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Rethinking America's racial policy alliances: beyond “repair” and “protect”

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In *America's New Racial Battle Lines*, King and Smith offer a compelling framework for understanding contemporary American politics through two polarized racial policy alliances – “repair” and “protect.” Building on their foundational insights, I explore how these concepts can be expanded to better capture the complexity of the coalitions, messages, and policy goals they describe. I propose three complementary frameworks to deepen our understanding of the strategic dilemmas facing America's racial policy alliances during Trump's second term: (1) the selection and framing of historical narratives in policy and messaging; (2) the balance between offensive and defensive strategies; and (3) the tension between systemic overthrow and preservation. These frameworks extend King and Smith's arguments about the dynamics of racial policy in modern America.

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Six months after the publication of King and Smith's book, *America's New Racial Battle Lines*, the 2024 U.S. Presidential election raised new questions about the messages, adherents, policy levers, and ultimate goals of the racial policy alliances they identify. In this symposium contribution I examine King and Smith's conceptual apparatus and articulate three fresh interpretations of the “repair” and “protect” alliances to help explain how combatants in America's racial policy battles select and hone their interpretation of history, pursue offensive or defensive approaches, and decide whether to overturn the system or work within it.

2024: Victory for protect; defeat for repair?

In November 2024, Donald Trump won the U.S. Presidency for a second non-consecutive term in a campaign again marked by racism, profanity, and vitriol. On the campaign trail, Trump said he wanted to protect women from “criminal migrants” who enter the country to “assault, rape, and murder our women and girls”, and he argued that immigrants entering the U.S. illegally are “poisoning the blood of our country” (Hubbard 2024; Gibson 2023). He

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spread false claims that Haitians were eating pets in Springfield, Ohio, questioned his opponent Kamala Harris's racial identity, and promised to fight what he calls "anti-white feeling" (Slattery, Layne, and Slattery 2024; Thomas and Wendling 2024). At a New York City campaign rally the week before the election, Trump's surrogates struck a dark tone, referring to Puerto Rico as a "floating island of garbage", and Harris as "Samoa-Malaysian" with a "low IQ" (Gabbatt and Pilkington 2024). The 47th president attracted overwhelming support from voters who see racial diversity as a weakness, rather than a strength, and who fear the decline in the share of white people in the U.S. population – although, notably, Trump also won the highest proportion of Latino voters for a Republican presidential candidate in at least fifty years (Nadeem 2024; Lange et al. 2024).

Trump's election and Republican congressional gains were a victory for wealthy Koch Network-backed conservatives, white evangelicals, gun enthusiasts, and white police organizations, which collaborated effectively in pursuit of shared conservative goals. Progressives were devastated by Harris's loss, the Democratic Party's failure to capture the House of Representatives, and the passage of right-leaning criminal justice amendments in various states, even as their diverse coalition elected the first openly transgender member of congress, the first Korean American senator, and doubled the number of Black women ever elected to the U.S. Senate (Morrison 2024). These representational firsts were overshadowed by crushing losses of political power and overall repudiation by the electorate. To use King and Smith's terminology, 2024 was a victory for the conservative "protect" alliance and defeat for the liberal "repair" alliance.

Repair versus protect alliances

America's New Racial Battle Lines distinguishes two polarized racial policy alliances that shape American politics in the current era, which have supplanted the more moderate "color-blind" and "race-conscious" alliances King and Smith identified in previous work. The protect alliance promises to protect traditional values, history, and interests of America and more traditionalist Americans. It emphasizes the country's European and Christian heritage, commitment to market capitalism, republican system of popular self-governance, and limits on majoritarian democracy. For adherents of the protect alliance, the color-blind principles that hitherto formed mainstream conservative thought are inadequate to the task of protecting American traditionalists – primarily, white, Christian, conservatives – from religious injustices, anti-white racial attitudes and violence, and forms of "communistic" economic radicalism from the left.

