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VIEWPOINTS

# *Reparations in California are about political responsibility, not individual guilt | Opinion*

BY MARK B. BROWN *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*

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For nearly two years, the [California Reparations Task Force](#) has carefully studied what is owed, and to whom. It's time to discuss the other side of the issue: Who should provide reparations, and why.

The Task Force is a nine-member advisory body, [charged by law](#) with making recommendations to the legislature on reparations to African Americans.

Last year, the Task Force released an excellent [interim report](#) that documents a long history of government-supported injustices, including slavery, racial terror, political disenfranchisement, housing segregation, unequal education and more. The long-term effects of these injustices still harm African Americans today, and

the purpose of reparations is to acknowledge and repair such harms, and to prevent them in the future.

The Task Force's final report is due July 1. Preliminary recommendations include not only monetary compensation but also a formal government apology, school curriculum initiatives, zero-interest business and housing loans, free college tuition and programs in healthcare, criminal justice and other areas.

OPINION

Wasn't California a "free state" where slavery was unconstitutional? Yes, but in name only. Hundreds of enslaved African Americans lived here, and slavery was actively supported by the California legislature and courts. Under [California's 1852 fugitive slave law](#), enslaved people who escaped were legally captured, taken to court and returned to slavery.

Don't other groups also deserve reparations? Yes, and those initiatives are underway. The [California Truth and Healing Council](#), for example, is charged with examining the California government's historical relationship with Native Americans and considering reparations.

Persuading a majority of Californians to support reparations could be an [uphill battle](#). A recent [Pew survey](#) found that public support for reparations is 30% nationwide, more than double what it was [two decades ago](#), but far from a majority. Only 18% of white Americans support reparations, but I'm one of them.

You might think I'm plagued by "white guilt." But reparations are not about individual guilt. It's about the political responsibility of society as a whole.

Political responsibility is a common topic in the political theory courses I teach at Sacramento State, and it has personal resonance for me: My German grandparents were opposed to the Nazis, but years later they paid taxes that helped to fund reparations to Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. I want to follow in my grandparents' footsteps by contributing my taxes to reparations in California.

The Task Force's [interim report](#) invokes the idea of political responsibility when it states that "repairing a wrong is a political and moral obligation." Citizens today are "more than a random group of people who live in the same geographic area; we bind ourselves into a community that lives beyond the lifespans of its individual members."

The California government owes reparations to African Americans, not because they are in need, but because they have been severely wronged by government policies.

Once we view reparations as a shared political responsibility, it’s a small step to also see it as patriotic. As [Erika D. Smith](#) wrote in the Los Angeles Times last year: “Reparations, by the most basic definition, is government acknowledging it did something wrong and then doing something about it. And that is the truest form of patriotism. A love not just of country but of the people who inhabit it.”

[Research](#) by sociologists Ashley V. Reichelmann and Matthew O. Hunt finds that public support for reparations depends on “appealing to Americans’ shared identities, empathy and sense of democratic citizenship.”

The California government should provide reparations for its history of unjust policies toward African Americans — not because anyone alive today is personally to blame, but because it’s our political responsibility as democratic citizens.

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