

## REVIEW | SPECIAL ISSUE: PSYCHOLOGY OF PUSHBACK

# Race, memory, and colorblindness: Critical history and deconstructing United States democracy

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Recent authoritarian rhetoric in the United States comes as a surprise to many who, before this, felt that U.S. democracy was secure. However, scholars argue U.S. democracy has never been stable to the extent that many believe. In this paper we use a synthesis of perspectives informed by critical race theory, critical and cultural psychologies, and research on collective memory to call attention to how the United States' colorblind ignorance to histories of racism informs perceptions of democracy as infallible. Through historical case studies we highlight how the U.S. has a long tradition of authoritarianism if viewed from the perspectives of people of color and ignorance to this past allows the U.S. to be vulnerable to authoritarian rhetoric in the present day. We suggest narratives of critical history that challenge majoritarian perspectives can disrupt this rhetoric. We conclude by discussing the importance of knowledge of racial history in making clear the ways in which the treatment of POC has never been democratic and how this knowledge can inform resistance and new conceptualizations of a color conscious democracy.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, colorblindness, critical history, democracy, racism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An Axios poll found that 52% of United States (U.S.) Americans believe Donald Trump, the elected president, is a threat to democracy (Contreras, 2025). Political scholars echo this concern, noting that Trump's actions parallel other authoritarian regimes (Gregory, 2025; Treisman, 2025). Yet, what is lost in this discourse is that his actions also share similarities with the U.S.'s past (Parker & Towler, 2019). The rise in authoritarian rhetoric associated with Trump's presidencies comes as a surprise to many who, before this, felt democracy was otherwise secure. However, scholars argue this democracy has never been stable and has not historically been available to everyone (Jones, 2023; Roberts, 2021).

The canonical narrative of U.S. history paints the country as a leader in global democracy. Often absent from these accounts, however, are the histories of violence committed against marginalized racial groups and the oppression these groups faced that directly contradict these glorified retellings (Loewen, 2018; Zinn, 2015). To say that U.S. democracy only now is under threat is a perspective that ignores the mistreatment many have faced. From the perspective of those who have historically been marginalized, authoritarianism looks less like a troubling modern development but instead a historical consistency.

In this paper, we use a synthesis of perspectives informed by critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), critical and cultural psychologies (Freire, 1996; Martín-Baró, 1996; Salter et al., 2018), and the psychology of collective memory to call attention to how the U.S.'s historical misrepresentations of racism are exploitable by authoritarianism. CRT suggests people of color (POC) have unique perspectives that are often ignored, but should be centered (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Critical psychologies argue mainstream psychology searches for universality in psychological experiences. These practices have privileged dominant groups whose experiences, while purported to

be universal, do not speak to the lives of the marginalized (Parker, 2007). Instead, the experiences of the marginalized are informed by unique histories and understanding of resistance and democracy should be grounded in these contexts (Freire, 1996; Martín-Baró, 1996). Complementing this perspective is a cultural psychology framework that posits we live in intentional worlds reflective of our beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies (Shweder, 1990). The cultural worlds we inhabit shape our psychologies and afford particular ways of knowing that can reinforce a racist cultural space but have potential to be changed to create more anti-racist worlds (Salter et al., 2018).

Informed by the aforementioned perspectives we describe how U.S. history is collectively remembered. We consider the connection between racism and authoritarianism in the U.S. through the lens of racial power (CRT) and center our analysis within the context and perspective of the marginalized (critical psychology). We illustrate these points through interwoven case studies from U.S. history and psychological research (e.g., social dominance, system justification, colorblindness) that underpin these historical observations. In this way, we deconstruct how, historically, U.S. democracy can be likened to authoritarianism and that motivations of White supremacy maintained a bifurcated democracy. Next, we discuss how colorblind ideologies, sustained by ignorance of this history, enable the vilification of racial groups as threats to democracy, aiding authoritarian consolidation of power. We conclude by discussing the importance of knowledge of racial history as a sociocultural resistance framework (Jordan et al., 2024) in fostering cultural affordances that can inspire resistance and reimagine a more racially equitable democracy (collective memory and cultural psychology).

## 2. CONNECTING AUTHORITARIANISM AND HISTORICAL MISTREATMENT OF POC

At a societal level, authoritarianism is a form of governance characterized by obedience to

authority, endorsement of hierarchy, and the concentration of political power in the hands of an individual or institution, often at the expense of personal freedoms and civil liberties of marginalized groups (Linz, 2000; Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010; Svoboda, 2012). These structures are often legitimized through authoritarian ideologies, which argue that centralized leadership is necessary because leaders are more competent than the public and, in times of instability, can offer protection from external threats (Mayer, 2001). These structures and ideologies inform authoritarianism at the individual level where people may adopt beliefs that reflect both the societal structure and ideological tenets of authoritarianism such as submission to authority and aggression towards norm violators (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981). At the individual level, authoritarianism is also related to social dominance orientation (SDO). An orientation towards social dominance characterizes individuals who hold a preference for social hierarchy and dominance of some groups over others (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). While both similarly involve stigmatization, SDO is centered on a competitive worldview with some who are naturally strong and others weak. This perspective justifies hierarchy and can, in concert with authoritarian attitudes, contribute to authoritarian systems (Osborne et al., 2023).

Furthermore, social dominance theory (SDT) suggests that even purported democracies have some degree of intergroup hierarchy. These hierarchies are supported through legitimizing myths which are widely shared narratives within a cultural context that serve to justify hierarchy (Pratto & Stewart, 2011). Therefore, in this paper, we discuss how authoritarianism at a societal level was present throughout U.S. history in both governance and ideology that informed policy decisions and individual level attitudes. This has always been true despite glorified histories and legitimizing myths that suggest the U.S. is wholly democratic.

Recently, scholars have drawn parallels between Trump's administration and early Nazi

Germany, highlighting their shared strategies of stigmatizing marginalized groups to consolidate power and suppressing dissent. This has prompted widespread anxiety about the future of democracy (Beauchamp, 2018). While the U.S. often positions Nazi Germany as a downward social comparison, Nazis took inspiration from the U.S. in informing their governance. Leaders of Nazi Germany viewed U.S. racism as a model for creating and oppressing stigmatized minority groups (Whitman, 2017). At a systemic level, Jim Crow Laws, Southern racial segregation laws that worked to legally marginalize people of color, served as a model for similar laws targeting Jewish citizens (Whitman, 2017).

Authoritarian ideologies have also been sustained through academic institutions. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scientists promoted theories of racial and gender inferiority and legitimized them through supposedly "objective" mathematical tests (Saini, 2019; Zuberi, 2001). Eugenics influenced policies in both the U.S. and Nazi Germany via efforts to restrict the reproduction of "inferior" races. The U.S. strategy was using immigration restrictions, and the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America became influential lobbyists. This group's usage of "empirical" methods provided a manufactured biological justification for the inferiority of immigrant groups. This lobbying contributed to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 which capped immigration from Asia and Southern Europe at no more than two percent of its foreign-born population as recorded in the 1890 census (Ludmerer, 1972).

