
Are Reparations Next on the Docket? By Anthony Costarelli

With a severe lack of bipartisan support, it's unlikely.

According to [the U.S. Census](#), 18.8% of black Americans (but only 7.8% of white Americans) were below the poverty line in 2019. Is there enough support for reparations for black Americans among Democrats or Republicans for a successful reparations bill?

To answer this question, I use data from the [General Social Survey](#).

“For more than four decades, the General Social Survey (GSS) has studied the growing complexity of American society. It is the only full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes currently being conducted in the United States.”

The GSS doesn't survey about reparations, but it has a good proxy question. The data available for this question is substantial, going back five decades, hence my decision to use the GSS over a survey with more precise questions.

I use three resampled instances of the GSS to account for biases during survey-respondent selection. When visualizing data below, I show one graph per resampled dataset to ensure important features aren't unique to a sample.

First I acquire the three resampled datasets, extracting the following columns for analysis: “year,” “natrace,” and “partyid.”

The “year” column allows me to give historical context to data by comparing values between survey years to determine if a certain value is noteworthy.

The question for “natrace” asks respondents,

Are we [the country] spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the conditions of [black Americans]?

This is the proxy question; the only type of respondents who would possibly support reparations is those who answered that spending is too little. I combine the first and third options, effectively rewording the question to:

Are we spending too little on improving the conditions of black Americans?

This makes it easy to count possible reparations-supporters.

The question for “partyid” asks respondents,

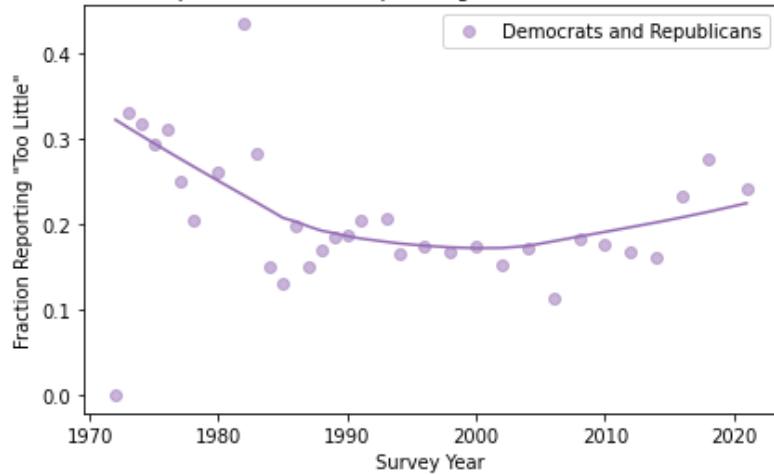
Do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?

This allows me to look at the combined support of Republicans and Democrats, and to compare support between. I simplify the responses by considering those reporting “not very strong democrat/republican” or “strong democrat/republican” to be simply “democrat/republican,” and ignoring anyone reporting otherwise.

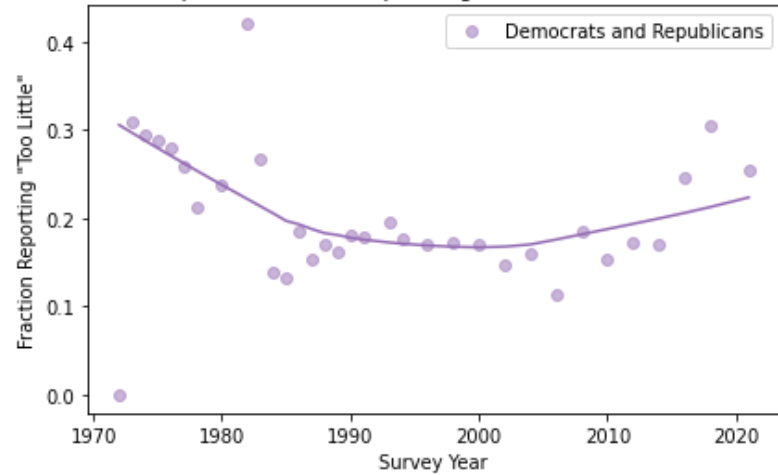
This blog post is organized to examine two standards of support for reparations: bipartisan and partisan support. The former standard is harder, but would have greater legislative influence if met.

These graphs show the fraction of combined Democrat and Republican respondents, by survey year, who believe spending for black Americans is too little (i.e. bipartisan support).

