

# Voting, Health, and Race

Hi, I'm Jim. I'm Erik. And I'm Jo, and this is Speaking of Race.

Jo: Guys, voting day is right around the corner. And, I don't know if you sense it, but the tension I feel about this election is off the charts this year.

Jim: Feels a little like 1968 to me.

Jo: Actually, Jim, you already foreshadowed a discussion about the election back at the end of our episode in June on the BLM protests. You weren't very optimistic then, remember?

Jim: Nor am I now.

Jo: You forecasted a November election that would involve suppression of non-white voters. And you also made the point that even if that election changes our national leadership, we're going to have to confront systemic racism. That'll require change that extends WELL beyond elections, and it likely is not going to be supported by even well-meaning white people in the US.

Erik: Even though there was this "great awakening" by the US media and corporations and people who put black squares on their Instagram pages with the #BLM hashtag....

Jo: As much as it pains me to say it, new evidence suggests you were right to be pessimistic, Jim.

Jim: It's true. New polling data confirms that, while a majority of both the overall and white population supported the protests against police violence in June, 2020, that has now fallen to 39% overall approval and just over 1/3 white approval. And, the reforms that seemed to be coming--even after the Minneapolis city council pledged to dismantle the police force that killed George Floyd--are growing less and less likely.

Erik: So after this initial flurry of activity that seemed like a promising moment for potential change, the impetus has come to a grinding halt among many white groups. We're in the seventh month of a pandemic that's looking worse instead of better. And we're five months out from the killing of George Floyd that sparked what could be the largest racial protests in American history--

Jo: --and we're only a few days away from the most contentious election I can remember.

Jim: In other words, there is no shortage of contentious public issues dealing with race in 2020. But, as usual, there's what seems obvious on the surface, and then there are the deeper historical and scientific issues at work that need some unpacking, which is what we're here for.

Jo: I think we should explain two recent articles, one from the tabloid *New York Post* entitled "Joe Biden's Disastrous Plans for America's Suburbs," and the other from the *New York Times* called "How Decades of Racist Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering."

Erik: Oh boy.

Jo: The first one says that Biden and Harris are going to reinstate the "Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing" (or AFFH) policies that Obama put into effect in 2015. The AFFH empowered the Department of Housing & Urban Development to make sure that states and cities and counties it funds are NOT discriminating, and are taking active steps to reduce racial segregation.

Erik: I don't understand how that's a disastrous plan.

Jo: We'll get there. The second article describes urban "heat anomalies"—extra-hot temperatures within cities. A study of 108 cities across the US found that areas that had historically been redlined were, on average, 5 degrees hotter in the summer than non-redlined areas. And in some cities, the difference was up to 12 degrees!

Erik: Hold on! We're going to have to explain what redlining is and then why this scientific data is significant when you know that history.

Jo: We'll get there! And we're going to tie all this to voting, which is why it's important to talk about it right now.

Erik: Good point. Can we start with redlining?

Jo: Yes. So, listeners, in April, we talked a little bit about the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA) use of the Home Owners Loan Corporation's (HOLC's) neighborhood ratings in the mid-20th century, which created a lot of the urban segregation and poverty we still see today.

Jim: We talked about how the concentration of poverty in urban areas creates physical consequences for racial minorities that puts them directly at higher risk for COVID exposure.

Jo: But we didn't go at all into the history or purpose of the HOLC or the FHA. That's important here because that history is still shaping urban segregation today.

Erik: Right, HOLC was created as part of the New Deal in 1933 to refinance home mortgages for families whose houses were "underwater" -- it was a whole process to prevent foreclosures and a growing wave of homelessness. As part of this process, the HOLC undertook a massive

campaign to evaluate thousands of neighborhoods across the country for how risky the refinancing would be.

Jo: When the FHA was created the following year to try to infuse cash and jobs into the construction industry, it began using the risk assessments the HOLC had created to underwrite mortgages and incentivize bank investments in neighborhoods.

Erik: These both sound like good ideas, right?

Jim: They sure do. But the problem was the system the HOLC used for rating neighborhoods. They had four categories: A colored green on the maps for the best neighborhoods; B colored blue for “still desirable”, C colored yellow for “definitely declining”, I grew up in one of those neighborhoods in San Francisco that the three of us combined couldn’t buy a house in today, and D colored red for “hazardous”. The term redlining derives from the hazardous label attached to the D or red neighborhoods, which indicated that no mortgages should be underwritten there.