Following the Holocaust, open support for eugenics diminished (Shilliam & Spence, 2025). However, this reckoning largely bypassed a deeper examination of how racism contributed to authoritarianism. Rather than confronting racism as a structural threat to democracy, post-war discourse positioned it as just one of many issues facing democracy (Shilliam & Spence, 2025). While psychological research has found that authoritarian personality is often

related to racist attitudes (Van Hiel, 2005), viewing racism as something that happens solely at an individual level obfuscates the myriad of ways that it is impactful on a societal level (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Contrary to the claims of eugenicists, race is not genetic or innately biological; it is a social construct in U.S. society that denotes position and power (Powell, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). As a social construct, race is malleable, but people hold biological assumptions about it. For example, research on hypodescent suggests that, when given a racial family history, a higher proportion of White family members must be present to be considered White than the number of POC family members to be considered a minority (Ho et al., 2011). Racist attitudes rooted in assumptions of race as innate were also integral to the creation of U.S. political and legal structures (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Recognizing these structural origins and their ongoing influence is helpful for understanding how systemic racism intersects with authoritarianism.

### **3. CENTERING THE HISTORY OF RACISM IN CONSTRUCTING U.S. AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

Despite the deep historical ties between U.S. governance, racism, and authoritarianism, public discourse today often frames democratic crises in terms of polarization. In a 2023 poll, 79% of U.S. citizens described U.S. politics using negative terms (e.g., “divisive”, “corrupt”, and “polarized”; Pew Research Center, 2023). Prior research has long linked conservative ideologies to authoritarian attitudes and research has also found a consistent association between conservatism and racial prejudice (Adorno et al., 1950; Jost et al., 2018; Hodson & Puffer, in press; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Van Hiel et al., 2019). In response, recent literature has argued that left leaning politics can also lead to authoritarian attitudes and that focusing on authoritarianism solely through the lens of conservatism, represents a liberal bias (Conway et al., 2018). While much of the discourse frames bipartisanship as a threat, this debate

obscures an enduring feature of U.S. politics: Across history, White people from both political parties have united to preserve White supremacy and withhold democracy from POC - even when divided on other ideological fronts. Scholars have argued framing democratic decline primarily in terms of partisan polarization invisibilizes racial authoritarianism (Weaver & Prowse, 2020). U.S. governance, particularly its racist laws and ideologies, has long displayed authoritarian features through the lens of race. For example, Jim Crow Laws in the South systematically stripped Black people of civil liberties through disenfranchisement and political power was consolidated amongst White people justified by racial threat narratives, political patterns consistent with authoritarianism (Parker & Towler, 2019).

This long-standing racial authoritarianism is sustained not only through policy, but also through psychological processes. Research from SDT and system justification theory (SJT), a theory that argues that people are motivated to defend, bolster, and rationalize existing social systems - even when those systems may also disadvantage them - because they provide order and stability (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004), have found that motivations to maintain hierarchy can cross group boundaries. Maintaining group-based hierarchies can be a collaborative exercise between some groups at the expense of others (Sidanius et al., 2004).

We suggest that understanding democracy and democratic decline should be contextualized within structural racism as a manifestation of authoritarianism. The following section describes how central racism was in the establishment of an early U.S. democracy that centered White supremacy and how divisions by political affiliation were spurred on by attitudes about race that created authoritarian governance (see Table 1). Secondly, we follow up with examples of how White people across the political spectrum have historically united to withhold democracy from POC via racism embedded in structures that would form authoritarian governance.

Table 1

Key United States historical events as told through a glorified narrative compared to a critical counternarrative

| Historical Event                                                     | Glorified Narratives                                                                                                                                                                                          | Critical Counternarratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Founding of the U.S. and intergroup relations with Indigenous people | Indigenous people were assimilated into the U.S. democracy because they were primitive and incapable of civilized democracy.                                                                                  | White colonists portrayed Indigenous people as being genetically inferior, uncivilized, and incapable of a democracy to justify their displacement and extermination.                                                                                                                                                        |
| Early development of U.S. democracy                                  | White settlers developed a novel and revolutionary democracy through a system of checks and balances to curb authoritarian rule, promote freedom of religion, and establish political representation for all. | Many Indigenous societies already had systems of democracy that pre-dated the arrival of settlers. Democracy was unequally applied and White Americans-imposed restrictions on liberties for Black individuals (e.g., slavery written into constitution, three-fifths clause).                                               |
| The Civil War                                                        | Disagreement between Northern states and Southern states regarding state's rights led to the Civil War, which eventually led to the abolishment of slavery.                                                   | The primary impetus for the Civil War was discord surrounding the system of slavery. While the Civil War led to the abolition of slavery many Northerners still endorsed stereotypes of Black individuals as genetically inferior and were concerned with Black people occupying equal status.                               |
| Abraham Lincoln emancipating the slaves                              | Abraham Lincoln is a White historical hero who abolished slavery because he was morally opposed to slavery.                                                                                                   | While Abraham Lincoln represented anti-slavery states and was president during the abolishment of slavery, he expressed beliefs that Black individuals were genetically inferior. His opposition to slavery, some have suggested, stemmed from concerns that enslaved individuals posed labor competition for White workers. |



## Critical history of U.S. democracy

Perez et al., 2026

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Reconstruction Act of 1867 | Following the Civil War the U.S. government granted equal democratic status to formerly enslaved individuals in the South.                                                                                                                                    | While the reconstruction act granted formerly enslaved individuals' equal democratic status it also enabled these individuals to become elected officials. Formerly enslaved Black individuals who were elected into political positions supported legislation to improve civil liberties for Black and poor non-land-owning White individuals. Their contributions also included the foundation of the southern public education system. |
| The Compromise of 1877         | A compromise was reached in the contested presidential election of 1876 between Republican Governor Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Governor Samuel Tilden. This compromise allowed Hayes to be elected president and helped prevent renewed civil conflict. | This compromise came with the removal of the remaining federal protections for Reconstruction in the South. As a result, Black people were stripped of much of their political influence and were systemically disadvantaged through the establishment of Jim Crow Laws.                                                                                                                                                                  |
| The ending of Jim Crow Laws    | Jim Crow Laws were effectively outlawed through legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These acts outlawed racial segregation in schools and public spaces, and protected voting rights.                         | While Jim Crow Laws were outlawed, inequalities regarding segregation and voting rights remain as remnants of this system. Similar inequalities are still maintained through systems such as mass incarceration, deed restrictions, redlining, covenants, and voter id laws.                                                                                                                                                              |

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*Note.* This table is a subset of some key moments/periods in American history designed to highlight how glorified narratives of historical events can differ from critical counternarratives of these same events. This table is not an exhaustive overview of all American history, and these historical events are complex and nuanced beyond these abbreviated descriptions.