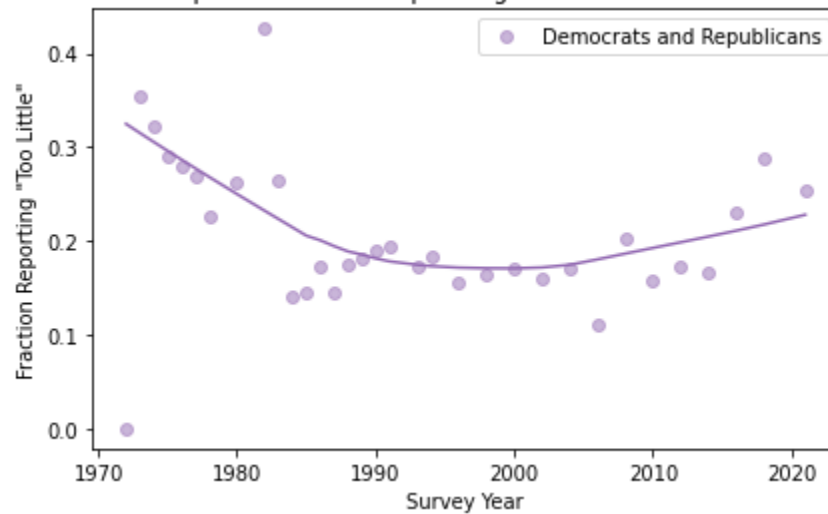
Opinions on Gov't Spending for Black Americans



Opinions on Gov't Spending for Black Americans



Opinions on Gov't Spending for Black Americans



Each dot represents the fraction of combined Democratic and Republican respondents who reported “too little” that survey year. The line is a local regression line to help visually ignore noise.

Key takeaways:

The latest fraction (suggested by the regression line; 20%-30%) is below 50%.

→ There is no majority bipartisan support, but a majority is likely necessary.

The latest fraction is below its last peak (30% in the early

→ 30% wasn't enough bipartisan support for a successful reparations

70s).

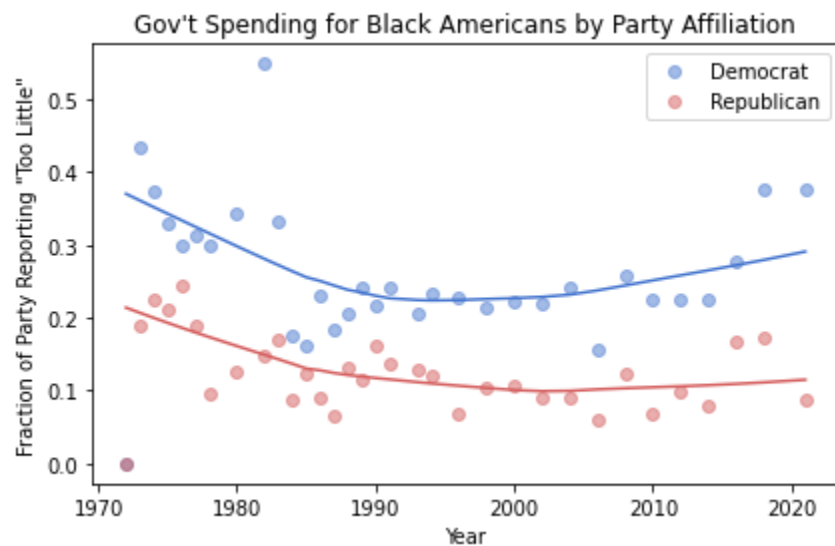
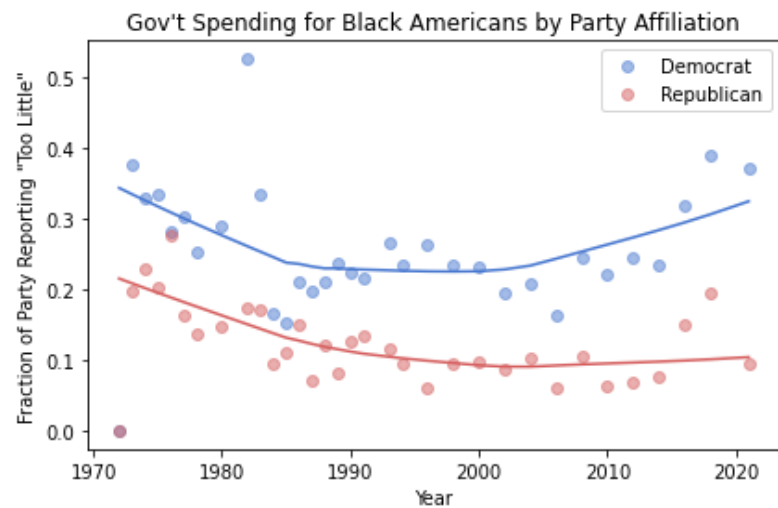
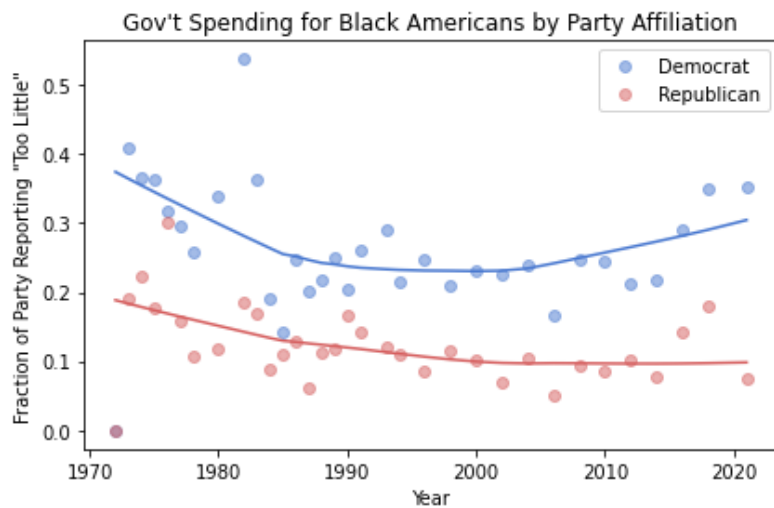
bill in the 70s, so 20-30% is probably not enough now.