Their opponents – the repair alliance – counter that U.S. political institutions require radical "repair", rather than protection, on the grounds that America's history and politics is indelibly marked by racial injustices and material racial disparities in public policy, growing economic inequalities, and victimization of communities of color by a punitive criminal justice system and a militarized police force. Unlike prior civil rights era demands for racial equity initiatives and integration within existing institutions, the repair alliance seeks pervasive egalitarian transformations to end systemic racism by pursuing a "new abolitionism" and a "Radical Reconstruction", including reparations for the descendants of enslaved peoples.

This rich and intuitive conceptual framework helps King and Smith to characterize the new racial battle lines in America that have arisen in the most recent decades. In essence,

they use “protect alliance” as a label for conservative policy goals, advocates, and messages, and “repair alliance” as a label for liberal ones, but if the repair and protect alliance framework is to provide additional analytical purchase for scholars – over and beyond existing understandings of liberal and conservative policy positions – then those labels need to stand for something more than just “liberal” or “conservative”. King and Smith argue that these policy alliances have distinctive understandings of American history and politics, oriented around “repairing” or “protecting” specific groups, policies, and institutions. The “protect” alliance seeks to protect America’s political institutions and white, Christian Americans; the “repair” alliance argues that such institutions are fundamentally flawed and in need of repair, and that communities of color should be compensated for the historical and ongoing trauma of racism.

Yet there is more than one way to utilize the etymology of the words “repair” and “protect” to capture the coalitions of interests, messages, and policy goals identified in *America’s New Racial Battle Lines*. “Protect” means to defend, preserve, keep safe, extend patronage to, take care of, or prevent alteration. King and Smith point out that Trump’s agenda is only protection *for some* – not for immigrants, for example, whom he promises to deport on a grand scale. But Trump’s policy agenda and messaging opposes protection in even more fundamental ways. If protection is about preserving an internal core against external enemies, a Trump presidency is not consistently protective. While proclaiming his desire to shore America up against certain external threats – for instance, by sealing the Mexican border against illegal immigrants – he invites and celebrates penetration and interference from other outside interests, such as Russia. He has expressed more concern about “the enemies within” than many of those without.

Taking seriously the policy messaging and historical imaginaries embodied in the phrase “Make America Great Again” makes it easier to see Trump’s movement as a “repair” movement than a “protect” one, if “repair” is to mend something that is broken. “Repair” means to restore, mend, fix, heal, or rebuild, or to restore a normal condition by compensating for waste or decay. For MAGA Republicans, America is understood to have decayed: spiritually, racially, culturally, and economically. Only Trump can fix and rebuild the country by restoring it to its former glory and placing whites back in their former place: at the top of a racial hierarchy. The sinister vision of “American carnage” he painted in his 2017 inaugural address and repeated in his 2024 campaign contrasts markedly with the familiar establishment Republican message of preserving America’s existing institutions and social order (Trump 2017). The America he describes is one of rusted factories and cities “ravaged by bloodshed and crime” (Layne and Slattery 2024). A Trump administration playing legal hardball, to use Theda Skocpol’s terminology (Skocpol 2024; Walters and Skocpol 2024), engaging in extra-legal tactics that undermine American democracy and the rule of law, and promising to eviscerate the federal bureaucracy, seems more like a radical vision of “repair” than the promise to protect existing institutions.

Conversely, liberals seeking to protect and shore up the country’s increasingly fragile democratic institutions, practices, and norms from the extra-legal efforts of Trump’s Republican Party seem to be engaged more in “protection” than “repair”. More than 130 Republican-backed lawsuits during the 2024 election season sought to make it more difficult for Americans to vote, including by mail, provisionally in person, or with assistance for those with disabilities (Tillman and Wahid 2024). Protecting the right to

vote has been a core Democratic effort for decades, but it took on additional significance after the violent effort to overthrow the election on January 6, 2021. Unlike the MAGA vision of *restoring* America to its former glories, understood to lie decades if not hundreds of years in the past, liberals seek to *protect* the relatively recent gains of civil rights movement, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights; the regulatory achievements of the modern federal bureaucracy; and the planet in the face of human-induced global heating. In many ways, liberals are the "protect" alliance: they seek to prevent further environmental destruction and defend its democratic institutions against emerging threats.