### 3.1 Constructing U.S. American Democracy with White Supremacy in Mind

Historically, the U.S. has always hypocritically balanced racism with democratic ideals. To manage this feat White people have painted POC as genetic inferiors to justify exploitation and rationalize extermination for the birth of the new democracy (Powell, 1997). First, the U.S. was founded at the cost of millions of indigenous lives through physical violence, displacement, and disease (Thornton, 2005). White people justified this by creating dehumanized narratives of them as innately savage, uncivilized, and inhibitory to the development of a growing democracy (Jardina & Piston, 2023). In the Declaration of Independence, the founding document declaring independence from British rule, there was discontent with the Crown's unwillingness to aid in the extermination of indigenous people. Listed as one of the oppressive injustices committed to the colonies by the King of Great Britain was that "He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." (U.S., 1776). This sentiment represented a prevailing attitude that indigenous people were not capable of civilized democracy (Jardina & Piston, 2023).

However, there were already some indigenous communities that had democratic systems of checks and balances to curb authoritarian rule, freedom of religion, and political representation in decision making (Grinde & Johansen, 1991). This was ironic considering White colonists themselves did not come from democratic societies. Secondly, the "free" nation constructed on indigenous land was built via African slave labor. This system was justified by dehumanized narratives of Black people as naturally subservient and strong. These stereotypes legitimized slavery by arguing that Africans were both biologically designed for slavery and content with it (Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). The establishment of an unequal democracy

through the institution of slavery was such a central consideration that it was written into the U.S. most central democratic document, the Constitution. The slave trade clause prohibited congress from banning the importation of slaves (U.S. Const. art. I, § 9, cl. 1), the fugitive slave clause required states in which slaves had escaped to return them to their masters (U.S. Const. art. IV, § 2, cl. 3), and the three-fifths clause counted three fifths of each state's slave population toward the total population when assigning the number of government representatives (U.S. Const. art. I, § 2, cl. 3). The three-fifths clause is the origin of the electoral college system of voting in the U.S., a system criticized as undemocratic (for a review see Finkelman, 2001).

### 3.2 Reconstructing U.S. American Democracy with White Supremacy Still in Mind

Race was so central in U.S. discourse that the country fractured due to disagreements between the institution of slavery. The Northern states of the U.S. (i.e., the Union) wanted a nationwide abolishment of the slave system, but the Southern states (i.e., the Confederacy) wanted the right to maintain the system. This disagreement led to the Civil War, and Alexander Stephens, the Vice President of the Confederacy, said as much in a speech prior to the war (Foner, 1990; see Stephens, 1861).

While the Union eventually won the Civil War and slavery was abolished, the motivations to reunite the nation were not always altruistic. Many Northerners still believed Black people to be inferior and feared the possibility of formerly enslaved individuals having equal rights (Ratner, 1965). Abraham Lincoln, the eventual 16<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S., who represented the Northern anti-slave owning interest expressed similar beliefs about the inferiority of Black people (Schwartz, 1997) and did not strongly support a democracy granting Black people equal status. Furthermore, some suggest it was not actually a disagreement with the morality of slavery that led to Lincoln's strong political support, but his appeal to White laborers. White

people outside of the South had a vested interest in abolishing slavery to remove the competition of slave labor that may have economically displaced free laborers (Schwartz, 1997).

Despite the hesitancy to allow equal democratic status to formerly enslaved people, the Reconstruction period following the Civil War gave a glimpse into the possibility of a more racially equitable democracy (Du Bois, 1935). Following the war, the U.S. government instituted the Reconstruction Act of 1867, requiring Southern states to write new constitutions. This provided an avenue for both Black and White men to vote and hold office together (Du Bois, 1935; Foner, 1993). Through the duration of this act these policies were protected by the federal government and Black people were elected to political positions. Black elected officials were integral to the establishment of a public education system in the South and lessened restrictions on property ownership, voting, and serving in juries. This helped not only them but poor non-land-owning White southerners (Foner, 1993; Perez, 2024)

However, the promises of this new democratic order were short-lived, partly because of a compromise between White interests. In the contested presidential election of 1876 between Republican Governor Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Governor Samuel Tilden, fears of renewed civil conflict loomed. To quell the threat of violence and maintain a unified country an informal compromise was made where Hayes was elected president under the condition that the remaining federal protections for Reconstruction in the South were removed (Woodward, 1991). Without federal protections, White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan intimidated Black voters away from the ballot boxes, some Black-led legislatures were violently overthrown, and Jim Crow Laws were instituted to remove the democratic freedoms of the formerly enslaved (Rable, 1984). While Jim Crow Laws and slavery have ended, the marginalization of Black people is still maintained through the modern

incarceration system. Black people are disproportionately incarcerated for crimes compared to White people and serve as labor in federal prisons further providing avenues in which White people economically benefit from Black subjugation (Alexander, 2020).

#### **4. MAINTAINING MEMORIES OF A COLORBLIND DEMOCRACY**

So, if the U.S. has never really been a democracy for all, why is there a collective idea that it used to be? We suggest a contributing factor are structures that promote colorblind ignorance and the pervasiveness of colorblind ideology that informs the history individuals are exposed to. Colorblind ideology suggests that race is inconsequential and that the U.S. is a post-racial society. These narratives are appealing because a society where race does not influence social standing appears equitable, but this ideology is preferred by dominant groups because ignoring race gives the impression that one is not racist and maintains a positive self-image (Plaut et al., 2018). Colorblind ideology may be interpreted as a legitimizing myth that works to maintain social hierarchy (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). One way in which it maintains hierarchy is by removing intergroup relations from their historical basis in favor of a representation of dominant and subordinate groups as equal comparisons (Malherbe et al., 2021). This ignores the hegemonic relationships that have been shaped by structural racism, and the role racist histories play in inequalities (Gallagher, 2003).

The dehistoricizing of race in colorblindness operates through four frames: abstract liberalism which sanitizes race through the language of liberalism (e.g., equal opportunity, individualism) without credence to historical inequalities, naturalization which explains racial inequality as natural occurrences as opposed to historical byproducts, cultural racism which attributes inequality to cultural based deficiencies as opposed to structural based inequalities, and minimization which suggests racism no longer plays a significant role in POC life outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Endorsement of colorblind

ideology can lead people to assume that the systems that are in place are justified and reduce support for resource and symbolic based redress policies (Yogeeswaran, 2018). Informed by research on collective memory we discuss how many are insulated from serious reflection of racism in their history discourse.

An analysis of common history textbooks and education requirements suggests they rarely cover the disparate treatment of minority groups (Conner, 2023; Lucy et al., 2020). When the history curriculum is more descriptive of the history of racism, it is often met with pushback. One example comes from Arizona, where lawmakers banned Mexican-American studies in 2010. The logic for this ban was that public school students should be taught as individuals rather than members of racial groups, that classes should not be offered that are designed for a particular group of students at the expense of others, and that these classes radicalize students via negative histories (Jensen, 2013). These arguments are laden with abstract liberalism that rationalizes race in individualistic terms, and claim this curriculum infringes on equal opportunity for White students. However, the current history curriculum already privileges White history. This is reminiscent of psychological research that White people threatened by losing out to minority groups are more likely to endorse colorblind ideologies as a procedural justice (Knowles et al., 2009). In this case, White people, threatened by the notion of a class that does not center their histories, invoked a desire for a historically decontextualized concept of equal treatment for all students. This perspective ignores the historical supremacy of Whiteness already present in mainstream curriculum, so instead of viewing ethnic studies as a means to make representation more equitable it is viewed as exclusionary.

