

A protester in Washington, DC, speaks into a bullhorn as people kneel and hold their hands up in front of Lafayette Park near the White House to protest the death of George Floyd on May 25. | Olivier Douliery/AFP via Getty Images

Why Ta-Nehisi Coates is hopeful

The author of *Between the World and Me* on why this isn't 1968, the Colin Kaepernick test, police abolition, nonviolence and the state, and more.

By Ezra Klein | @ezraklein | Jun 5, 2020, 2:13pm EDT

The first question I asked Ta-Nehisi Coates during our recent conversation on *The Ezra Klein Show* was broad: What does he see right now, as he looks out at the country?

“I can't believe I'm gonna say this,” he replied, “but I see hope. I see progress right now.”

Coates is the author of the National Book Award winner *Between the World and Me* and *The Water Dancer*, among others. We discussed how this moment differs from 1968, the tension between “law” and “order,” the contested legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., Donald Trump's view of the presidency, police abolition, why we need to renegotiate the idea of “the public,” how the consensus on criminal justice has shifted, what Joe Biden represents, the proper role of the state, and much more.

But there's one particular thread of this conversation that I haven't been able to put down: There is now, as there always is amid protests, a loud call for the protesters to follow the principles of nonviolence. And that call, as Coates says, comes from people who neither practice nor heed nonviolence in their own lives. But what if we turned that conversation around? What would it mean to build the state around principles of nonviolence, rather than reserving that exacting standard for those harmed by the state?

An edited transcript from our conversation follows. The full conversation can be heard on ***The Ezra Klein Show***.

Ezra Klein

What do you see right now, as you look out at the country?

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I can't believe I'm gonna say this, but I see hope. I see progress right now, at this moment.

I had an interesting call on Saturday with my dad, who was born in 1946, grew up dirt poor in Philadelphia, lived in a truck, went off to Vietnam, came back, joined the Panther Party, and was in Baltimore for the 1968 riots. Would've been about 22 at that time.

I asked him if he could compare what he saw in 1968 to what he was seeing now. And what he said to me was there was no comparison — that this is much more sophisticated. And I say, well, what do you mean? He said it would have been like if somebody from the turn of the 20th century could see the March on Washington.

The idea that black folks in their struggle against the way the law is enforced in their neighborhoods would resonate with white folks in Des Moines, Iowa, in Salt Lake City, in Berlin, in London — that was unfathomable to him in '68, when it was mostly black folks in their own communities registering their great anger and great pain.

I don't want to overstate this, but there are significant swaths of people and communities that are not black, that to some extent have some perception of what that pain and that suffering is. I think that's different.

Ezra Klein

Do you think there is more multiethnic solidarity today than there was then?

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I do. Within my lifetime, I don't think there's been a more effective movement than Black Lives Matter. They brought out the kind of ridiculousness that black folks deal with on a daily basis in the policing in their communities.

George Floyd is not new. The ability to broadcast it the way it was broadcasted is new. But black folks have known things like that were going on in their communities, in their families, for a very long time. You have a generation of people who are out in the streets right now, many of whom only have the vaguest memory of George Bush. They remember George Bush the way I remember Carter. The first real president who they actually grappled with was a black dude. That's a different type of consciousness.

Ezra Klein

I was watching the speech Trump gave before **tear-gassing the protesters** in the park in DC. What so chilled me about that speech was how much he clearly wanted this — like this was the presidency as he had always imagined it, directing men with guns and shields to put down protesters so he could walk through a park unafraid and seem tough.

He's always seemed so disinterested and annoyed by the actual work of being president, even during coronavirus. But this is the thing that he seems energized and excited by. And that's been the scary part of it to me — that you have somebody in that role who is eager for escalation.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

It is pretty clear that the war-making part of being head of state was the part that most appeals to Donald Trump.

What does this mean for the election? It may be true that Donald Trump will win. Maybe this will lead to some sort of white backlash that ultimately helps him. I can't really call that. But what I will say is this is a massive denial of legitimacy. Donald Trump may win the election in November, but he will be a ruler and not a president.