Erik: And how did they decide which neighborhood got which color?

Jim: The two major criteria for evaluating these neighborhoods were the characteristics of the area and the nature of the population. Frederick Babcock, first director of the Underwriting Division of the FHA, wrote their manual in 1939 using the data and ratings the HOLC had accumulated. He equated racial composition and land use when he wrote... Erik, can you take this quote?

Erik: “The infiltration of inharmonious racial groups will produce the same effects as those which follow the introduction of nonconforming land uses which tend to lower the levels of land values and to lessen the desirability of residential areas.”

Jim: And that was exactly how the FHA decided on mortgages. So the less white the neighborhood, the more automatically risky the FHA rated it, by definition--and they were blatant about it. That meant mortgages and other federally backed forms of credit were harder to get.

Jo: I’m guessing this all produced a pattern of pushing government money toward white neighborhoods and away from Black neighborhoods at the very moment when many African Americans were moving from the South and entering northern industrial cities. So, intentionally or not, these New Deal policies created what would eventually be called ghettos. One way of potentially addressing this would be to create more affordable housing outside of traditionally redlined neighborhoods.

Jim: Right! These problems were *supposed* to be addressed by the two most important acts signed by Lyndon Johnson in the summer of 1968: the Fair Housing Act and the Housing & Urban Development Act. They were pretty successful. In fact, the HUD Secretary who presided over the single largest construction of federally subsidized housing in American history was George Romney, father Mitt Romney.

Erik: Hell, it should have been PREVENTED by the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which was the first civil rights act ever signed in the U.S., shortly after the abolition of slavery. All citizens were supposed to be granted the same rights in use, purchase, and lease of real estate.

Jim: But you know who George Romney's HUD ran into back in 1972?

Erik: Um...

Jim: Nixon.

Jo: --- Bum bum buuuuum!

Jim: The GOP switched to the public-private initiatives like Section 8 housing and basically divested from the plans under the Johnson administration only a couple of years in. Plus as Fred Trump and his son Donald showed back in the 70s, Nixon's executive branch would only go after you for housing discrimination up to a point. Not enforcing anti-discrimination laws in housing was just once piece of the "Southern Strategy."

Jo: You're going to have to explain that.

Erik: The "Southern Strategy" was the 1960s transition of Republicans away from the ideology of Lincoln and emancipation and toward the party of George Wallace and Dixiecrats. Starting with Nixon's campaign in 1967, Republicans played on white's fears of racial minorities and all these policies passed by Democrats that are part of the Civil Rights Movement like fair housing and integrated schools to move white voters from the Democratic Party to the Republican. It was such a good strategy that the Gulf South flipped from almost entirely Democrat to almost entirely Republican.

Jim: I remember an egregious political operative for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, Lee Atwater, who gave an hour-long interview about the Southern Strategy. He blatantly described how it was designed to harm African Americans while appearing non-racial.

Jo: Oh ya, let's play that clip.

Sound clip of Atwater: "Y'all don't quote me on this. You start out in 1954 by saying, "n-word n-word n-word". By 1968 you can't say "n-word"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this", is much more abstract than even the

busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "n-word, n-word". So, any way you look at it, race is coming on the back-burner."

Erik: Well then.

Jo: This, then, takes us to voting! Or more specifically, gerrymandering.

Erik: In 1812, Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry (pronounced "Gary") drew election districts around Boston that would favor his party. One looked like a dragon or salamander, hence the term. The drawing of these strange shapes helps in two ways. "Cracking" means disbursing a powerful voting bloc's influence across multiple districts to dilute that influence. "Packing" means squishing everyone in a particular constituency into a single district to reduce their voting power elsewhere. In both cases, the controlling party tries to waste as many votes of the other party as possible -- wasted because they are unlikely to contribute meaningfully to an election outcome. Gerrymandering has gotten more precise and extreme over the years. And both parties now regularly engage in it.

Jo: It's true that both parties do it, but the modern version of gerrymandering was overseen by a Republican political strategist named Thomas Hofeller [Hof-FLER]. Hofeller is one of those guys you may never have heard of, but whose work has had a really outsized impact on US politics. He masterminded the re-drawing of congressional districts in the 1960s to pack AAs--who after Johnson's reforms were more likely to vote Democrat--into a small number of districts. The GOP would then win the remaining largely-white districts. He did this especially in North Carolina, but all over the south really.