Three ways to understand repair and protect

Are the racial policy alliances simply mislabeled? That interpretation does not seem right either, given King and Smith's persuasive arguments about the importance of protection against threats in Trump's presidential campaigns, and the prominence of restitution and repair themes in the campaign for reparations on the left. Neither the language and messaging nor the policy substance and goals of either alliance aligns cleanly on one side or the other of the "protect" versus "repair" divide. Both racial policy alliances are dissatisfied with the status quo and seek to protect aspects of the polity that align with their ultimate vision for the country. But then, do "repair" and "protect" simply dissolve into "liberal" and "conservative"? No. These evocative terms are substantively meaningful and can be applied in ways that illuminate three aspects of racial politics in America: (1) how to select and hone an interpretation of history in policy goals and messaging; (2) when to pursue offensive versus defensive strategies; (3) whether to overturn the system and utilize radical policy approaches, or work to protect and preserve the existing system.

Interpreting History: The conservative-dominated U.S. Supreme Court, three of whose members were appointed by Donald Trump during his first term, has recently adopted a "text, history, and tradition" test to strike down gun ownership restrictions, eliminate the federal right to an abortion, and bolster religious rights (Calvert and Papandrea 2023; Bazelon 2024). In adopting this test, justices reach back in time to a specific point in history – typically the U.S. founding era; sometimes even the English medieval period – to peg the meaning of challenged statutes to specific historical practices. Conservatives favor this focus on the distant past but liberals, too, have pressed it into service: self-described "progressive originalist" Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson employed it during oral arguments in *Allen v Milligan*, 599 U.S. 1 (2023), the case which struck down Alabama's congressional district map on vote dilution grounds (Westhill 2022; Stern 2022).

One key feature that might distinguish those engaged in a process of "protection" from those engaged in "repair" is the temporal distance of the imagined beneficial past from the present moment. Repair seeks to return to a distant past which has been lost in the ensuing decades and centuries. Rectifying historical injustices, restoring rights or benefits, or social hierarchies or natural order since lost, Repair paints a dark picture of long-standing and systemic problems in the country. Like repair advocates, adherents of text, history, and tradition seek the moral and legal clarity of a firm anchor in the distant past, although this clarity is of course illusory: as Justice Amy Coney Barrett herself warned, the judge's hunt for historical sources is like "looking over a crowd and picking out your friends" (Gerstein 2024). Rival accounts of specified historical periods are now pressed into service in court briefings on behalf of each side.

By contrast with Repair, Protect seeks to preserve more recent developments, on the grounds that they are now, or soon will be, under threat. To engage in protection is to believe that something exists *now* that needs urgent protection from emergent threats. Both sides find some sources of comfort in America's history: after all, a polity that is fundamentally and irredeemably flawed is neither worthy of protection nor capable of repair. But they differ in the temporality of their arguments. Protection is granted to current arrangements or the very recent past. Repair promises to restore rights, values, and interests derived from a more distant past.

Offensive and Defensive Maneuvers: By definition, protection is a defensive posture – focused on repelling attacks – whereas repair requires forceful action to remedy injustices, restore, mend, and rebuild. Insofar as Trump's Republican Party seeks to wield the powers of the government forcefully in pursuit of its objectives, it seems more naturally described as a "repair" action, rather than "protect". Some measure of power is needed for both protection and repair, but it is essential for the successful prosecution of a repair agenda. Those who are threatened with losing power might be expected to engage in protective behaviors, while only those gaining power are able to articulate a new repair agenda. Republicans assume trifecta control of federal government in 2024 in an offensive rather than a defensive position. The diminished ranks of Democrats seek to protect policy measures and rules promulgated by the Biden administration, knowing that his legacy is extremely vulnerable.

