

The new deal and racial inequality (question 6) essay examples

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Essay Question](#) \n \t
2. [Social security](#) \n \t
3. [Civilian Conservation Corps](#) \n \t
4. [Political culture](#) \n \t
5. [References](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Essay Question

It is irrefutable that the New Deal heralded a period of progression in America. It in fact greatly contributed to reversing the effects of the great depression (Skocpol and Finegold, 1982). However, historians have argued that the New Deal came at a price, especially in relation to racial equality. It is argued that leaving African-Americans out of the deal was the price the government had to pay to get the much needed support of the South (Katznelson, 2005). Accordingly, government policies, political culture, and laws entrenched racial inequality, which had far reaching consequences to date.

The biggest breeding ground for racial inequality was the fact that little was done to address the racial discrimination prevalent in the South and the South's belief in white superiority. By forming a coalition with the South without addressing these issues, it meant that the policy of racial inequality would dominate all government actions. This to a large extent gave sanction to racial inequality, meaning that the government supported it, or at least

did not oppose it. Additionally, it gave the South latitude to veto any government policy or law that was geared at racial equality. The South actively used this veto power to propagate racial inequality, especially in relation to labor and social security (Katznelson et. al, 1993).

Consequently, majority of the aspects of the New Deal, ranging from laws, relief programs and policies had inherent in them racial inequality. In some cases it was more pronounced in others it was subtle. The sum effect was that the deal left in place, if not reinforced, racial inequality. An analysis of these laws and policies reveal traces of racial inequality.

Social security

The New Deal ushered the concept of welfare in American society (Hacker and Pierson, 2002), and especially social security. It emphasized the government's duty to take care of the vulnerable such as the poor, unemployed, women, disabled, and elderly. The original intent was that social security policies and programs would be universal. However, Southern democrats opposed such application arguing that it would benefit blacks. This prevented the enactment of a universal social security policy, thus excluding some people, invariably African Americans.

For instance, the laws on labor and labor union rights, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 barred many black unions from rights enjoyed by white unions. Section 152(3) specifically excluded agricultural and domestic workers from forming labor unions. Consequently, jobs occupied by whites became more lucrative due to the bargaining power of unions, while those occupied by African Americans became more unbeneficial. The net effect

was that African Americans remained in poverty while the whites gained more riches. This gap though reduced today, has never been bridged.

Another law, the Social Security Act of 1935 also excluded some jobs such as farm laborers and domestic work from social security. This law perpetuated racial inequality as majority of such jobs were occupied by blacks. The antagonism for universalism meant that a universal health insurance would be impossible to achieve; largely at the expense of the blacks.

Social security was even denied to African Americans that were qualified under it. This is because it was largely administered by whites, and no steps were taken to ensure African Americans were represented in the administrative boards. The situation was grave in the South where racial discrimination was rife. The net effect was the increase in poverty among African Americans.

For quite some time the Southern representatives in Congress exercised their veto power to ensure the status quo created by these two laws and other related laws was maintained. However, at the advent of the Second World War, this voting pattern stopped (Katznelson et. al, 1993). This was not because they supported racial equality as was realized when an amendment to outlaw racial discrimination in the army was introduced. The South opposed the amendment, effectively depriving African Americans the chance to serve. This would later disadvantage African Americans as they were excluded from the benefits of the Selective Service Readjustment Act. The Act introduced some welfare benefits for those that had served. Having been largely denied the chance to serve, African Americans were thus not eligible. The benefits that included upgrade of schools and repayment of

mortgages largely benefited the whites. This widened the gap between the whites and African Americans, further entrenching the racial inequality. Other laws that put in place racial inequality include the National Industrial Recovery Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The import of the National Industrial Recovery Act was to disallow equal wages between whites and African Americans. Though the Act did not expressly determine the wages, it left such duty to the National Recovery Administration (Goldfield, 1989), which was largely dominated by whites. The Agricultural Adjustment Act dealt with regulation and administration of the agricultural sector, which was a preserve of the South. Accordingly, the south used it largely to enrich white farmers at the expense of African Americans.

Civilian Conservation Corps

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was one of the relief programs under social security. It provided employment opportunities to unemployed men. The program provided a monthly wage in addition to shelter, cloths, and food. Many unmarried African Americans men benefitted from the program. A key highlight of the program in relation to racial equality was the equality in benefits; all races benefited equally. This was however overshadowed by the fact that the administration of the program was largely left to whites. At some point, the director of the program made racial discrimination an official policy in the program.

Many African Americans benefitted greatly from the program as it not only benefitted the member but also the family. This was however short lived as

the program was later abolished by Congress. The racial inequality in this program is depicted by two facts; one, it downplayed the economical and political disadvantages the African Americans faced, and two, it was kept long enough to ensure that they did not benefit substantially from it.

Additionally, the number of African Americans in the program highlighted the poverty prevalent in the African American community.

Political culture

African Americans played a minimal political role in the New Deal. This is largely attributable to the lack of political representation, especially in Congress. Majority of the African Americans then were living in the South (Katznelson et. al, 1993). Accordingly, their participation in politics was close to impossible. This situation was compounded by the fact that their ‘ representatives’, the Southern Congress men, were the majority in Congress. For that reason, they ensured that no laws that facilitated African American political participation would be enacted (Katznelson et. al, 1993).

This state of affairs meant that even if the government wanted to ease African American political participation, they could not do so as they lacked the numbers in Congress. Additionally, the government did not want to antagonize the South as that would greatly jeopardize the New Deal. In some occasion, President Roosevelt openly admitted the government’s inability to deal with racial inequality as that would precipitate a loss of the South votes.

The few African Americans that could participate politically had no choice but to support President Roosevelt’s Democratic Party. This support was

essential in ensuring that President Roosevelt would put in place programs that would alleviate the situation of the African Americans; one on these programs was the Civilian Conservation Corps discussed earlier. However, as alluded to in the foregoing, the Democratic Party's efforts at social democracy were always thwarted by the South (Katznelson et. al, 1993). It is such diminished political participation that made African Americans susceptible to communist ideas, especially the Communist Party. The party proved very appealing to African Americans as it gave them an opportunity to participate fully in politics (Kazin, 2011). This support in addition to support from other disenfranchised groups enabled the Communist party to form a popular front in 1933 to 1939 (Kazin, 2011). These communist ideals set the stage for civil rights and labor movements, all largely composed of African Americans. Even though communist ideals were later discredited in America, their influence nevertheless made the Democratic Party a strong supporter of racial equality, facilitating the passage of laws that supported such equality in all states (Kazin, 2011). This reaffirms that the New Deal Era was tainted with a lot of racial inequality.

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