

New Report Examines Race, Religion, and Public Spaces

Focus Group, Interviews Reveal Differing Opinions Between Black and White Southerners

WASHINGTON/NEW ORLEANS (August 22, 2023)—A new report published jointly by Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and E Pluribus Unum (EPU) provides a detailed look at Black and white Southern Americans’ personal opinions on Confederate memorials and the role of religion in framing conversations about race and public spaces. The report, “Two Histories, One Future: The Legacy of Confederate Memorials and the Promise of Public Spaces,” details the findings of focus groups held across the South and profiles grassroots groups working on memorialization in their communities.

“In a country where every new generation is increasingly diverse, welcoming, inclusive public spaces are vital for our communities,” says **Melissa Deckman, Ph.D., CEO of PRRI**. “While most focus group participants — both Black and white — agreed with this sentiment, their views diverged when asked to consider the impact of Confederate memorials.”

“Since our founding, E Pluribus Unum has learned that symbols matter – they can support inclusion, or they can support division. This report illustrates that Confederate monuments were put up for a reason – it was the Civil war’s ‘Big Lie’ and propaganda of the Lost Cause,” says **Scott Hutcheson, Executive Director of E Pluribus Unum**. “As we are seeing today, the harm of such lies around our nation’s history can negatively impact generations. EPU is not only committed to advocating for and amplifying the truth, we are determined to bring communities together and do the necessary work to heal these harms that for so long have held us back as a nation and people.”

Focus groups participants expressed a wide range of opinions around removing or re-contextualizing Confederate monuments. While many white Southerners were defensive about the continued presence of Confederate monuments, Black Southerners readily shared personal anecdotes and described how these memorials serve as reminders of a violent past. Notably, in states where monument debates and removals have already occurred, white focus group participants were more sensitive to how Confederate monuments affect Black people, even if they did not necessarily agree with the action taken.

When it comes to religion, focus group participants of both races discussed how their faith guides their moral compass, particularly the principle of loving your neighbor. Additionally, both Black and white Southerners had more favorable opinions of religious leaders than politicians but noted that the segregated nature of churches stood in the way of religion playing a unifying role on these issues. One participant, a Black woman in Virginia stated, “Do I believe that church is going to be the voice? No, because we learn two different things in two different ways because of our skin color.” Overall, the report found a lack of trust between white and Black Southerners and vastly different levels of comfort discussing racial identity. It was individual relationships and conversations across race, though rare, that could break through cynicism and led to greater shared understanding.

Throughout 2022, PRRI and EPU convened this series of 26 focus groups, with participants organized by race (a Black group, with a Black moderator, and a white group, with a white moderator), in 13 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Additionally, EPU profiled seven grassroots groups doing

work around memorialization: the Ida B. Robinson Institute (Richmond, VA), the Committee for Justice, Equality, and Fairness (Walton County, FL), the 2022 Day of Repentance (Richmond, VA), St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Richmond, VA), the Orleans Legacy Project (New Orleans, LA), the Wesleyan College Lane Center for Social and Racial Justice (Macon, GA), and the Lafayette County Remembrance Project (Oxford, MS).

A previous PRRI/EPU report, [*Creating More Inclusive Public Spaces: Confederate Memorials, Structural Racism, and Building for the Future*](#), found that Americans' awareness of and support for Confederate memorials, statues and other commemorative symbols frequently diverge along both partisan and racial/ethnic lines, with Black Americans often holding views distinct from other groups. Meanwhile, at least nine out of ten Republicans, compared with about four in ten Democrats, see each of these as a manifestation of Southern pride, rather than of racism. Additionally, three quarters of Americans (74%) support repairing the damage done by past violence or discrimination against racial minorities, including more than half of Republicans (52%).

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About PRRI

PRRI is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to conducting independent research at the intersection of religion, culture, and public policy.

About E Pluribus Unum

Founded by former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu in 2018, E Pluribus Unum (EPU) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to build a more equitable and inclusive South, uprooting the barriers that have long divided the region by race and class.