Overturning the System: King and Smith tell a persuasive story about how the era of color-blind versus race-conscious alliances gave way to the present era. They argue that both sides became more severely polarized and violent, displacing older debates about the value of affirmative action and the role of racial categories in public policy more broadly. The new racial policy alliances command more intense support than their predecessors, with potentially destructive consequences. The book powerfully describes a conservative alliance that is intensely committed to the idea that American traditionalists are the true victims of public and private racial and religious injustices, and a liberal alliance that is embittered by entrenched and growing racial and economic inequalities.

But if we return to the etymology of "repair" and "protect", it seems that *both* sides in this ideologically polarized battle are increasingly *less* protective of existing institutions and systems, and increasingly *more* supportive of radical, system-defying solutions on either the left or the right. One way to redefine "repair" versus "protect" is to tie these labels not to whole policy alliances but to the extremity of the proposed means and ends. Insofar as an organization or activist seeks moderate solutions that support existing systems, they act in *protective* ways. Insofar as they seek to overturn and replace or fix existing systems, they act in *repairing* ways.

Dividing "repair" and "protect" along system-defying versus system-preserving lines accords with the meanings of these words, but it also helpfully orients us toward the struggle within both sides against extremism in an era of growing racial and partisan polarization. Both conservatives and liberals in the more moderate wings of their respective parties have sought to protect their cherished policy positions not only against those on the other side but also those on the extreme ends of their own party. The Trump takeover of the Republican Party pushed the party further to the right, but the radicalization of the Republican right began decades before he launched his presidential bid. Republican state officials have sought voting rules changes targeted to hinder votes from Democratic

constituencies and were emboldened further by the elimination of Voting Rights Act pre-clearance requirements in *Shelby County v Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013).

The quality of democracy in the United States has diminished in multiple measurable ways in recent years, but one of the most consequential has been the erosion of trust in U.S. political institutions by ordinary Americans. The downgrading of the U.S. from “full” to “flawed” democracy in 2016 tracked declines in public trust in government (Economist Data Team 2017). Although growing distrust has many causes, the trend is connected to conflict extension and the growing disconnect between a relatively moderate electorate and more extreme and ideological policy activists and elected officeholders (Layman and Carsey 2002; Pierson and Schickler 2024). The struggle between protect and repair could be characterized as a battle between policy moderation and extremism, or between those who seek to support America’s democratic institutions and the rule of law, and those who stretch established laws or procedures or even seek to overthrow elections and accountable governance with violence.

If the repair/protect divide is aligned with moderation or extremism, then we have a four-fold typology rather than two policy alliances. Liberal Repair seeks reparations and complete economic and cultural transformation to end systemic racism. Liberal Protect seeks to work within existing institutions and to support long-established DEI initiatives and affirmative action programs, many of which are now decades old. Conservative Protect are the kind of “traditional” conservatives who seek to preserve existing institutions and uphold the rule of law. By contrast, Conservative Repair seeks to transform American economy and society, through both legal and extra-legal routes including violence.

We might refine this typology further by considering the goals of each set of actors and how they propose to achieve those goals. Here, repair and protect form not two but four analytically distinct approaches to America’s racial politics. Individuals and organizations might seek to protect existing institutions through either moderate (protective) or extreme (repair) means, or radically repair those institutions through either moderate (protective) or extreme (repair) means. For instance, in Domingo Morel’s compelling account of the creation and persistence of the Talent Development program – an affirmative action program to help poor, first-generation Black and Latino students access college and graduate – urban uprisings and the threat of future uprisings helped create the political conditions to initiate and defend the program from those seeking to dismantle it (Morel 2023). In this case, a system-defying approach (violence) sustains a system-affirming end (the protection of a fifty-year old affirmative action program). We might say that activists sought a “protect” end by “repair” means.