Erik: Ironically, the redrawing was often justified by saying it was necessary to support the Voting Rights Act. But pretty soon, yet again, no one was trying to hide what was really going on here. Check out this quote from Hofeller himself. In the year 2000 he says, "Redistricting is like an election in reverse. It's a great event. Usually the voters get to pick the politicians. In redistricting, the politicians get to pick the voters."

Jo: Actually, I discovered when we were prepping this episode that Hofeller just died in 2018, and his daughter released a bunch of his private files. Here's a crazy twist. They show that he was one of the key players behind Trump's attempt to add the citizenship question to the 2020 census—he even wrote the justification for it in the DoJ letter, trotting out that old logic that it would be necessary to support the Voting Rights Act. But privately, in those files that were just released, he predicted that that information gleaned from that question would support redistricting in a way that would be really advantageous to "Republicans and non-Hispanic whites" (his words). So it looks like part of the purpose of that citizenship question would have been to collect information that would have supported redistricting again in favor of Republicans and white people.

Jim: All of which is to say, guess what, our voting system is rigged--but not the way the Cheeto says it is. It's rigged in his favor!

Jo: To get a sense of how ridiculously our districts are drawn, you could just look at a map, which we'll link in our show notes. But another way you can look at it is through what's going on with the people inside those ridiculously drawn districts. Say, health. Since we're in the middle of a pandemic, let's take a look at the differences in health between particular voting districts. This is a great way to get insight into how those districts have been specifically engineered to squish constituencies into small numbers of districts to dilute their voting power.

Erik: I hate to be the one to ask this question, but what does any of this have to do with science? I mean I know political science has that name in it, but ...

Jo: We. Will. Get. There. So, in June, the Pew Research Center reported that the majority of coronavirus deaths in the US were in Democratic congressional districts—about 75,000 out of the total 92,000 deaths that had happened by mid-May.

Erik: That's pretty grim. But I would imagine that's because the first places hit were New York and Seattle, not the most Republican areas.

Jo: Sure, Erik, and what you're saying is what a lot of other people speculated: namely, that people in urban areas die more because they live closer together, and people in urban areas also tend to vote Democratic rather than Republican. That might be true. You might also think it reflects income differences--there's a lot of wealth in those big cities. But no. When they drilled down, what they found was that those Democratic voting districts with the highest death rates were the ones where non-white residents have been concentrated through decades of redlining and gerrymandering. Non-white people are dying from COVID-19 much more than white people for all the reasons we talked about in our April episode—poorer health and healthcare access to start off with, and that's thanks to redlining.

Jim: Not surprisingly, politicians have been actively engaging in voter suppression for decades, on top of gerrymandering. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down one of the key aspects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which since its inception had required states to seek federal approval to change voting laws to ensure that racial groups would have equal voting access. The lifting of that requirement in 2013 meant states were freed up to make changes as they saw fit, and guess what? Almost immediately, 13 states closed over 1700 polling places, mostly in the south and many in Black or Latinx neighborhoods. In many cases, voters weren't notified that their precincts had been closed. And to make matters worse, many states enacted voter ID laws at the same time, which required a government-issued ID to vote.

Jo: So gerrymandering plus these laws making it more difficult to get to the polls--those have been criticized as direct acts of voter suppression aimed specifically at people of color.

Jim: Yep, a lot of the gerrymandering that went on in the US in the 80s and 90s was aimed at packing African American voters into districts known as "minority-majority" districts--that is,

districts where racial minorities formed the majority within the district. And those were the same districts with fewer polls open, fewer workers and hours for voting, etc.

Jo: And NOW we come to the scientific part.

Erik: Oh good!

Jo: You're going to like this. So that New York Times article on urban "heat anomalies"—in areas redlined over 80 years ago? Remember, I said earlier that, on average, formerly redlined areas were 5 degrees hotter in the summer than non-redlined areas, and in some cases much higher.

Erik: So, two questions: why does that little bit of extra heat matter? And why do the study authors think that's happening?

Jo: The second one is pretty obvious: those formerly redlined neighborhoods are the same ones now that have fewer features that cool the environment down: big old trees, parks, running water, and so on. Instead, they have more paved surfaces, like highways, big public housing blocks, and warehouses heating up the environment. Those kinds of infrastructure choices can be pushed to poorer neighborhoods where there are mostly rentals.

