

The 'Great Replacement' Theory, Explained



In mid-September 2021, the U.S. media turned its attention to an increasing number of Haitian migrants seeking protection at the border in Del Rio, Texas. While [most of the arriving migrants](#) were either turned back into Mexico or deported to destitute conditions in Haiti, [some Haitian families](#) were allowed to stay in the U.S. and pursue asylum claims in immigration court.

On Sept. 22, cable television host Tucker Carlson provided his own theory as to what was happening at the border. In a [segment](#) titled “Nothing About What’s Happening Is an Accident,” Carlson said that current U.S. border policy is designed to ‘change the racial mix of the country. ... In political terms this policy is called the ‘great replacement,’ the replacement of legacy Americans with more obedient people from faraway countries.’ Carlson [concluded](#) that President Biden’s policies with regard to the Haitian migrants have put the U.S. on a “suicidal” path.

Since Carlson’s comments, numerous public figures on the far right have echoed or supported this “great replacement” theory — which has also been called “white replacement theory” or simply “replacement theory” — and it has started to gain broader attention. On Sept. 29, Axios [summarized](#) the situation: “A racist conspiracy theory goes mainstream.” Several more moderate conservatives have criticized the theory for being anti-American and for its roots in white supremacy, including former President George W. Bush and former Reagan administration official Linda Chavez.

“A racist conspiracy theory goes mainstream.” – Axios

But what exactly is the “great replacement” theory? Where did it come from and how is it being used today? What are the implications of its growing popularity?

What is the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory?

The “great replacement” theory, in simple terms, states that welcoming immigration policies — particularly those impacting nonwhite immigrants — are part of a plot designed to undermine or “replace” the political power and culture of white people living in Western countries.

Multiple iterations of the “great replacement” theory have been and continue to be used by anti-immigrant groups, white supremacists, and others. Prominent iterations include:

Rhetoric of invasion: The theory often uses martial and violent rhetoric of a migrant “invasion” that must be stopped before it “conquers” “white America.”

Voter replacement: The theory also sometimes incorporates the [inaccurate](#) assumption that nonwhite immigrants will vote a certain way, and therefore pro-immigration policies are designed by elites to diminish the political influence of white Americans.¹

Antisemitism: In still other iterations, the theory can be found embedded in a web of other xenophobic conspiracies, including antisemitic notions that Jewish elites are responsible for the “replacement” plot.

¹ While the idea that increasing immigration will help Democrats win elections is [largely unfounded](#), espousing that idea by itself is not the same as promoting the “great replacement” theory. “Great replacement” theory generally also refers to the existence of a conspiratorial plot to destroy or undermine white Americans.

Regardless of which version is referenced, proponents of the “great replacement” theory almost always paint a life-or-death scenario concerning the fate of “white America.” The theory contends that nonwhite immigration must be stopped, or else the country is on — as Carlson [put it](#) — a “suicidal” path. As a consequence of these existential terms, the theory often coincides, directly or indirectly, with calls for violence.

“Antecedents and precursors to the ‘great replacement’ theory have always been present in the American debate on immigration.”

Where did the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Come From?

Antecedents and precursors to the “great replacement” theory [have always been present](#) in the American debate on immigration. Recognizing this broader history, we can trace the replacement theory’s modern use from French nationalist authors to fringe alt-right xenophobes, and on to its introduction into more mainstream channels.

- In 1973, the French author Jean Raspail wrote a novel titled *The Camp of the Saints*, an apocalyptic tale that attempts to depict the destruction of white, Western society at the hands of mass immigration from the Global South. Raspail’s novel took hold among American [white supremacist](#) and [anti-immigrant](#) groups in the 1980s and 1990s, and remains a [touchstone today](#) for prominent anti-immigration hardliners such as Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon.
- In 2012, Renaud Camus, another Frenchman [heavily influenced](#) by Raspail, authored a book titled *The Great Replacement*. In the book, Camus [argues](#) that white Europeans “are being reverse colonized by Black and Brown immigrants, who are flooding the Continent in what amounts to an extinction-level event.”
- Throughout the 2010s, the term — and the theory — slowly [began to catch hold](#) among fringe alt-right and white supremacist figures. By 2017, “You Will Not Replace Us” was a [prominent slogan](#) among white supremacists who gathered at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.
- As asylum-seeking migrants sought refuge in southern Europe and then on the U.S.-Mexico border, the theory began to emerge from more mainstream sources. In 2017, then-Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) [tweeted](#), “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.” In 2019, the theory was [referenced](#) by a prominent, far-right French politician named Marine Le Pen. Tucker Carlson and other Fox News hosts [began making repeated references](#) to the replacement theory in their segments on immigration.



This painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is by Giovanni Volpato, “Arch of Titus” c. 1780 which represents Titus’ defeat of the Judean rebellion and the origins of an anti-semitic fear that Berenice, a Jewish Queen of Rome could convert the world to Judaism.

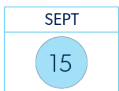
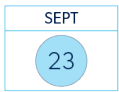
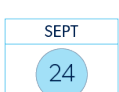
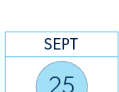
What Have Been the Consequences of the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory?

