

# Whether Harvard Fires President Claudine Gay or Not

*Janice Fiamengo*



Asked whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” violated the school’s code of conduct, Harvard President [Claudine Gay waffled and](#)

[equivocated](#), saying that when anti-Semitic rhetoric “crosses into conduct,” that was “actionable.” It was a revelation of moral murk and verbal obfuscation. Gay could not clarify—because it was impossible to do so—how speech could be distinguished from conduct in a case like this (speech IS conduct, academic administrators have repeatedly affirmed). Gay later [apologized](#), saying that she regretted giving the impression that Harvard would condone “calls for violence against Jewish students,” but she still stopped short of answering the original question.

Gay’s hedging might have been defended on the grounds that university leaders should remain neutral regarding constitutionally protected speech, but this [has not been Gay’s or Harvard’s position for many years](#), as other questioning revealed, and coming from an avowedly activist administrator, it would have been the height of hypocrisy.

Gay is undoubtedly aware that Harvard has a [specific policy statement on discrimination and bullying](#) that seeks to prevent “unwelcome and offensive conduct,” that could reasonably be considered “intimidating, hostile, or abusive.” Given Harvard’s extreme sensitivity about a range of issues, including preferred [pronoun use](#) and its official outrage over “[It’s Okay to be White](#)” signs, it’s hard to imagine that, in the days immediately following Hamas’s massacre of Israeli civilians, students blaming Israel as “[entirely responsible](#)” and calling for the end of the Jewish state would *not* be seen as “intimidating, hostile, or abusive.”

Exactly why Gay zigged and zagged so awkwardly is not entirely clear. Perhaps she simply did not wish to offend anti-Israel colleagues and students—obviously a significant number at her school—who believe that Israel is an illegitimate Zionist entity that should be eliminated, and the country’s Jews left to fend for themselves in a region known for its murderous anti-Semitism.

On previous occasions, Gay has made no secret of her belief that speech is indeed conduct ripe for condemnation. Upon a visit to Harvard in 2020 by Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve* and other books about race and IQ, Gay—who was then the Dean of Arts and Science—[denied that Murray’s work had any academic merit](#), criticizing Murray for lack of “[rigorous data science](#).” Whether Gay has read Murray or is capable of challenging him intellectually was not made clear in the reporting.

Also in her role as Dean, Gay did not hesitate to harshly punish male professors who, neither charged nor convicted of any crime, had been accused of “sexual harassment,” much of which involved speech. Two of these, [Jorge Dominguez](#) and [Gary Urton](#), were stripped of their emeritus status, meaning that academic honors bestowed in recognition of decades of meritorious scholarship were retroactively cancelled following unproven accusations, an egregious violation of due process and natural justice.

Protected by campus orthodoxies, it seems, Gay has no trouble taking a clear line on offensive speech. With a more contested principle

at stake, she doesn't perform as well. Now, [the Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers are considering whether to ask for Gay's resignation](#); but the real question is, why was she hired in the first place?

As Harvard's first black female president, Gay received a hero's welcome when she stepped in to the position earlier this year, but she hasn't so far demonstrated the intellectual heft to dignify the position. A highly celebratory article ("[The Scholar Everyone Sought: Claudine Gay, Harvard's Next President](#)") by Harvard's *The Crimson*, gushing about her "meteoric rise through Harvard's administration," could not disguise the vacuousness of her many supporters' compliments. Professor Jennifer Hochschild, who has published and taught with Gay, called her "a very high quality person." Professor Barry Weingart said of her teaching that "She was not nervous as many assistant professors are" and "She knew where she was going. She knew what she needed to do." Ariel White, one of Gay's graduate students, said of her "She always listens very attentively, and then she asks these very simple-sounding questions that get right to the heart of the matter." The article alleges that as Dean of Arts and Science, she came to meetings well prepared, "radiated concern for others," and was, according to a longtime friend "just a winner."

Whether there is any substance behind these vague encomiums is difficult to determine. Is it significant that not one of those quoted had anything to say about the kind of scholar Gay is, the contributions she has made to her field, her particular qualities of mind? The article admits that Gay has never published a book, once a *sine qua non* for academic advancement at Ivy League schools. In fact, Gay's CV, [available here](#), is remarkably thin. In over 20 years of academic employment at top schools, she has published only ten scholarly articles (two of them co-authored) and edited one book with multiple co-editors. Most top-tier universities demand much more: at least one article or book chapter every year, and a monograph (single-author book) or major co-authored book every decade. Gay's record would not even guarantee tenure at most elite post-secondary institutions.

