of the economic emergency brought racial issues to the fore in the 1940s in ways that had not occurred in the previous decade. African Americans themselves, in the words of Ralph Bunche, the first black to head a division of the State Depart-

73. Quoted in Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 234, 238.
ment and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, developed from the experience of the 1930s and 1940s “a much keener sense than formerly of the uses to which the ballot [could] be put.” They now knew that the ballot was “negotiable” and that it could “be exchanged for definite social improvements for themselves.” Thanks to the politicization stimulated by the New Deal, blacks moved increasingly to use the ballot as a lever to encourage attention to their concerns. Civil rights groups adopted a new strategy: to overcome the persistent exclusion of enforceable antidiscrimination clauses in social welfare legislation, henceforth they would refuse to support legislation that did not explicitly prohibit discrimination and segregation. Never again would social welfare trump civil rights. By 1948 African American leaders served notice to Democrats and Republicans alike that they would encourage the expanding ranks of black voters to support the party that took the strongest stand in favor of civil rights. Both parties responded by courting black votes as never before. The Republicans adopted a platform supporting antilynching legislation and opposing discrimination in strong language. Democrats, who for the first time had African American delegates at their nominating convention, worked closely with civil rights activists to get out the black vote and generally reminded blacks of the economic assistance provided by the Roosevelt-Truman administration.

Northern white Democrats interested in civil rights but especially in the electoral fortunes of their party represented another pressure point for change. Growing impatient with their party’s silence on race even after millions of African Americans had become “Roosevelt Democrats,” many white northerners encouraged the party to act. A central goal was to make the party competitive well outside of its natural base of support in the South; in fact, the party’s success in maintaining a majority coalition depended critically on its electoral fortunes beyond Dixie. And winning the electoral votes of northern states depended on winning the cities in that region by large margins. In turn, winning the cities depended on winning increasing numbers of northern African American voters. The electoral logic of the New Deal coalition, in short, was forcing Democrats to begin to confront racial issues to an extent they had never had to do before. As a result, Harry S. Truman looked to civil rights as a

74. Ibid., 32–33.
means to transform black Roosevelt supporters into black Democrats. A virtual sea change was occurring in the party of the Old Confederacy. Whiteness as an ideology faced a new, even if modest, challenge within the very party that had so long openly championed it.

This new challenge produced a counterattack. By 1948 the influence of African Americans and white liberals in the Democratic Party had begun to rankle its staunchest white supremacists, disproportionately in the South. When in February of that year President Truman called for legislation to abolish the poll tax, make lynching a federal crime, curtail discrimination in employment, and prohibit segregation in interstate commerce, southern Democrats were outraged. As they had denounced the Freedmen’s Bureau as the work of those out to “Africanize” the South, vocal southern white leaders now denounced Truman’s call as the work of liberals out to “harlemize” the nation. They threatened to bolt the party, and buttressed their threats by convincing southern contributors to cancel several hundred thousand dollars in pledges to the Democratic National Committee. Despite these efforts, a coalition of liberals, civil rights leaders, and labor leaders succeeded in incorporating Truman’s proposal in the party platform. The delegates to the Democratic convention erupted in applause when Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis, declared: “The time has arrived for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of state’s rights and walk into the bright sunshine of human rights.”

Mississippi’s delegation and part of Alabama’s decided it was time for them to get out of the Democratic Party. Bolting the convention, they eventually formed a third party, the States’ Rights Democrats—a.k.a. the Dixiecrats—to run a presidential candidate more to their liking: Strom Thurmond, then governor of South Carolina.

Southern discontent with the Democrats deepened during the campaign when Truman issued Executive Orders 9980, creating a Fair Employment Practices Board within the Civil Service Commission, and 9981, desegregating the military. In effect, Truman was courting the black vote as no Democratic presidential candidate had ever done before. His electoral arithmetic was clear: the fleeting southern white vote could be made up for by a strong black vote in sixteen northern states, with a total of 278 electoral votes—151 more than

the 127 electoral votes controlled by the South. The war for the racial soul of the party had clearly begun. What was then a serious fissure between the Democratic Party and a growing number of southern whites would ultimately become a gaping fault line.

The defiant splinter candidacy of Strom Thurmond notwithstanding, the civil rights platform, both executive orders, and a last-minute appeal to black voters in the North helped to secure victory for Truman in 1948. In what was an exceptionally close election, Truman won despite the loss of four Deep South states—Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi—to the States’ Rights Party. He was amply rewarded for his efforts on behalf of civil rights: a strong majority of African Americans not only cast their votes for the Democratic nominee but abandoned the party of Lincoln and joined the party of Roosevelt and Truman. They did so in such substantial numbers that politicians could never again dismiss their votes as of little consequence in national elections.77

In sum, the election of 1948 placed civil rights high on the national agenda and helped force national leaders to begin to address the ethos of white skin privilege and the position of African Americans in society. As Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP, saw it, “the message was plain: white power in the South could be balanced by black power at the northern polls. Civil Rights was squarely at the heart of national politics—if we could keep them there.”78

This was no small task. In 1952 the Democrats took a giant step backward toward the ethos of white skin privilege. In an attempt to regain the South, the party asserted in its platform that “the Party of Jefferson and Jackson pledges itself to continued support of those sound principles of local government which will best serve the welfare of our people and the safety of our Democratic rights.”79 This statement sent a coded message to segregationists that the party planned to steer a more conciliatory course on civil rights after its near disaster in 1948. The choice of Adlai Stevenson to be the party’s presi-

79. Quoted in Carmines and Stimson, Issue Evolution, 35.
idential nominee in 1952 was part of this approach. Stevenson, never deeply committed to civil rights, was much more concerned about the potential of the “race issue” to divide the party. He made strenuous efforts to court the South, even praising the Constitution of the Confederacy. Stevenson’s southern strategy apparently worked: the four Dixiecrat states that had deserted the party in 1948 all returned to the Democratic column in 1952. Nevertheless, it was not a winning strategy. When Dwight D. Eisenhower won in 1952, the Democrats were forced to rethink their electoral arithmetic.