This pushback aligns with psychological research that suggests that perpetrator groups are motivated toward historical closure due to defensiveness. When confronted with their group's past transgressions, they may prefer to

"close the chapter" to avoid negative perceptions (Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2024). However, by avoiding critical histories, the prevalent narratives portray the U.S. as an otherwise just nation promoting concepts of democracy despite minimizing the plights of underrepresented groups (Kurtiş et al., 2010). This overexposure to histories colorblind to racial violence can form what cultural psychology refers to as cultural affordances. Cultural affordances are the environmental or contextual conditions that structure the psychological experiences that emerge in a given context (Kitayama et al., 2006; Salter & Adams, 2016). Living in a context insulated from the country's history of racial violence shapes the ways in which people think about and engage with racism psychologically.

In fact, Salter and Adams (2016) found that exposure to Black History month posters that sanitized racial violence against Black people, and instead focused on achievements of Black historical figures, provided cultural affordances that impeded support for anti-racist policies. Thus, an avoidance of critical history of a racist past could foster colorblind norms that discourage critical discussion of racism. The culture of colorblindness can also afford strategies by which to avoid reflections of racism and history via epistemologies of ignorance, which are "processes of knowing designed to produce not knowing" (Mills, 2022; Mueller, 2017). Processes of not knowing can be upheld by a general lack of knowledge, maintaining falsehoods (often to avoid feelings of threat), and/or ignorance as an epistemic practice maintained through structures of repeating falsehoods (El Kassar, 2018).

First, general ignorance of U.S. history affords ignorance about democratic processes. Due to omission of contextual history in favor of patriotic history many U.S. citizens do not have accurate political knowledge (Loewen, 2018). A national survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania found that U.S. citizens know little about how its democracy functions. Only 36% of respondents could name all three branches of

the government (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014). Without basic knowledge, critically reevaluating democracy's origins, its connections to the present, and its potential for change become challenging.

Second, the maintenance of ignorance through adoption of falsehoods to avoid feelings of threat shape how White people think about racism. Psychological research suggests dominant group members' negative attitudes toward marginalized groups often stem from perceived losses of cultural primacy and power (Hodson et al., 2022). For instance, when White U.S. Americans are made aware of increasing racial diversity, they exhibit greater implicit and explicit racial bias, pro-White attitudes, and greater conservatism; as opposed to when they were allowed to remain ignorant to the increasing racial diversity within the U.S. (Craig & Richeson, 2014). Other research has found that perpetrator groups who believe past transgressions have been properly addressed may feel their group is more moral, fueling beliefs that discussions of past transgressions should be closed (Kazarovytska et al., 2022). Because the cultural context surrounding intergroup race relations in the U.S. is scaffolded by a history that glorifies the accomplishments of White people they can avoid threatened moral feelings that may come from exposure to other marginalized group histories (Mukherjee et al., 2015; Salter & Adams, 2016).

Also, Whiteness often operates as an invisible baseline in U.S. society (Powell, 1999). This baseline has been operationalized as the White racial frame defined as a "broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (Feagin, 2020, pg., 11). One ideology within this frame is racial colorblindness, which legitimizes privilege through frames of naturalization and cultural racism. For example, when race is treated as innate, the actions of POC are attributed to biological difference (Hong et al.,

2009). These cultural differences in actions are also used to justify inequality because White people's behavior is individual choice, but POC behavior is viewed as being reflective of cultural norms (Causadias et al., 2018). These frames invisibilize racist histories by attributing inequality as the byproduct of choice or biology.

When confronted with privilege, White people tend to deny it, claim victimhood, or justify their advantage by claiming it is earned through meritocracy (Phillips & Lowery, 2018). These strategies limit critical engagement with their own racial identity and can heighten threat responses when confronted with claims of privilege (DiAngelo, 2011). From an emotion regulation perspective, researchers have argued that White individuals may be less willing to address social inequality because having to think about their own role in racism elicits negative emotions which undermines their sense of self (i.e., White Fragility; see Ford et al., 2022).

Finally, colorblind environments insulated from critical history are not accidental but due to historical, epistemic practices to reproduce false narratives. For example, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization of southern White women who propagandize the Confederacy, lobbied for sympathetic Confederate representation in Southern school curriculum (Breed, 2018). They helped reframe Confederate soldiers as war heroes and erected monuments (Cox, 2019). The argument for keeping these monuments has been that they reflect Southern pride and have nothing to do with glorifying a slave owning history (Henderson et al., 2021). However, these monuments - often placed in areas with historically high numbers of lynchings - were intentionally positioned in view of young Southern White children to socialize a proud confederate historical consciousness (Cox, 2019; Henderson et al., 2021). The effects of this reverberate today as there is still debate of whether the Civil War was about states' rights or slavery. Even though the only, significantly, contentious state right issue at the time was the right to own slaves (James,

2011). The narratives of these monuments as important historical records, ignoring their racist roots, have persisted as well. In an executive order issued by Donald Trump, Confederate monuments that were removed were ordered to be resurrected (Executive Order No. 14253, 2025).

## 5. COLORBLIND HISTORICAL CONTEXT IS HOSPITABLE TO AUTHORITARIANISM

The contextual and psychological maintenance of a colorblind history affords authoritarianism. Research finds White people with higher authoritarian personality are more likely to endorse colorblind ideology, and in turn, endorse beliefs that POC are too pushy for equal rights (Poteat & Spanierman, 2012). At the structural level this connection could be maintained by how authoritarianism shapes collective memory (see Figure 1 for an overview).

One goal of authoritarian regimes is to control the historical record and censor negative histories which prevents collective action (Stanley, 2024). Because the U.S. already has a tradition of ignoring its racist past, the assumption that its historical foundation is infallible already exists. This perception allows for reminiscing about a glorified past in times of uncertainty that often portends rises in authoritarian attitudes (Kang, 2016). Additionally, because colorblind ideologies reinforce ignorance to race, racial differences, and racial histories, POC can be exploited as threats in line with historically racialized stereotypes without critical reflection of their histories as victims.

The events of the past are not truly identity neutral but are often reconstructed to represent the concerns of the present (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992). This process forms collective memory which encompasses how history is recollected by individuals and communities, and how this history is expressed societally (Schuman & Scott, 1989). Collective expressions of historical events can be molded to depict the nation in a positive light (Paez & Liu, 2011).