I think that those things need to be distinguished. When you're calling out the military to repress protests that are in cities across the country, not just in ghettos and in hoods, all you have is force at that point. Most likely if he wins, he'll be someone who won with a minority of the vote two times, which will be a first in American history. And violence will be the tool by which he rules. I think it's a very different situation to be in.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M GONNA SAY THIS, BUT I SEE HOPE. I SEE PROGRESS RIGHT NOW."

Ezra Klein

I'm glad you brought in that word legitimacy. I wrote a piece the other day called "**America at the breaking point**," and one of the things that I was imagining as I wrote that was a legitimacy crisis. The stakes have been going higher and higher this year: coronavirus, the entire country locked in houses, upset, angry, scared. Then you add on a series of basically televised lynchings.

And then you think: This is an election year. In some ways, I'm more afraid of the situation you just described. If Donald Trump is reelected in a way that does not feel legitimate to people — if he loses by more votes than he did in 2016, or there's a contested-vote situation — **this could turn out badly**. Legitimacy crises are scary things. And I don't think we're really well equipped for one right now.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I agree. But when I look back historically, the alternative to me is 1968.

I think, amongst a large swath to a majority of black people in this country, the police are illegitimate. They're not seen as a force that necessarily causes violent crime to decline. Oftentimes you see black people resorting to the police because they have no other option, but they're not seen with the level of trust that maybe Americans in other communities bestow upon the police. They know you could be a victim to lethal force because you used a \$20 bill that may or may not have been counterfeit, because you were asleep at night in your home and somebody got a warrant to kick down your door without knocking.

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I would argue that [feeling] has been nationalized. I don't know that everybody in America feels that way, but I think large swaths of Americans now feel that Trump is the police. And they feel about Trump the way we feel about cops: This is somebody that rules basically by power. I would prefer that situation to 1968, where we're alone in our neighborhoods and we know something about the world and we know what the police do, but other folks can't really see it — and if they can, they're unsympathetic. I would prefer now.

The long history of black folks in this country is conflict and struggle, between ourselves and the state and other interests within the society so that we can live free. And this is the first time that I think a lot of us have felt that the battle was legitimately joined, not just by white people but other people of color. When I hear that brother in Minneapolis talk about how his store was burned down and him saying, “**Let it burn.**” That's a very different world. It's a very, very different situation. It's not a great one. It's not the one we want. But it's not '68.

Ezra Klein

Chris Hayes had **this tweet** the other day, where he said that “the two most flagrantly lawless presidents of the last 60 years have both been the most insistent on ‘law and order,’ which shows how little it has to do with law and how much it's about maintaining a specific ‘order.’”

I want to build on that idea. It seems to me there is a lawlessness embedded in a certain kind of politics of order. That slogan puts together two things that are actually opposed. I'm curious how you think about that.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think that's true. There's also a lack of order actually because you don't know what the cops are going to do and when they're going to do it. There's just a total lack of peace. I think in many times this phrasing is used to sanctify violence against people and not make it seem like the thuggishness that it actually is.

Ezra Klein

And you can see the way this gets cyclical and self-reinforcing. Police certainly betrayed the law in killing George Floyd. That unleashes protests which break the order. And that, then, is used by a lot of conservative politicians — guys like Tom Cotton — to create a justification for police to break the law again in order to impose his version of order. Tom Cotton is talking about **using the military on American citizens with “no quarter,”** which is exactly how you don't treat citizens of your own country.

Over and over again, this idea of order is used to justify lawlessness on behalf of the state. The people advocating for that approach hide behind the fact that, for many people, it doesn't look like lawlessness as long as the state is doing it. It doesn't appear the same way as an anarchist in a black face mask throwing a brick. But when you look at those videos of cops just casually turning rubber bullets on people who are filming them, who are posing no threat to them — that's just a crime.

“THERE'S ALSO A LACK OF ORDER, ACTUALLY, BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THE COPS ARE GOING TO DO AND WHEN THEY'RE GOING TO DO IT. THERE'S JUST A TOTAL LACK OF PEACE.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Right. And I think one of the things that's probably changed over the past five years is that I do think it has started to look like lawlessness. I think the crucial moment in all of this, when we look back, is going to be when the Hennepin County prosecutor stands up

in a press conference and says there might be reasons why this was not criminal. If putting your knee on somebody's neck and torturing them to death for eight minutes is not against the law, then there is no law. And that was basically the conclusion.

