

# OPINION

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## Second-Class Citizenship Continues

Has anything changed?

BY EBONY SLAUGHTER-JOHNSON

When I heard about the police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, I thought back to another name etched into American history: Dred Scott.

In 1857, the Supreme Court was tasked with deciding whether Scott, an African American man born into slavery, should be granted his freedom.

The justices not only denied Scott's request, but also took the opportunity to send a chilling message to all African Americans, free and enslaved, that reverberates to this day.

The court held that as members of an inferior race, African Americans were not citizens at all — and, as such, did not even have legal standing to sue.

African Americans, as Chief Justice Roger Taney so decisively determined, had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

The next century was charac-

terized by an ongoing struggle to prove Taney wrong.

African American heroism during the Civil War era hastened the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, which ended slavery and (theoretically) reversed race-based restrictions on citizenship.

Yet these gains were negated almost as quickly as they were realized,



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as the strong grip of Jim Crow choked communities throughout the South.

Over the violent decades that followed, African Americans endured church bombings, harassment, and police beatings and animal attacks, like the brutalities inflicted on those marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965.

This sacrifice of the black body, along with sustained lobbying, ultimately led to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Yet even today, second-class citizenship continues. It shows up in generational poverty, a disparate education system, mass incarceration, and violence at the hands of police.

In fact, African Americans are three times as likely as whites to

of their constitutional right to life by self-deputized racists who proclaimed themselves judge, juror, and executioner and gunned them down.

That same year, Rekia Boyd was murdered under a hail of bullets by an off-duty police officer who reproached Boyd and her friends for talking too loudly, depriving her of her right to free speech, freedom of assembly, and life.

next to Scott's motionless body on the ground — all over a mere traffic violation.

On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling, a father of five who was selling CDs to provide for his children, was murdered by law enforcement officers who violated his Fourth Amendment right to prevent unwarranted search and seizure simply because he fit a certain profile.

Less than 48 hours later, Philando Castile was pulled over for a broken tail light. Castile's non-threatening disclosure that he was legally carrying a concealed weapon prompted a police officer to murder him in front of his partner and her four-year-old daughter, violating his Second Amendment right to bear arms.

In 2016, one would hope that the “inalienable rights” of all Americans are respected. Yet Taney's words that African Americans “have no rights which the white man was bound to respect” still ring loud and clear.

The fight for full African American citizenship continues.

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## Acknowledging the Deep Racial Wealth Gap

A party platform that finally targets the barriers

BY JOSH HOXIE



Party platforms are dense and often morosely boring documents filled with wonkish policy proposals and partisan jeers at the other side.

At over 40 pages, this year's Democratic Party platform lives up to its predecessors in length

and ennui. However, it also includes a section not yet seen in platforms from either side: an acknowledgement of the racial wealth gap.

Wealth has been unfairly distributed since our nation's founding, and that unfairness has always had a racial bent. It goes something like this: White families have more; black and Latino families have less. (Asian and Arab Americans have more complex economic histories.)

The gap is far larger than you might expect.

A 2014 study from Pew Research revealed that median white families have 13 times more wealth than median black families, and 10 times more than median Latino families. That gap has remained relatively consistent for decades.

The Democratic platform acknowledges that this gap “has been created by historical and contemporary policies and practices that discriminate against people of color” and have “constrained their ability to earn income and build assets to the same extent as other

Americans.”

In other words, the racial wealth gap is no accident, and it's not caused by some deficiency in people of color. It's caused by a legacy of bad public policies that extend to this day. The platform commits to eliminating those systemic barriers, but what exactly are they — and how do we fix them?

One way to get at this is to consider who benefits from existing wealth-building policies.

Consider that in recent decades, wealth has concentrated at the tippy top of the economic pyramid. The 400 wealthiest Americans combined own \$2.34 trillion. That's more than the GDP of India, a country of over a billion people. In that group of 400, just seven are black or Latino.

Those at the top have been able to reach record levels of wealth through policies that prioritize wealth concentration by those who already have wealth. This is in stark contrast to focusing on those who have no wealth and helping them build a nest egg.

Take for instance the loop-

holes in the tax code that enable some of the highest earning households to pay just 17 percent of their income in taxes. That's less than half the top nominal rate. At the same time, we're told we can't afford to expand programs with a proven track record of improving prospects for people who start with less, like the early childhood education program Head Start.

This tradeoff — wasting precious public resources on tax breaks for the rich while leaving those at the bottom to fend for themselves — plays out in countless different ways in public policies large and small.

Reversing this dynamic will have a significant impact on the racial wealth gap, but first we have to acknowledge it. Including the racial wealth gap in the Democratic Party platform is a strong first step — one the Republicans should follow.

Now, let's fix it.

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