### 5.1 Authoritarianism and Exploiting a Mythologized Past

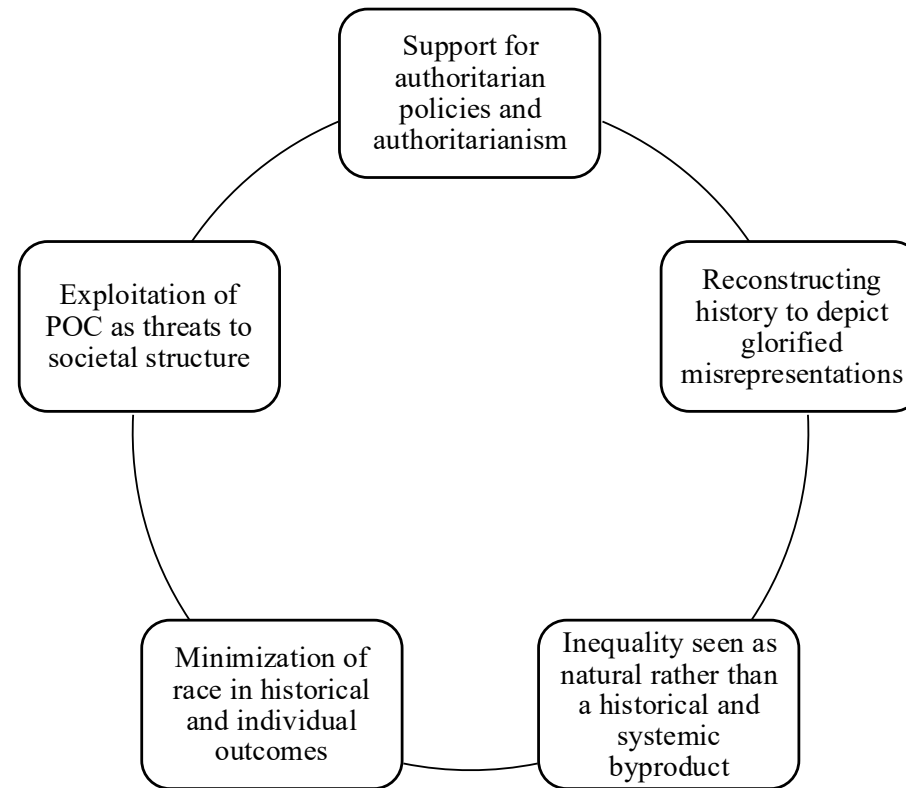
An example of the U.S. reconstructing the past to represent the political ideals of the present can be seen with Thanksgiving. The iconography of this holiday depicts harmonious intergroup relations between White colonizers and indigenous people, overshadowing the colonial violence committed during early settlements (Kurtiş, 2010). Thanksgiving was not declared a national holiday until 1863, during the Civil War, when it was reframed as a symbol of unity and intergroup healing in a time of national division (Adamczyk, 2002). This shift illustrates how collective memory adapts to contemporary needs, often erasing outgroup violence in the process (Paez & Liu, 2011). Because collective memory of the past is reshaped by contemporary context, authoritarians can leverage the appeal of a mythical past (Stanley, 2024).

This strategy is especially effective if critical knowledge of that historical past is poor or actively suppressed. This concept - referred to as "authoritarian nostalgia" - emerges during periods of societal uncertainty or democratic dissatisfaction, offering idealized narratives of order, morality, and national greatness, while scapegoating marginalized groups and democratic institutions for current instability (Ekman & Linde, 2005; Kang, 2016). In this way, authoritarian nostalgia functions as a hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myth - an ideology that provides moral justification for inequality and group dominance. SDT emphasizes that such legitimizing myths appear to offer stability, order, and cultural continuity (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Scapegoating, then, becomes a psychologically appealing strategy for dominant group members who are experiencing status threat: It allows them to offload blame and alleviate guilt, preserve a sense of control, and maintain a positive moral image (Rothschild et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2014). Harkening to this authoritarian nostalgia via scapegoating can be seen with Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again"

**Figure 1**

*Visual presentation of the relationship between authoritarianism, colorblindness, and collective memory*



*Note.* This figure depicts an overview of our descriptive narrative for how colorblind ideology and authoritarianism could be afforded through the construction of collective memory.



movement. This phrase can be interpreted as an example of a pernicious usage of a colorblind narrative. It invisibilizes the victimhood experiences of POC in the past by making claims that the U.S. was once great but is no longer and scapegoats POC for societal woes. This invokes threat from a White voter base who report racial resentment towards POC (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Those nostalgic for the past are more likely to endorse authoritarian beliefs, including support for strong leaders who subvert the rule of law (Goidel & Goidel, 2025). Thus, messaging that insinuates a glorified past based on the resentment of POC resonates not as a neutral call for national renewal, but as a longing for when White people held a perceived higher social status and the supremacy of their heritage was not challenged (Perry, 2023).

This messaging has been coupled with the Trump administration's initiatives to remove mention of marginalized group histories from official government records (Collins & Hamlin, 2025). One executive order demanded the Smithsonian and national parks erase information that reconstructs historical events to be "inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed" (Executive Order 14253, 2025). These narratives contradict claims that the U.S. is a just democracy and always has been. However, an inaccurate representation must be maintained if the primary messaging is a return to the past. This process is facilitated more easily by a culture of colorblindness that ignores racial history.

## 5.2 Authoritarianism and Creating a Racial Threat

In the colorblind U.S., the history of POC victimization is not readily mentioned; however, negative stereotypes of POC are contextually pervasive. For example, Black people are often overrepresented as criminals in the media compared to White people and stereotyped as lazy (Dukes & Gaither, 2017; Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). Latine immigrants are similarly stereotyped as criminals, welfare abusers, and

unqualified job competitors - labels rarely applied to White immigrant groups (Caricati, 2018; Van Meeteren, 2012). Negative stereotypes of POC have evolved over time to serve White political interests (Melson-Silimon et al., 2024). For example, stereotypes of Black people as docile and jovial were common during slavery because these narratives worked to rationalize a brutal system of subjugation; however, post slavery, stereotypes shifted to Black people as aggressive and dangerous to justify violence committed against those who challenged the White supremacist status quo (Lemons, 1977).

This pre-established racial threat narrative aligns seamlessly with authoritarian goals. To consolidate power, authoritarians often stigmatize marginalized outgroups in order to foster social cohesion and conformity around an individual or institution (Osborne et al., 2023). Marginalized outgroups are framed as violators of societal norms and are attributed as responsible for societal declines (Górska et al., 2022). This hateful messaging is appealing to the public because in times of uncertainty people are open to narratives of a strong authoritarian force that promises to keep them safe (Sprong et al., 2019). Critically, aligned with psychological research, threat need not be real as the perception of threat alone is sufficient to increase authoritarian attitudes (Mirisola et al., 2014). The fact that there are well entrenched scapegoats who have been successfully stigmatized in the past makes the messages easier to accept.

The trade-off between personal freedoms and perceived safety is a consistent feature of authoritarianism. When people feel threatened, they are willing to relinquish rights in exchange for a sense of security (Cheek et al., 2022). During the Reconstruction era of U.S. history, there were opportunities for Black people and poor White Southerners to build coalitions around shared class interests. However, poorer White Southerners were dissuaded from this future through a process W.E.B. DuBois called the "psychological wage of whiteness" (Du Bois, 1935). While poor White laborers made small

financial wages, richer White Southerners offered a psychological wage. By allowing poor White people to enter the same public spaces and granting them symbolic social respect greater than Black people, rich White people conferred a sense of racial superiority.

