

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
MINORITY (202) 225-5051
<https://oversight.house.gov>

Vice Ranking Member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Opening Statement
As Prepared for Delivery
“Ending Illegal Racial Discrimination
and Protecting Men and Women in U.S. Employment Practices”
June 27, 2024

Throughout history, Americans have fought for and championed civil rights. We fought to end segregation, discrimination and advanced measures towards an integrated, diverse, multiracial society. And throughout our history, we have also had to confront the ugly legacy and backlash of bigotry, ignorance and white nationalism. The arguments that protections and civil rights for historically marginalized populations, as “reverse racism” or “preferential” is not new.

We passed the Civil Rights Act and Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the Fair Housing Act in 1968, and spent decades integrating schools, all in an effort to build a society where people can work and be treated equally no matter their race, gender or religion.

But throughout it all, from Little Rock to Charlottesville to today, conservative extremists have resisted these efforts to integrate American democracy. They weaponize fear and claim these efforts toward a better society are themselves unconstitutional, or illegal.

Today’s hearing is just the latest in a decades long attack from right wing extremists on any and all efforts to expand civil rights, equity, and freedom in the United States.

Let’s start with the Civil Rights Act, which is designed to ensure no person is discriminated against for something as simple as the color of their skin, their gender, or their religion.

Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was even passed, conservatives opposed it, arguing that the law would somehow violate their constitutional right to segregated spaces.

But they lost that fight.

And thanks to the landmark legislation of the 1960s, opportunities for Black Americans radically expanded. From 1959 to 1969, the poverty rate for Black Americans dropped nearly in half, the share of Black youth completing high school rose from 39% to 56%, and the gap between white and Black incomes reached the lowest it has ever been.

All after integrationist, pro-civil rights policies were passed.

Then came the conservative response afterwards. In the late 60s, Republican President Richard Nixon, determined to gain support from southern white politicians by appealing to racism, promised to slow civil rights enforcement.

In the 1970s, right-wing opponents of civil rights and integration started framing efforts to ensure all Americans have equal access to opportunities as “reverse racism.”

And in the 1980s, Republicans and right-wing judges, including now-Chief Justice John Roberts, built on that framing to advance a dubious argument: if we don’t talk about bigotry, it doesn’t exist.

So instead of punishing bigoted leaders and organizations and societal structures and violations of the law, and working to create a more equitable world, the law would instead pretend race and racism—and their real-world impacts—didn’t exist.

This right-wing legal effort continues today. One lawyer alone, Edward Blum, backed by wealthy right-wingers, has brought more than two dozen cases since the 1990s attempting to remove consideration of race entirely from key civil rights laws.

This resistance to integration in every part of society, whether it be in schools, or housing, or the workforce, is an attempt to destroy the progress we have made toward a more equal and just society.

But it’s also an economic play and that’s what’s important for people to understand. This is a way to keep the status quo that gives a handful of the wealthiest people in society power and immunity, and distract the working class from attaining the basic rights and protections they deserve.

These right-wing billionaires prey on racism, bigotry, anti-trans panic, and fear to drive wedges in our communities and prevent resources from going to public services that predominantly serve working class communities.

They use these arguments to defund our public schools, defund our communities, and defund our public infrastructure. They divide us, then they union-bust.

And let’s be clear, these extremists are not just destroying the public institutions that working people rely upon as retaliation in some culture war, no, defunding services for working people is the point.

And we’ve seen what happens when they pursue this goal:

Last year alone, more than 4,200 books were targeted in right-wing attempts for censorship, most often targeted for censorship were those books that cover themes related to race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Last year, a record 510 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures.

And since the Dobbs decision two years ago this week, 21 states now ban abortion or are more restrictive than the standard that was in place under Roe.

Those opposed to integration see this as a victory. And they are not planning to stop here.

Project 2025, the radical right-wing playbook detailing conservative Donald Trump’s agenda for a second term, devotes an entire chapter to detailing the many ways that the federal government should roll back progress and turn back the clock on civil rights and liberties in the workplace.

I will note that the Majority of this Committee has apparently invited the author of that chapter to testify here today.

This hearing is fundamentally an insult to the promise of a multiracial democracy that we all represent and require for prosperity in a working-class America. This hearing is fundamentally an insult to all of us.

My Republican colleagues are going to say empty words about discrimination in the workplace today. They’re going to play on fear and provide yet another opportunity for radical right-wing extremism—the kind that says that if you’re not a white, or cisgender, or straight, or a man, you don’t deserve equal protections over your own body and the ability to have Control over your own life—to take root.

We’re not going to fall for it, and we’re not going to let them get away with it. I yield back.

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Contact: Nelly Decker, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181