There's a kind of logic to it where law is stated not as any sort of a reflection of the world we want to live in, but as a reflection of the allocation of power.

And it's not just that. You have to put that on top of all the other videos — on top of Walter Scott being shot in the back, Eric Garner being choked, Breonna Taylor's door being kicked down. There have been so many indisputable instances of outright criminality — what we feel in our bones to be criminal; what if anyone else did, we would rule as criminal. I think a critical mass of nonblack people have come to see the enforcers of the state in a different kind of way.

Ezra Klein

I want to talk about the way we talk about rioting and disorder. I think there's a language breakdown here. The police, in a given place, are an institution. You can find their address, call their front desk. In terms of protests, "rioters" are not. It's a term that encompasses many different people doing many different things for many different reasons — some of them are engaged in political protest, some [are] using protests as cover, some may be trying to discredit protests, some are just chaos tourists, and so on. You can't call up the head of the rioters and ask about the strategy.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think one of the mistakes made is to view "rioting" or "uprising" as political strategy. What you often see is this comparison between what's happening right now or what happened in Baltimore or Ferguson with, let's say, Martin Luther King in Selma. And people will say, what is most effective? But that's not what rioting actually is.

If you look at communities of human beings as natural creatures who tend to react a certain way when put under X number of pressures, I think it becomes a lot more sensible. What happens to a community of people who are policed arbitrarily and with violence, not just in the moment, but historically? Whose great-grandfathers and grandmothers can tell stories of police officers either not stopping lynchings or jumping into lynchings? They see law enforcement as illegitimate, and other members of the

community as more legitimate than cops.

A man walks past a boarded-up shop tagged with the message “Do Better America” on June 2, 2020, in downtown Washington, DC. | Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images

And then you see like a video like that, and that could have been you or your son or your husband. What is the natural reaction? Is it to form a committee and present a list of possible reforms? Is it what we will call “nonviolent protest”? Well, we tried that — that was Colin Kaepernick taking the knee. And he was driven out of his job and out of his profession, not just by the NFL but by the president of the United States. So what is the natural reaction? Black people are human beings too. They get angry. They get sad. They get depressed. They have natural reactions to things.

I think it bears repeating that it was only weeks ago that we had armed white men showing up at the Michigan legislature, literally shutting the organs of democracy down, and we saw **a very different reaction to that**. Not just by the police, but by the White House and by the larger society. And that wasn’t the first time. I think of **the Bundy standoff**, where federal troops decided to retreat. So I think at the root of this is an inability to extend the kind of humanity that we extend to white people in this country to people who are not white, and specifically to black people.

Ezra Klein

You have this discussion in *Between the World and Me* about learning over and over again in school about the civil rights movement and nonviolence. And you have this line that I’ve been thinking about this week: “Why were they showing this to us? Why were only our heroes nonviolent? ... How could the schools valorize men and women whose value society actively scorned?”

I think that’s a profound point here. It’s one thing to preach nonviolence if you yourself are nonviolent, but it’s another thing to preach nonviolence if it’s a basically unrealizable standard that you make other people meet in order to be taken seriously, but don’t follow yourself.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Even when I was writing *Between the World and Me*, and certainly more so since then, I

have come to believe in the deep moral case most effectively made by King for nonviolence: that you actually don't want to repeat what the people who are oppressing you are doing. That when you do violence to someone else, there is something corrupting about it. That's a very true thing. But often it is the very people who squelch nonviolent protest who then turn around and preach nonviolence.

It is simply not the case that over the course of American history, nonviolent protest has been met with open arms and applauded by the powers that be. People forget that day that King got stoned in Cicero. They pretend that when King was leading these movements against Jim Crow, he was somehow the most popular man in the country. He was hated. He was hated by white people all through the country. He was hated at the very highest levels of law enforcement in this country.

So the question is not what is the reaction to nonviolence in the midst of a riot, in the midst of a Ferguson or Minneapolis or Baltimore. It's what is the reaction to nonviolence when it happened? How many of these people stood up and said, yes, we really applaud the way that Colin Kaepernick is going about this struggle?