Social psychological research on system justification and social dominance orientation provides mechanisms for understanding this dynamic. In this context, poor White people benefited from, and aligned with the symbolic “wage of whiteness,” even as it undercut possibilities for cross-racial democratic solidarity. Although many poor White people yearned for a higher economic status, they had also been socialized to view White dominance over Black people as the natural order (Roediger, 2018). The result was poor White Southerners acting against their best economic interest. Instead of continued cooperation with Black people to create a more equitable democratic system that curbed the power of the land-owning class, they sided symbolically with rich White people to maintain a sense of racial superiority (Roediger, 2018).

Like the past, current political “threats” that have catalyzed authoritarianism have revolved around stoking fear of marginalized racial groups. Authoritarian ideologues in the U.S. have stoked fear of immigrants as criminals and/or job-stealers (Craig & Richeson, 2014), and of diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) policies as unfairly rewarding unmerited POC to the detriment of White U.S. Americans (Iyer, 2022). As during Reconstruction, support for exclusionary narrative often comes at the expense of the collective good. Economists, for example, have long emphasized the crucial role immigration plays in the economy. Specifically, immigrants provide more benefit in taxable income overall than their cost to social services, and many have argued that mass deportations would create significant economic issues (American Immigration Council, 2024; Lipman, 2006). Not to mention restrictions to DEI policies can have negative implications for

everyone as these policies encourage better organizational performance, productivity, creativity, and these programs have helped disadvantaged White groups as well, in particular White women (Iyer, 2022).

## **6. COMBATTING AUTHORITARIAN THREAT THROUGH CRITICAL RACIAL HISTORY**

We suggest critical racial histories can help disrupt threat narratives by leveraging the counternarrative storytelling tradition of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado, 1989) which centers the perspectives of POC in discussions of the structures and histories of racism in society. The practice of counternarrative storytelling through exposure to histories that are critical of mainstream White centered history, can be a powerful tool for reconsidering marginalized groups as threats. Importantly, counternarrative storytelling may decrease threat perceptions not only by highlighting discrimination marginalized populations endured, but also by showing how they have contributed to the very fabric of U.S. society. This broader perspective may encourage cognitive reappraisal of the role of marginalized communities. In fact, prior work has shown that when individuals reappraise discriminatory experiences positively, they relive the experience while diminishing their level of negative affect (Duker et al., 2022). To illustrate this, we revisit two case studies discussed earlier - Latine immigration and DEI policies - as exercises in counternarrative storytelling. In both cases, we highlight how reframing these issues through the perspectives of the marginalized can illuminate alternative understandings of power and threat.

### **6.1 Contextualizing the History of Latine Immigration**

While immigrants come from many countries, immigrants from Latin America are disproportionately stigmatized in the U.S. media as job stealers and criminals (Silber Mohamed & Farris, 2020; Valentino et al., 2013). However, the U.S. has not always had such an antagonistic stance toward immigrants from Latin America

- particularly when they could be economically exploited. In response to labor shortages during World War II, the government instituted the Bracero Program in 1942, which brought Mexican agricultural workers to the U.S. on a seasonal basis picking crops until 1951. This program created a readily exploitable workforce: Laborers were often employed without formal contracts and faced the constant threat of deportation with little legal recourse (Olivas, 1990).

Furthermore, there is no reliable evidence that increases in immigration increase violent crime rates (Light & Miller, 2018). In actuality, many immigrants from Latin America flee to the U.S. to escape crime in their home country (Magaloni & Razu, 2016). Crime that the U.S. has historically helped perpetuate because the U.S. is one of Latin America's largest firearm suppliers. A report from the Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) found that 70 percent of seized firearms in Mexico from 2014 to 2018 were U.S. made (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). While Mexico has maintained stricter gun control policies aimed at centralizing and limiting civilian access to firearms, the U.S. has fostered a more pro-gun culture. This disparity, combined with geographical proximity, has enabled a persistent flow of U.S.-manufactured firearms into Latin American countries (Weigend Vargas et al., 2021). This market for firearms that U.S. businesses have profited from continues to contribute to the violence that is present in Latin America by arming organized crime that threatens the safety of citizens (Pérez Ricart et al., 2021).

## 6.2 Diversity Equity and Inclusion from a Marginalized Historical Perspective

Another topic authoritarians have used to stoke fear has been Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs in government and universities (Taylor, 2025). DEI programs are designed to help traditionally marginalized groups get resources that they need to succeed and to overcome historical racial disparities (Iyer,

2022). Critics of these policies argue that they unfairly discriminate against White Americans and reward people based on racial identities as opposed to merit (Iyer, 2022). However, arguments that DEI programs unfairly discriminate against White people conveniently ignores that, in the past, POC were denied by White institutions of higher education that would otherwise have afforded them opportunities for social advancement (Ross, 2000). Stigmatizing DEI programs as discriminatory are hypocritical when you consider the convenient forgetting of the generations of privilege White people have experienced that necessitated these programs.

Not only that, but White people have been disproportionate recipients of a multitude of beneficial equity and inclusion programs in the past. For example, New Deal era welfare programs were substantial investments by the federal government in bolstering the U.S. American middle class and making higher education and economic social advancement attainable. However, these policies disproportionately benefited White Americans. Southern states lobbied for federal welfare programs to be at the discretion of the state and used this control to limit Black access to these programs (Katznelson, 2005). Although the GI Bill provided an affordable avenue to attend college for military veterans who fought in World War II, because the states controlled the federal GI funds, they were able to disperse these benefits while maintaining discriminatory Jim Crow policies that excluded Black veterans (Katznelson, 2005). The benefits of these programs, what some have dubbed the first "affirmative action" programs, were hoarded by White Americans and were not met with the same objections (Katznelson, 2005). Instead, many colleges have acquiesced to the Trump administration's anti-DEI agenda and have cut these programs in order to preserve their federal funds (Binkley, 2025). Illustrating another example of POC welfare being left behind based on the financial interests between rich White elites.

## 7. HISTORICAL RACIAL CONTEXT AND FOSTERING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

These case studies demonstrate that narratives portraying marginalized racial groups as threats are inaccurate. By knowing this history, it becomes clearer that the racial groups villainized as threats to democracy today have actually been the groups most excluded from its policies. By making connections between past injustices and present-day inequities, historical knowledge provides a framework for recognizing ongoing systemic racism.

Research on the Marley Hypothesis finds that knowledge of racial histories facilitates acknowledgement that racism still exists (Nelson et al., 2013). When you expose participants to narratives of racist U.S. history compared to a control, participants exposed to the racist history are more likely to report a higher awareness that racism persists (Bonam et al., 2019). Similarly, exposure to critical history has demonstrated that people are also able to connect racism in the democratic process of the past to racism in democratic processes in the present. When participants read about the history of voter suppression in America, they were more likely to acknowledge that voter suppression could still be an issue in the present day (Rojas Melo Silva et al., 2025). Giving credence to these racial group histories that provide counternarratives to glorified histories encourage complex reflection about self and society by connecting the past to the present.

## 8. RACIAL GROUP HISTORY AND TRANSFORMING OUR ASSUMPTIONS OF U.S. AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has argued that teaching marginalized histories damages democracy because they make White people feel bad and supposedly foster anti-American radicalization that divides an otherwise harmonious nation (Executive Order No. 14190, 2025). The current administration has created a public narrative that racial groups

who have historically been victims of violence are threats to democracy by mere acknowledgment of their historical mistreatment (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). This framing takes attention away from an important question of whether these histories are threatening democracy or if these histories threaten the illusion of a democracy that has only existed to benefit White people?