Meanwhile others pursue “repair” ends by “protect” means. Frozen policy thresholds and categories, including welfare programs, felon-disenfranchisement laws, and minimal-change maps, become increasingly out of step with current societal needs when lawmakers fail to revise those policies. In other words, the policies *drift* (Hackett 2023; Hacker 2004; Rocco and Thurston 2014). Over time, the failure to modify such programs can transform their nature, scope, and distributive consequences. For instance, centuries of population growth have rendered the U.S. Senate the most grossly malapportioned legislative body in the world. Senate malapportionment is approximately one third worse now than it was at the beginning of the nation’s history (Archer et al. 2024). This change, which I call “malapportionment drift”, has always advantaged white rural areas.

Table 1. Protect and Repair: Means and Ends.

		Means	
		Protect	Repair
Ends	Protect	Institution-building. Work within existing institutions. Moderate approach and modest goals. Maintain status quo.	• Liberal version: Reform the institution to save it. Abolish the filibuster, pack the Supreme Court. • Affirmative action programs sustained through violent protest and the threat of violent protest at critical junctures. • Conservative version: Much of Project 2025: Ban pornography to protect children. Destroy bureaucracy to protect individual rights.
	Repair	• Conservative version: Restore whites to high status by supporting existing institutions – Electoral College, Senate, etc. where the advantage to whites is large and growing. • Liberal version: Repair multigenerational trauma inflicted on people of color through existing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs, and affirmative action policies.	System destruction. Legal hardball and extra-legal tactics. Overthrow of existing norms and practices.

It now substantially underrepresents Latinos who are concentrated in the most populous states, along with Blacks and urban residents (Johnson and Miller 2023; Malhotra and Raso 2007). By protecting institutions that grant growing advantages to whites as the nation diversifies, the forces seeking to restore white supremacy can pursue their radical “repair” vision in part through “protect” means. Table 1 summarizes the analytical distinction between protect versus repair means and protect versus repair ends, and the conservative and liberal versions of these projects.

Conclusion

The question of how to define protect versus repair is not merely a trifling linguistic dispute. The language we use to describe the policy alliances delineates the goals, messaging, capacities, and fundamental identities of the adherents. If we consider Trump’s Republican Party as an alliance engaged solely in “protection”, we risk underplaying the radicalism of his agenda to address perceived decay and restore traditional Americans to a high-status position pegged to a distant past. If we consider his liberal opponents as focused only on a radical “repair” agenda, we miss their defensive efforts to protect and conserve hard-won civil rights gains in the face of immediate and emergent threats. If we do not want repair versus protect to dissolve into liberal versus conservative – that is, if we want these labels to have substantive meaning beyond our existing left-right continuum – then we must take seriously the various meanings of these terms and the cross-cutting pressures of repair and protect on both sides of disputes about the future of racial politics.

The cross-cutting divisions between repair and protect that I have laid out here provide different answers about the take-homes for effective advocacy and policymaking and shape our expectations about Trump’s second presidency. Taking a protective stance implies that there is something worthy of protection – that the object of protection is not irredeemably flawed or tainted by “enemies within”. Protectionism safeguards domestic industries against foreign competition, orienting foreign policy at once both outward (to ward off external threats) and inwards (toward domestic concerns). The extent to which ordinary

Americans seek radical repair as opposed to protection will help determine how easily the new administration will be able to gain support in its efforts to weaponize the power of the federal government to root out internal, as opposed to external, ‘enemies’.

Subdividing repair and protect as system-defying versus system-preserving means and ends orients us towards different goals and means of achieving them. Institutions that are understood to be merely contingently – rather than fundamentally and irredeemably – flawed, are fixable, and institutional reforms are more likely to gain the public support needed to succeed. Both liberals and conservatives face strategic choices in selecting and honing their interpretation of distant or more recent moments in history to support their policy goals; when and how to pursue offensive or defensive approaches; and ultimately, whether to overturn the system or work within it. The momentous decisions they make will determine the character of contestation over racial politics over the coming years.

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