The fraction seems to be trending positively.

→

There could be majority bipartisan support in the future.

These next graphs show the fraction of Democratic and Republican respondents, by survey year, who believe that government spending for black Americans is too little.



Each dot represents the fraction of a particular party who reported “too little” that survey year. The lines are local regression lines to help visually ignore noise.

Key takeaways:

The Democrat fraction is consistently greater than the Republican fraction.	→	If there is enough partisan support, it will be Democratic support.
The latest Democrat fraction (suggested by the regression line; 30-40%) is below 50%.	→	There is no majority Democratic support, but a majority is likely necessary.
The latest Democrat fraction is roughly equal to its last peak (in the early 70s).	→	30-40% wasn't enough support for a successful reparations bill in the 70s, so it's probably not enough now.
Democrats seem to be trending positively.	→	There could be majority support in the future (not as distant as bipartisan support).
The latest Republican fraction (suggested by the regression line) is the lowest yet recorded, and seems to be trending constantly or slightly negatively.	→	If there is ever future majority Republican support, it will be more distant than bipartisan support.

Presently, the party makeup of the legislature is mostly even. Thus, if the bipartisan standard is met, a successful reparations bill can be expected “soon.” If only the partisan standard is met, a successful reparations bill can be expected later than “soon.” If neither standard is met, a successful reparations bill can only be expected even later than that.

Considering there has not yet been a successful reparations bill, the bipartisan support standard is something above 30% reporting “too little” (all-time greatest bipartisan support), and the Democrat support standard

is something above 30-40% reporting “too little” (all time greatest Democratic support).

Realistically, at least a majority is probably necessary to effectively pressure the legislature. But also, both standards are further raised by the fact that not all people reporting “too little” necessarily support reparations.

The latest fractions reporting “too little” do not currently meet either threshold, so neither standard is met. A successful reparations bill is only expected after the bipartisan support standard is met, which is only expected after the partisan support standard is met. In short, a successful reparations bill is not expected soon.

Considering the fractions of both bipartisan support and Democratic support are trending positively, either standard could be met in the distant future. The necessary support threshold would depend on the future makeup of the legislature. Either way, considering there seems to be little hope for Republican support, a successful reparations bill will likely only come from an overwhelming majority of Democratic support.

A Python notebook for reproducing these results can be found [here](#).