For the remainder of the 1950s, both major parties took relatively moderate stands on civil rights, although Republicans reclaimed their traditional position of being more supportive. Thus it was Eisenhower who was president when the first civil rights acts since Reconstruction were passed and signed into law. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 created a temporary Commission on Civil Rights, gave the Justice Department an assistant attorney general for civil rights, and specified those circumstances requiring jury trials in contempt cases. The 1960 act provided for court-appointed referees to ensure that eligible African Americans were allowed to register and vote. Neither act, however, included strong enforcement powers. Yet the very fact that they passed during a Republican administration reinforced the party’s image as being the more progressive on race. When Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock to enforce a school desegregation order, his action was further evidence that the Republican Party was not yet a viable alternative for segregationists and other staunch protectors of white privilege.80

As a result of the relative uniformity on race issues, polls taken before 1964 showed that American public opinion was bifurcated on the question of which party was “good for civil rights.” As late as 1960 a substantial minority of African Americans continued to vote for the Republican presidential nominee. In the contest that year between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy, 32 percent of black voters cast their ballots for the Republican nominee, Nixon.81 It would take the Civil Rights Movement and the social policy legislation of the 1960s to change all that.

80. Ibid., 37.
Conclusion

In an address at Howard University near the start of the New Deal, Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced that his social policy would proceed upon the conviction that “among American citizens there should be no forgotten men and no forgotten races.”\(^{82}\) The irony of this statement is apparent, for African Americans were indeed forgotten at best and singled out for exclusion and unequal treatment in the welfare state at worst. Whites were the prime beneficiaries of most New Deal legislation, from its agricultural policies and its Housing Authority’s pro-segregation mortgage loans to its social insurance and relief schemes.

In part because black-white relations took on new salience with the New Deal and the migration of blacks out of the South, many other peoples were in a sense forgotten, too. That was the time when Europeans who previously had been consigned to alien identities with suitably funny names—Wops, Polacks, Hunkies, Eyteys, Frogs—became ever more likely to be recognized as simply whites. As Matthew Frye Jacobson concluded, by the 1950s, what was “‘forgotten’ was that these groups had ever been distinct races in the first place.”\(^{83}\) Race politics had ceased to concern the white “‘races’” of Europe and come to refer exclusively to black-white relations and the struggle over civil rights as both political and social conceptions for African Americans.

Arguably, the New Deal was the crowning American legislative achievement of the twentieth century. It provided at least a modicum of income security not dependent on the market for the elderly, the unemployed, and poor children. Its guarantees of home mortgages, subsidized “private” pensions, Social Security, and health insurance generated important benefits for the American middle class. And for the first time, workers were guaranteed strong rights to organize into unions and to earn a minimum wage. In each instance the New Deal posed a challenge to the American ethos. With no end of the Great Depression in sight, for the first time a major political party tentatively embraced the idea that responsible, hardworking people are sometimes unable to make their way and that the federal government had the responsibility to promote individual economic security.

\(^{83}\) Jacobson, \textit{Whiteness of a Different Color}, 246.
To be sure, the New Deal did not embrace sweeping notions of social rights. Roosevelt and his advisers constantly expressed concern about fiscally irresponsible and politically motivated “unearned handouts.”\textsuperscript{84} Nonetheless, the New Deal advanced important new ideas about both the causes of individual need and the role of the federal government in addressing that need. Yet most of the new benefits established by the New Deal were provided in a discriminatory pattern, guaranteeing white but not black security. Before Truman’s presidency the Democratic administration made few attempts indeed to challenge America’s racial status quo.

This is not to say that the New Deal represented a total failure from the standpoint of racial concerns. The inadequacy of its efforts should not lead us to minimize the achievement of 1935. People of color and white women would have been even worse off without federal assistance. Although assistance was provided on a discriminatory basis and was never enough and never sustained, federal relief was nevertheless a major accomplishment. It helped people of all races and both genders to subsist; it provided hope; and most important, it firmly established that the federal government could manage a huge distribution system. It also raised expectations, awakened consciousness of civil rights, and prompted demands for equal treatment. Both the good and the bad of the New Deal made people want more. Thus the New Deal not only heightened citizens’ sense of entitlement but also increased their desire to participate.

Perhaps, more than anything else, it was these new participatory norms that would produce change. Black politics in northern cities moved the “American dilemma” from the periphery to the center of national politics. Racial injustice was no longer understood as just a southern problem, for the nation as a whole was forced to confront this issue. By the mid-1950s, a civil rights movement swept across the nation, demanding that the United States finally and immediately grant to all its citizens the basic prerequisites of a democratic society—the right to vote, the right to a job, the right to live wherever one could afford to buy a home\textsuperscript{85}—all demands that challenged the belief system and reality of white skin privilege.