Erik: Ah, rentals because home ownership was out of reach without those government-backed loans from the New Deal.

Jo: Exactly. And renting means you're not putting equity in a property which forms the basis of most wealth in the U.S., you usually move around more, and you're likely pushed to the political fringes, too. When the government wants to plunk a new highway down near you, or Amazon wants to open a big distribution center in your neighborhood, you're probably not going to have the kind of representation in the legislature or lobbying power to resist it.

Jim: To get to your first question, Erik—why do these few degrees matter—as for the health effects, you'd be surprised at how little of an increase makes a massive difference. Even one degree during an already hot day tips the risk of hospitalization higher for people who might already have underlying conditions, especially respiratory or circulatory ones.

Jo: On hot days, the body pumps a larger volume of blood to the skin to cool you down—but that natural response puts strain on the heart, lungs, and kidneys. Those are the very three common points of damage for people living with heart disease, diabetes, and asthma or COPD.

Erik: Ah, and we talked back in April about how these are the very chronic conditions that plague poorer communities and leave them vulnerable to the coronavirus.

Jo: Right. Exactly. It's those very same chronic conditions that are most responsive to extreme heat. And it's no surprise, then, that people die a lot more during heat waves, especially people

with those conditions. A study in Rome found that there was between an 8 and 15% excess risk of death on heat wave days than on regular days in that city alone in older age groups. In other words, you're 8 to 15% more likely to die on a hot day in Rome if you're over a certain age.

Erik: So those few extra degrees really can make a difference.

Jo: Yes they can, especially to people with chronic diseases. And it's not just about the temperature; the risk to health is also about the fact that people in poor urban centers have fewer ways of escaping the heat. Folks are less likely to have air conditioning or cars to get places, and they have to travel farther to get to the store to buy food or see the doctor. All of these factors add up to more heat exposure, poorer health, and shorter life expectancy. The NYT story spotlights the city of Richmond, VA, where average life expectancy in its mostly black, urban Gilpin neighborhood (once part of the vibrant Jackson Ward area) is 63 years. Just across the river in the mostly white neighborhood of Westover Hills, it's 83 years. The gap isn't that dramatic everywhere, but a recent national-level analysis of over 10,000 census tracts found that there are clear differentials in life expectancy between people living in formerly redlined neighborhoods and others, averaging at least 3 or 4 years across all sites, and much more in some places.

Erik: And I imagine we can only expect these high temperatures will get more common and more persistent with climate change.

Jo: That's right. A 2010 study funded by the CDC found that in 2005, there were 10 more days per year of extreme heat in cities across the US than there were in the 1950s.

Erik: I imagine things are even worse on this front now -- or maybe I'm just biased because we're experiencing our fourth hurricane this year.

Jo: Yes, and I was forced to flee my house last month because of the wildfires here, which were the worst in history.

Jim: And let's keep in mind those effects on cities with large minority populations are not accidental—they're the result of deliberate government policy. These studies really show the cumulative effects of government disinvestment in non-white neighborhoods over time. If you want to know more, there's a really great report from the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, that we'll link to in the show notes, that details how those chronic conditions that we know give rise to greater risk of bad COVID outcomes, like diabetes and heart disease are all statistically more common in neighborhoods that were once redlined.

Jo: In part that's because, in the 1950s, urban planners began to stress access to grocery stores, doctors, green space and walkable streets. Those things happened in the new, planned communities in the suburbs, but not in redlined neighborhoods near the center of cities, by and large. So these neighborhood-level disparities in health became much larger than ever before.



Erik: Which is why the Johnson administration tried to pass Fair Housing laws and Biden and Harris are hoping to reinstate the “Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing” policies.

Jo: But listen to this! “The Suburban Housewives of America must read this article. Biden will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it, and make it even better!”

Erik: What?!

Jo: It’s a Trump tweet from this summer. Race and housing is again an election issue. Biden & Harris want to reduce discrimination in housing by reinstating the AFFH regulations from 2015. Trump wants to dismantle fair housing regulations and in fact has been doing so for most of his presidency, if not his whole life.

Jim: It’s the Southern Strategy. All the way from Atwater until today’s GOP.

Erik: So, in other words, to make a long and complicated story short, it’s a big cycle. Unfair housing and unfair voting practices mean that even voting districts track things like health disparities. They’re that way by design. And it’s only going to get worse unless the cycle gets broken.

Jim: Looks that way to me, yes.

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