Ezra Klein

One thing I've been thinking about is whether the question can and should be turned around: Instead of nonviolence being the ethic demanded of protesters, what if it was the ethic demanded of the state? That seems more reasonable to me, at least as a goal.

The core of nonviolence is that you will transform those you are in relationship with through your own willingness to suffer and forgive. You will forgive over and over and over again. You will always hold out the hope of growth and transformation, and you will accept enormous risk and pain to create space for it.

There are many ways we could think about this in terms of the state. You could think about prison abolition. You could have police who did not have guns. If nonviolence is such a beautiful way of living, I think we should imagine that for the state. I think it's actually worth doing.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think that's exactly right. Josie Duffy Rice had [**a Twitter thread**](#) where she was arguing

that many people who think police abolition is crazy actually live in a world where the police have effectively been abolished already. If they want to know what a world looks like without police, all they have to do is look around them. Just ask white folks who are of some privilege: Do you generally have encounters with the police? How often do you see the police? The answer is very little.

“HOW MANY OF THESE PEOPLE STOOD UP AND SAID, ‘YES, WE REALLY APPLAUD THE WAY THAT COLIN KAEPERNICK IS GOING ABOUT THIS STRUGGLE’?”

Well, what would we do about crime? What would we do about murder? Well, do police in particularly violent neighborhoods have a sterling record of solving and closing murder cases? **Turns out they don't.** So if we're not talking about solving crimes, what is it about these worlds where police basically don't exist that allows for that? And why can't we do that in the very communities where we say we need a heavy policing presence?

That's a practical way of thinking about nonviolence: How do you make those communities less violent? Well, the world that we're trying to build already exists. It just doesn't exist for us.

Ezra Klein

We're taught that the defining feature of the state is its **monopoly on violence**. That's a very grim view. If instead you began with the idea [that] the point of the state is to instantiate values of nonviolence, values of flourishing, then you might build something very different.

I don't think we realize how deeply embedded that idea is that the state gets to control violence. And because state violence is so normalized, it looks different than when we see violence coming from elsewhere. The death penalty is the ultimate example, but so are drones and the military.

And it's not that you don't need some of these things. The state is going to need a military because we don't live in a world where everybody is peaceful. But nevertheless, we either strive toward values or we don't. And if the value we strive toward is a state

monopoly on violence — which I think is the value America strives toward, versus trying to build toward nonviolence — you get some very different outcomes.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think even if you say we're going to have a military, it's a difference between valorizing war and viewing it as a necessary evil. There's a difference between those two things. I've just been struck that the only way people know how to talk about those folks who are doing what we consider essential work is through the language and rituals and invocations of war.

And yet the inability to actually do things to make it so those soldiers actually risk their lives less, it's deep in our bones. This is deep in Western philosophy, this notion that man is naturally in a state of war. That if you left us alone, what we would do is we would go and kill each other. Is that true? Or is that just an assumption that we made? I'm all here for the conversation that says maybe we should start from somewhere else.

Ezra Klein

I just did **a conversation with Rutger Bregman** who wrote this book called ***Humankind***, which is all about how you would build a society on this very different view of human nature. We're used to the idea that if you do something to me, I should do it back. The state works like that: If you do something awful and violent, we will do something awful and violent back to you. And the question his book raises is: Does that actually work? What would it mean for the state to treat you in the way it wants you to treat others, not in the way you perhaps did just treat others?

When an adult says something shitty to me, I often say something shitty back. I try not to, but that's my impulse. But when my kid is being tough, I try to get calmer and kinder because my belief is that will bring something kinder out in him. There's some way in which we lose this insight when we deal with other adults, and even more when we abstract out to governance, that may be a profound mistake.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

And obviously there's a differential in power, too. The people who are called on to be nonviolent are the people with the ability to do the least amount of damage; whereas, we don't call upon those who have the most power and actually can do the most

damage. So I think it would be a very powerful thing.