From the insulation of a colorblind context, White people believe and trust democratic government. However, in a poll asking about personal beliefs surrounding trust in the government, marginalized groups were more likely than White Americans to report low faith/trust in the government (Rainie & Perrin, 2019). This sentiment is understandable, considering from the perspective of many marginalized racial groups democratic rights have been inconsistent and the rights that have been gained have been hard fought. Instead of a story of democracy being stable, the story of U.S. democracy from the perspective of POC has been a democracy that benefits mostly a singular group at the expense of others (Van den Berghe, 1978). With that said, in the subsequent section we use historical case studies of POC as counternarrative stories juxtaposed with academically established tenets required for democracy (see Table 2 for an overview).

### 8.1 Reconsidering Democracy from the Perspectives of the Oppressed

Prior research suggests that healthy democracies have at least three characteristics (for a review see Diamond & Morlino, 2004). First, healthy democracies have political rights, such as the right to vote (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). However, these political rights have been tenuous for most citizens who are not White land owners. The U.S. declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776 and in this year only White land-owning men had the right to vote (Karlán, 2003). The property requirement was not lifted until 1860, and Black men did not receive the right to vote until 1870 with the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (U.S. Const. amend. XV). Despite

Table 2

Tenets of a healthy democracy described through mainstream narratives compared to critical counternarratives

| Tenets of Healthy Democracy | Mainstream Narratives                                                                                                          | Critical Counternarratives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political Rights            | Individuals have, and historically have had, the right to vote, stand for office, campaign, and to organize political parties. | Voting rights for people of color and women were restricted/banned until legal policies allowed these individuals to participate in elections. Historically, White land-owning individuals have been the only group that has always had voting rights. Thus, political rights in the U.S. have been tenuous.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Civil Rights                | Individuals have the freedom to live and move as they please and the right to education.                                       | <p>Segregation limited the civil rights for people of color by mandating where they could live (e.g., Black and White only places of commerce and schools).</p> <p>Resources for education were directly tied to race such that White communities had greater resources and higher quality education than communities of color.</p> <p>People of color have historically faced barriers to owning property through clauses prohibiting them from buying, owning, or leasing properties, and/or through the denial of financial services (e.g., mortgages, insurance, etc.).</p> |
| Social Rights               | Individuals have the right to certain goods (e.g., health, well-being, and minimal income).                                    | Black individuals have routinely been the targets of racialized violence (e.g., lynchings, hate crimes) that inhibited their right to health and well-being.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

*Note.* This table provides a broad comparison of democratic tenets as interpreted from a mainstream perspective and challenged by critical counternarratives. This table gives broad definitions of key democratic tenets, but these tenets and their relationships with U.S. racial history is complex and historically dynamic.



this Amendment, many southern states still instituted measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests to prevent Black people from voting that were not outlawed until the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Crowley, 2013). Not to mention women did not get the right to vote until 1920 and Indigenous Americans did not gain suffrage until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 (Smith, 1970). If you consider the most recent suffrage legislation, the U.S. has not had full political rights for its citizens for around 75% of its total history. While all U.S. Americans “technically” have the right to vote now, critics have argued the spirit of voter suppression still lives with policies such as voter ID laws designed to target members of marginalized groups (Kuk et al., 2022).

Secondly, healthy democracies have civil rights, including freedom of residence and the right to an education (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). Segregation in both neighborhoods and schools contradict these rights. In this country, the right to residence and the right to an education are inextricably linked, as public school quality is often determined by the neighborhoods in which that school resides. This dynamic is deeply racialized. Historically, White neighborhoods have had greater wealth and resources, while communities of color have been systematically underfunded and segregated (Denton, 1996). Prior to the landmark court case *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), legal segregation explicitly barred Black residents from moving into White neighborhoods and schools, creating a system that was separate and unequal (Bell, 1980). While segregation is no longer formally protected White communities are still wealthier than Black communities maintained through deed restrictions, redlining, and covenants (Massey, 2007).

Finally, healthy democracies have social rights. These rights include the right to health and physical well-being (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). This right has also been historically inconsistent for Black people due to racial violence.

For example, between 1877 and 1950, over 4,000 racially motivated lynchings were documented in the U.S. (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). These violences were so pervasive that, the Civil Rights Congress, a former U.S. civil rights organization, presented a petition to the United Nations (UN) in 1951 arguing that “the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence [from police, the Ku Klux Klan], suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government” (Civil Rights Congress, 1970). These conditions that led activists to petition to the UN, to a degree, still remain as data suggests Black people are still more likely to be killed by police than their White counterparts and more likely to be victims of racial violence (Blee, 2005; Edwards et al., 2019).

## 8.2 Using Historical Perspectives to Envision a New Democracy for All

By contrasting historical cases of POC mistreatment with foundational principles of a healthy democracy, it becomes clear that U.S. democracy has not only been historically constructed by racism, but that racism has prevented the successful functioning of democratic processes for POC. A critical reconsideration of core democratic values such as freedom, equality and governance is not a rejection of democracy, but a necessary step toward its fulfillment (Mutua, 2023). How democracy can be reimagined through engagement with history can be informed by research that works to both mitigate resistances to critical historical narratives and informed by research that suggests how engagement with history can foster resistance.

Critical psychologies have suggested reclaiming knowledge of critical histories can be transformative in promoting a new, more equitable social world (Martín-Baró, 1996; Freire, 1996). However, this is not easy. A meta-analysis of intergroup contact found that exposure to knowledge about marginalized groups had weaker effects on prejudice reduction than empathy and perspective-taking (Pettigrew &

Tropp, 2008). This is understandable considering exposure to these marginalized group histories often creates emotional defensiveness from dominant groups (Bilewicz, 2016). Resistance is also fueled by misinformation. Many opponents of CRT, for instance, assume it harms White people, fosters division, or dredges up the past unnecessarily. Encouragingly, a metacognitive intervention designed to correct these misconceptions reduced opposition (Richmond et al., 2024). Meanwhile, understanding the multitude of ways multiculturalism is threatening can help develop specialized, practical ways to reduce threat and combat colorblind ideologies (Rios, 2022).

Reducing White people's feelings of threat towards racist histories can also start early through proactive parent-children conversations. While many are concerned about discussing racism with children, this perspective privileges the feelings of White children who often have the luxury of being able to ignore race compared to children of color who are confronted with racism early in their lived experiences. Histories of racism can and should be proactively discussed with children so long as it is appropriately grounded in a digestible way so they can develop a nuanced understanding of these histories as they grow (for a review of strategies see Lingras, 2021).