Evil, hate and violence have sprung directly from the “great replacement” theory.

- **On Aug. 11, 2017**, hundreds of individuals representing antisemitic and white supremacist groups including the Ku Klux Klan gathered for the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a two-day event that sparked extreme violence and led to the death of a counterprotester. The extremists kicked off the rally by referencing the “great replacement” theory, [chanting](#) “You will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.”
- **On Oct. 27, 2018**, 11 congregants in a Pittsburgh synagogue were killed in one of the deadliest attacks against the Jewish community in the U.S. The shooter’s belief in the “great replacement” theory precipitated the attack, as he [believed](#) that HIAS, a Jewish American nonprofit organization that provides aid and assistance to refugees, was working to “bring invaders in that kill our people.”
- **On March 15, 2019**, 51 people were killed in consecutive terrorist attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The shooter’s manifesto [repeatedly and directly](#) referenced replacement theory. Its title was The Great Replacement.
- **On Aug. 3, 2019**, 23 people were killed in a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. The terrorist targeted Latino shoppers, and his manifesto [referenced](#) the “great replacement” theory and fears of a “Hispanic invasion of Texas.” The manifesto also listed the Christchurch shooter as an inspiration.

How is the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Being Used Today?

Tucker Carlson has explicitly touted the “great replacement” theory on his broadcast multiple times. He referenced it directly for the [first time](#) on an April 8 episode of Tucker Carlson Tonight, and then again on Sept. 22. Other political figures on the right and far-right have also brazenly endorsed the theory in recent weeks:

-  Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R-Texas) [said](#) of the Haitian migrants arriving at the border, “this is trying to take over our country without firing a shot.”
-  Conservative activist and radio host Charlie Kirk [said](#) on his show that the Biden administration’s immigration policy “is about bringing in voters that they like and, honestly, diminishing and decreasing white demographics in America.”
-  Rep. Brian Babin (R-Texas) endorsed the theory, [stating](#), “They want to change America, they want to replace the American electorate with third-world immigrants that are coming in illegally.”
-  Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Florida) [tweeted](#), “@TuckerCarlson is CORRECT about about Replacement Theory as he explains what is happening to America.”

Many other [prominent figures, including](#) former President Donald Trump, have used the related rhetoric of a migrant “invasion.”



‘Sickening ... Racist, Xenophobic, and Paranoid’

It is tempting not to engage with a conspiracy theory so wrapped in xenophobia and extremism. But as the “great replacement” theory becomes more mainstream, it is imperative that we understand the history and dangerous extremism behind this school of thought — and even more important to highlight those who have effectively and articulately pushed back.

“Our identity as a nation, unlike other nations, is not determined by geography or ethnicity, by soil or blood. ... This means that people of every race, religion, and ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.” – George W. Bush

- In response to Carlson’s September segment — and Gaetz’s support — conservative commentator and National Immigration Forum Senior Fellow Linda Chavez [called](#) the “great replacement” theory what it is: “Sickening ... racist, xenophobic, and paranoid.” Chavez further noted that a Democratic replacement plot would not make all that much sense: “Republicans have since the 1970s done fairly well with Latino voters.”
- In response to the events in Charlottesville in August 2017, former presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all came out forcefully against the extremists’ rhetoric that was so steeped in the “great replacement” theory. In an [October 2017 speech](#), George W. Bush issued perhaps the strongest response: “Our identity as a nation, unlike other nations, is not determined by geography or ethnicity, by soil or blood ... This means that people of every race, religion, and ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.”
- The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a leading anti-hate organization, has vigilantly tracked the rise of the “great replacement” theory and described its roots in racism, fascism and antisemitism. In a [recent piece](#), the ADL noted that self-proclaimed white supremacists have celebrated Carlson’s broadcasts, with one [announcing](#): “Now Tucker is name dropping the Great Replacement Theory on his broadcasts ... that’s due to us.”

How Can I Combat the Rise of the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory?

When faced with a dark and extreme ideology like this, it can feel overwhelming and like it’s impossible to make a difference. However, we have the power to educate ourselves and be catalysts for change in our own communities. Here’s where we can start.



Learn more about the history. Read through this resource, visit the library, or use the internet to find information from fact-checked and trusted sources and researchers about the history of nativism and extremism in the United States, and efforts to combat them.



Help others understand where statements and theories like these originate. Share this resource and talk with your loved ones and friends.



Amplify the voices of those who have spoken out against theories like these. Share speeches, quotes and articles that push back against this ideology, and outline why it’s so dangerous.



Ask questions. When faced with a public official or community member who continues to share thoughts that fall along these lines, ask them, yourselves, and others questions about where they’re getting their information, what proof they have to back up their statements, and more about where their theories come from. You may not change their minds, but your questions might inspire others to ask questions, too.



Get involved in your community to support immigrants, refugees and migrants. With the rise in extremist narratives and ideas in the mainstream, it’s imperative that we engage with the subject in a positive way. Speak up in support of policies that would help reform our immigration system to make us a country of welcome, or volunteer to help refugees resettling in your community. If you are looking for ways to take action on the national scale, see resources such as the National Immigration Forum’s [Advocacy Resources Landing Page](#).