But it's hard to think of a world like that. We are far from it right now. Although, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I feel like we're closer than we were in 1968. I feel like more people get it. I feel like more people understand it. I don't think a Democratic candidate could do **Sister Souljah** today. I don't think **Ricky Ray Rector** is possible today. I think we live in a very different universe.

“The people who are called on to be nonviolent are the people with the ability to do the least amount of damage.” | Chandan Khanna/AFP via Getty Images

I don't like seeing people breaking windows or what we call looting. But by the same token, I don't like seeing a government in Ferguson looting its civilians. I don't like seeing a state where big corporations on Wall Street are allowed to effectively loot people through the way they design their home loans. It's always messy.

Ezra Klein

You have this line in *Between the World and Me* where you say, “the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white.” And as I reread that line last night I couldn't help but think about the fact that “domination” is literally the word Trump is choosing to come back to and back to. He's using it in speeches, in his tweets. It describes what **he just did in DC**. I think for him the state is about domination.

It's really different to imagine the state as enabling people to do things together rather than imposing order on them.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Several times on this podcast you've expressed your discomfort with the phrase “social distancing.” I've been thinking about this a lot, the way we wag our finger at people who are not socially distancing. I think the philosophy we've taken is: You do it. You wear your mask. You stay 6 feet apart. You don't go to this place.

Obama advanced that idea repeatedly. It wasn't until now with coronavirus that I got what I disliked about the Obama administration. Society and a country and a nation have created a condition in African American communities, but the logic of respectability

politics says that they are not responsible for it, that we are not responsible to each other or for each other. The people living in that community should do individual things. You do it. Pull your pants up. That will solve the problem. You saw this with Trump's Surgeon General saying, "Will you do it for your pop-pop?" It's like these little individual actions can actually solve huge public health problems. I think that sort of vocabulary damages the idea of the public itself.

Ezra Klein

The other day, **I interviewed Patrick Skinner**, a police officer in Georgia, who talks about police work in a very different way than I've ever heard. One thing he talks a lot about is what he calls the "neighbor mindset."

He calls everybody he's dealing with neighbors. So I asked him in this interview: What do you mean by that? What is a neighbor mindset? And he says, "The neighbor mindset sounds so cheesy, but it's so powerful: We all matter or none of us do. I live here. I can't know everybody in Savannah. But I call everyone my neighbor because they literally are. And I can't put my knee on the neck of my neighbor."

The people who were at the right-wing anti-lockdown protests were considered part of the public, they were neighbors. The police showed up without riot gear, just their little cloth masks. Then you look at the police who are massing in front of these protests in riot and SWAT gear and it sends a different message.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think you're right. The thing that immediately occurred to me is just the basic thought experiment: Imagine a police force that doesn't show up in riot gear. Do people feel okay throwing things at them? Or do they react differently? When you deploy in the armor and weaponry of war, isn't that in and of itself provocation? I think people hearing this might say that the police have to make this show of force. But do they? I'm not sure it's true.

In the communities I grew up in, everyone viewed calling the police as the absolute last resort. I used to live right across from a club in Brooklyn, and every Friday night it would get rowdy and it would, without fail, spill out into the streets and folks would start fighting. I was away one night when we first moved there and my wife called and she

said, “I’m really worried about what’s going on. People are talking about going to get guns, should I call the police?” “Absolutely not. Do not call the police. If you want to see the possibility of shooting, call the police.”

And what actually happened was some of the older men who lived on the block came in and defused the situation. So it would be nice if you had some sort of officials who were empowered to try to defuse these kinds of situations.

We deploy the police for so much. We do it so easily and so casually and so habitually. And the only thing making me feel somewhat good about this moment is going back to this concept of a neighbor. It is quite clear that in cities around the country, there is at least a critical mass of people who look at George Floyd and say, “That’s my neighbor and this is intolerable. This can’t continue.”

Ezra Klein

I saw some people fighting on the street the other night and I thought to myself, I should call someone to make sure this doesn’t get out of hand. And then I realized I didn’t want to call the police because it was these two homeless guys and I didn’t want them arrested. But if there was somebody I could call for something going wrong who I knew was just a mediator — someone unbelievably skilled at these escalating situations — I would feel much more comfortable making that call.