However, another way to understand critical history is not solely through its potential to reduce White prejudice, but through its power to foster resistance. This is important because racism is not solely a byproduct of ignorance but also maintained by power (Bobo, 1999). White people in the U.S. are motivated to maintain racism through the privileges they get from its existence. Therefore, introducing critical histories is not just for the edification of majority group members but in the resistance to these structures it may incite in POC. How we construct historical narratives can afford psychology of resistance. Research suggests that reframing the way we tell historical narratives provides beneficial affordances for collective

action. Historical narratives that counter master narratives of dominant group superiority can increase acknowledgement of perceived injustice and foster collective efficacy beliefs that current systems can change which in turn could lead to collective action (Freel & Bilali, 2022). Initiatives to introduce ethnic studies courses that offer counters to mainstream narratives of history in schools have found success in reducing prejudice of White students. These courses have also improved academic performance for POC students by making them feel represented and valued in their education and increasing their interest in political participation (Sleeter, 2011).

Constructing antiracist worlds through representative history must consider both psychological attitudes and context (Salter et al., 2018). On the one hand, reducing feelings of threat can help reduce opposition to critical histories. However, inclusive history need not just be for the benefit of White people but for the benefit of marginalized racial groups. These histories help contextualize their experiences within a racist U.S. history and foster pushes for a more representative democracy that centers their interests. Because the colorblind context of the US fosters an environment in which calling out histories of racism and connecting them to modern day inequality is difficult, cultural affordances to understand connections between histories of racism, authoritarianism, and democracy are restricted. However, critical histories that encourage reflection could foster psychological characteristics necessary for developing democratic citizens such as better understanding of group differences and a willingness to learn from those who are different (Moghaddam et al., 2023). Through these affordances citizens may be able to more critically understand where a colorblind conceptualization of U.S. democracy has failed but also resist efforts by dominant groups to keep these systems in place.

## 9. RECONSTRUCTING COLOR CONSCIOUS DEMOCRACY THROUGH HISTORY

Treating groups in ways that ignores their group membership entirely (i.e., colorblindness) has challenges, because a preoccupation with commonality between racial groups fosters colorblind assumptions of group differences that ignore hierarchy and merely give the appearance of progress (Dovidio et al., 2015). Colorblind narratives of progress have been present in democratic messaging. Modern narratives of democracy focus on tenets of civility and rationality as the best way to engage in discourse between groups without considering unequal status (Olson, 2004). For example, the Trump administration has argued for defunding broadcasting platforms like the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) because it promoted “biased content” such as airing a documentary about reparations and an episode of Sesame Street that discussed racism (The White House, 2025). However, while this attack on the broadcasting network has racist underpinnings, these legal proceedings are not always represented as attacks on POC but represented as a failure to maintain rationality and civility through equally representative discourse. This marginalizes the experiences of POC under the guise of adhering to civility and rationality. The byproduct of which is epistemological violences wherein POC experiences are ignored or misrepresented in public intellectual spheres (for a review see Teo, 2010).

The focus on civility and rationality has become popular in the U.S.; however, it has been mainly motivated by a desire to avoid conflict as the nation was balancing factions of different racial groups that they worried could erupt (Baszile, 2015). Prior research suggests many find colorblind ideologies less threatening because of a belief that acknowledging race fosters division and avoiding discussions of racism keeps the peace (Crenshaw, 2019). Yet this quest for civility led to a colorblind assumption of democracy. Historically, some Supreme Court justices,

the highest legal authorities in the U.S., have endorsed a colorblind constitutionalism, arguing that the U.S. constitution should be interpreted without explicit recognition of race (Gotanda, 1991). This interpretation of the constitution was similarly motivated by hopes to maintain democratic rationality by sidestepping the potential conflicts that might arise from acknowledging racial groups in legal terms. However, critics argue that such an approach does not maintain harmonious relations but rather ignores the histories of legally instituted discrimination that minoritized racial groups have experienced in the U.S. and obfuscates the ways in which democracy has failed them and continues to fail them (Gotanda, 1991).

The U.S., while having its own unique circumstances, is not alone in their struggles with reconciling with its history. For example, textbooks in Israel similarly ignore or negatively depict Palestinians (Bar-Tal, 1999). Attempts have been made to reform the textbooks to be more multicultural, but this process has proven difficult because these texts often still retain a national ethos that glorifies Israeli narratives of history (Al-Haj, 2005). Cases like this suggest there are similarities between contexts in dominant groups trying to maintain a positive representation in national histories. Looking at cases such as this also highlights the potential importance of not just representing other histories but redefining historical narratives that create a more critical, inclusive ethos from which people living in a cultural context can pull from to inform their psychologies.

Acknowledging these histories in a real and critical way has been effective in some small cases. Some scholars have used Mauritius, an island nation off the coast of Africa, as a case study for the effectiveness of reconciling with a racist history. Mauritius ranks highly on many peace indexes and political freedom indexes and has maintained these outcomes as a multicultural society. In interviews with a cross section of its residents, many pointed to the country's efforts to acknowledge their

discriminatory histories in order to improve for the future as one of the reasons they believe the country maintains pushes for peace and equity (Aumeerally et al., 2022). While this nation is not a utopia and still has its fair share of intergroup issues, the case of Mauritius illustrates that the relationship between historical acknowledgment and democratic possibility is not unique to the U.S. context.

While the U.S. has a unique legacy shaped by chattel slavery and anti-Black racism, Mauritius, despite its own distinctive history of colonization and ethnically diverse population, offers an example of how democratic resilience can emerge from confronting, rather than erasing, histories of intergroup injustice. As Aumeerally and colleagues (2022) show, many Mauritians emphasized the importance of confronting historical injustices to maintain peace. Participants emphasized the role of public discourse and education that center historical injustices as essential tools for maintaining peace within a multiethnic society. Notably, these efforts are not left to individuals alone. Initiatives such as the establishment of a slavery museum were prompted by recommendations from the government-backed Truth and Justice Commission, creating structural affordances for meaningful engagement with history and power. While not uniformly successful, these collective efforts illustrate acknowledging historical harm need not fracture national identity; rather, it can serve as the foundation for a more robust, inclusive ethos of democracy.

## 10. CONCLUSION

While some lessons may be gleaned from comparing similar contexts, trying to use broad strokes to understand racism, authoritarianism, and democracy may not be the best means by which to consider these processes in a practical sense. Countries have their own unique histories that form and shape democracy. We suggest that an understanding of the interplay between structural histories of racism, localized in context, and the psychological

processes reflected in these histories should be considered when thinking of democracy in the U.S. Much research looking at authoritarianism has focused on its relationship with prejudicial attitudes and has often separated it from considerations of how it interplays with structural racism (Mcfarland, 2010; Weaver & Prowse, 2020). This may reflect an overarching tendency in psychology to consider racism as solely a manner of prejudice and individual bias (Adams & Omar, 2024). However, in the U.S., authoritarianism and democracy should be understood within the context of histories of structural racism and how these cultural patterns of racism shape democracy. In this way, we work towards a sociocultural resistance framework that considers resistance in terms of cultural patterns and interrogations of racial power (Jordan et al., 2024). By highlighting and challenging the misrepresentations of dominant histories that have reproduced and sustained authoritarianism we suggest resistance should consider history. Challenging dominant histories brings the potential of constructing more race conscious history that could construct new cultural affordances and inspire a new imagination of a democracy for all.

## 11. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests.

## 12. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

M.P., A.B., and P.S. all worked to theorize and write the manuscript

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