And I don’t see a reason we couldn’t create that. People are talking about defunding or abolishing the police, but there’s also the question of what would you create? And I think we need some institutions that are as central to how the government thinks of itself as police are but are not built upon a skill that involves violence.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

The obvious one is mental health. Should we be calling people with guns to deal with mental health? That’s the thing that always occurs to me.

Ezra Klein

When I imagine a society built on a value of nonviolence and deescalation, you would have organizations like that. The state would have a specific and special competency in, like, people who knew how to help others with mental health. So when those folks were

having a really bad night for them and for others, there'd be someone forgiving and gentle and calm — the person you would want to be called out there if it was your sibling with bipolar disorder who had lost the plot and was wandering around.

“WE DEPLOY THE POLICE FOR SO MUCH. WE DO IT SO EASILY AND SO CASUALLY AND SO HABITUALLY. AND THE ONLY THING MAKING ME FEEL SOMEWHAT GOOD ABOUT THIS MOMENT IS GOING BACK TO THIS CONCEPT OF A NEIGHBOR.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates

When I was a kid, there was a kid in my neighborhood who was having all sorts of issues. Turned out he was being abused by his dad. He was known to have a temper and act sort of crazy. One time he got into it with one of my brother's friends and the kid was in front of my house and pulled a metal stake out of the ground and started swinging it in the air.

So my dad came out to get the kid to stop and go back home or wherever. If my dad had pulled out a gun and shot that kid because he was swinging a stake at people, we would've thought that was crazy. Everyone on that block would've been horrified by that. And if he said I was in fear of my life or the lives of other people around me, they would have said, “So you shot him? That's what you did because you were afraid, you shot him?”

And yet we have basically written it into case law that the people who have the most power can kill someone because they feel afraid. And in some Stand Your Ground cases, you don't even have to be a cop to make that argument.

Ezra Klein

Can I get you to talk about the Tony Judt lecture you gave around a year back now? I think this all relates to what you talk about in the lecture about the branding of the letter M and what people can and can't see as a crime.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

In that lecture, I was talking about a woman who's escaped slavery. And her slave

master puts out an ad for this woman so that he can retrieve her. He casually says, “I marked her with the letter M, I branded her with the letter.” And then here’s somebody who in any other situation we would recognize as having committed a criminal act against somebody, assaulted somebody. But in this case, the person who’s been assaulted and who was trying to escape from the situation is the actual criminal.

That haunts us. It’s in our pop culture. It’s in our movies. It’s in our books. It’s in everything. It’s in our political dialogue. Once again, we become tolerant of these horrendous acts of violence against people that we would be appalled to see if they were, you know, enacted on somebody else.

I think that anatomy is beyond the work of electoral politics. How do you unwind that? How do you get to a place where you have a critical mass — and hopefully a majority — of nonblack people in this country who don’t look at black folks and are more likely to think of a criminal when they see them? That’s a very different place.

The obvious retort to that from some right-wing folks is: When black people stop committing the majority of crimes. But even in that argument is the acceptance that it’s about black people — that something about them specifically is causing this as opposed to looking at and saying this is a group of people who we’ve made black. There’s a group of people who we’ve put into this condition. And asking, what is it about the environment that’s causing this to be the case in the first place?

Ezra Klein

There’s a real way in which Joe Biden makes me hopeful about this. Joe Biden is like the control group of American politics. He’s always been in the center of his party on everything. So when you look at the way he’s changed, you can see the way politics around him are changing.

If you looked at his first video about the George Floyd killing and then the protest that turned violent, it just didn’t have any of the “on the one hand, on the other hand” “order is important” language. It was just straightforward: There has been a murder committed by police and that is the cause of this, even more so than the way Obama would talk about things like this a couple of years back.

Biden helped write the 1994 crime bill. But that was a consensus document at the time. Bernie Sanders voted for it! But now if you look at Biden's platform, he's really moved in the other direction. There is a way in which you can really see through him how much the center in this area of politics is changing.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

I think that's right. I say this as somebody who's been very openly critical of Biden. We have this idea of elections as this kind of sacred ritual that one is undertaking, that you should be inspired and in love with with the candidate. But I often think people need to think about it more like taking out the trash. It's a thing that you should do. Brushing your teeth is hygiene.

So when I think of who to vote for, the question isn't how much of my own personal politics do I see in this person so much as how much do I think this person can actually be influenced by my politics or the politics of the people around me. So I can loudly say all the things Joe Biden was wrong on and feel guilt about voting for him. Me casting a presidential vote is not the totality of my political action within a society.

People gather at the US Capitol during a protest against police brutality on June 4. | Sarah Silbiger/Getty Images

I really don't know how this plays out, but I think we are very much in an unprecedented moment with direct analogs to other periods. The Democratic Party is so different demographically. It's completely different than it was even 25 years ago.

I was one of these people who felt that what would happen is the Republican Party would almost cynically make room for other people under the umbrella of whiteness, as this country has done at other moments in history. And that's not what has happened. On the contrary, under Trump, they've just doubled down on the race and made it more clear that it is a white party.

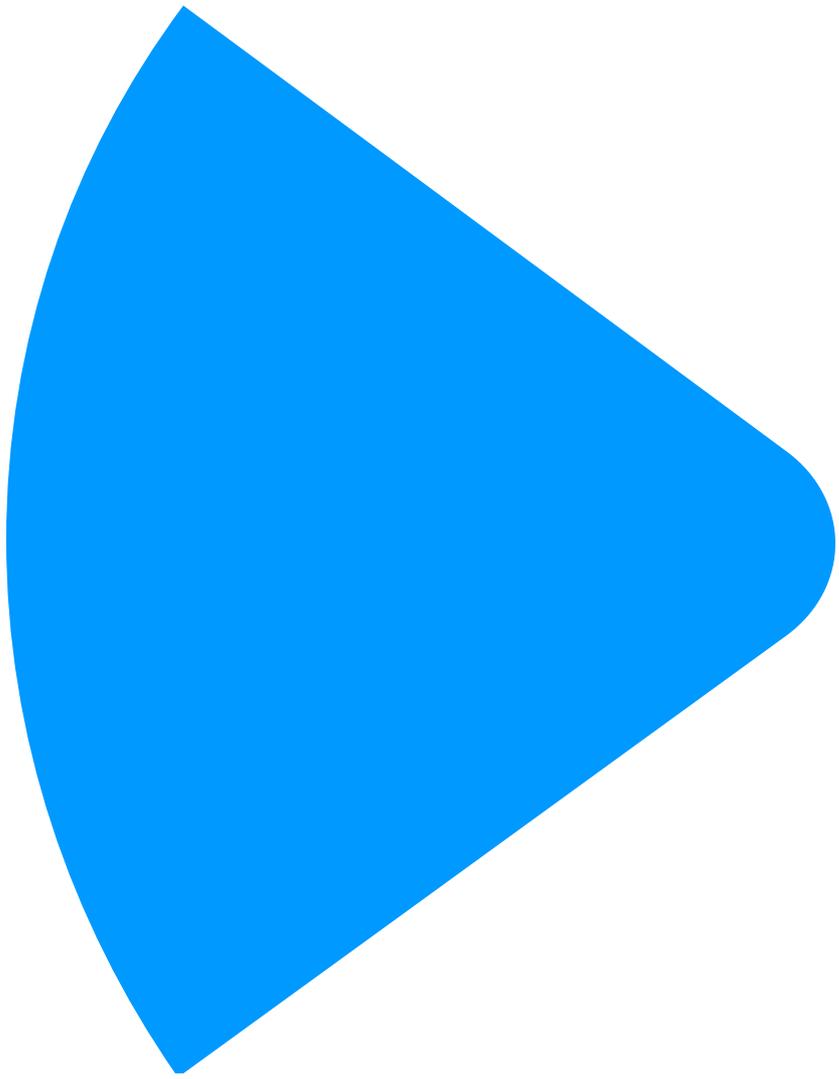
What that means is that a Democrat Party is very different. I don't think Stacey Abrams, getting as close as she did, is really imaginable 25 years ago. You just see what the Democratic Party is today. I mean, you have an old white guy who was basically dependent on the black vote. That's a very different thing, even within a Democratic

primary, than it would have been 25 years ago.

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