Granted, simply counting publications is not a failsafe way to estimate a scholar's quality, but it is a method widely employed by America's schools and generally accepted amongst academics themselves (see the enormously higher output of many of Gay's colleagues, some much younger than she, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

A better indicator is the content of Gay's publications: the depth of her insights, the originality of her approach, the quality of her methodology, problem-solving ability, and data-collection. Pursuing this angle, I read in full a report she co-authored with three other feminist scholars on women's advancement or lack thereof in the profession of political science. I also read a mid-career article called "Seeing Difference: The Effect of Economic Disparity on Black Attitudes Toward Latinos." These pieces of writing cover Gay's two central preoccupations: gender and race. I was not expecting to find subversive or counter-narrative perspectives from a woman

determinedly working her way up through the corridors of power in American academia, but even so, I was struck by the predictability and shallowness of the analyses offered. The intellectual conventionality on display may go some way towards explaining the incoherence of her response to the House Committee grilling.

[“Would I Do This All Over Again? Mid-Career Voices in Political Science,”](#) written with Laura van Assendelft, Page Fortna, and Kira Sanbonmatsu for the *Report by the APSA Presidential Taskforce on Women’s Advancement in the Profession* is boilerplate feminist propaganda dressed up with academic discourse and social scientific methodologies. Like dozens of such reports before it over the decades, and deviating not a whit in its assumptions, substance, and recommendations, the report claims that women are still discriminated against in the field of political studies/political science, and that more needs to be done to ensure that they are better supported, advised, and promoted. As the authors emphasize, “Women were more likely to highlight a lack of encouragement and lower satisfaction than men” in their academic careers (p. 7); and the authors find that the “pipeline to academic careers is leakier for women and people of color than for white men” (p. 1).

Relying heavily on qualitative rather than quantitative data (in other words, taking at their word women’s reports of inadequate mentoring or of being made to feel unwelcome in academia), the report claims to represent what it has no convincing data to support: that academia is still, even after at least four decades of equity initiatives and targeted hiring, hostile to women and unwilling to remove the (always invisible) “barriers” that allegedly prevent them from succeeding. The barriers may be “informal, subtle, and even unconscious,” the authors admit, yet still “damaging to morale and job satisfaction” (p. 34).

That the women themselves might not be able to see their situations clearly, or might be averse to taking responsibility for their lack of achievement (“I didn’t have anybody really guiding me when I was younger,” p. 32), is never considered; the authors report an abundance of complaints, ranging from “[T]here definitely were people who, I think, were indifferent to my existence at best” (p. 15) to “My male colleagues do not talk to me about politics” (p. 21); from “I say no a lot. But the few things I say yes to really do tax me “ (p. 16) and “When I would [...] not do something that I was supposed to do and use my child as the reason, I think people reacted negatively to that” (p. 29).

Authored by a woman who has been rapidly promoted above peers far more industrious and productive, the claims in the report are impossible to take seriously; in fact, it reads like a rote exercise in intersectional feminist posturing.

[“Seeing Difference: The Effect of Economic Disparity on Black Attitudes toward Latinos”](#) is a more substantial piece of work intellectually in which simple bromides about discrimination and barriers to success will not suffice, engaging as it does the thorny issue

of blacks' racial animosity toward Latinos. Gay is to be commended, perhaps, for choosing such a fraught subject. What she does with the subject, however, is remarkably limited. Finding that racial animus increases with economic under-performance, she concludes that the negativity blacks express toward Latinos is caused mainly by "competition for scarce resources." And such negativity is regrettable, she makes clear, because it limits the possibility for black Americans to form political coalitions with Latinos (against whites, it seems).

The conclusions are embarrassingly facile. While it seems likely that poverty plays some role in prejudice and racial hatred, it's not clear that it is either a necessary or sufficient cause. Perhaps more well-educated and affluent black people, equally inclined to strong in-group preference and out-group bias, merely learn to suppress their true sentiments about racial others. Alternatively, it may be likely that the types of black Americans who hate and blame others for their failures are also the type who tend not to succeed. In the article, Gay demonstrates no interest in these larger issues.

What is more shocking about her discussion of racial animosity, however, is her conviction that the primary problem with black dislike or hatred of Latinos is that it reduces the likelihood of black Americans forming political coalitions that would advantage black Americans; as she phrases it, "anti-Latino sentiment among the black mass public may undermine elite efforts to build black-Latino alliances, putting at risk the group's future political and economic status" (p. 982). Note where the apostrophe lies: Gay focuses on only one group's status. The naked self-interest in the argument is so taken-for-granted, apparently, that Gay neither seeks to mask or justify it; we should all care about black animosity, it seems, mainly because it may harm black political prospects. The safety and well-being, as well as the economic success, of Latinos, who may experience violence at the hands of blacks due to the evident racial prejudice, is not once mentioned as an object of concern. It is impossible to imagine any scholar arguing that white prejudice is mainly worrisome because of how it may harm white prospects for political benefit. As Gay notes, almost comically, "A group stereotyped as 'difficult to get along with' or as 'people to fear' is unlikely to be viewed as a potential partner; and, by the same token, a group whose members voice such intolerant sentiments may find it difficult to attract or retain a diverse base of support."

Never mentioned is the subject of racial animus more generally. If blacks' racial animosity against Latinos is undesirable only because it reduces the possibilities for political coalitions and cross-racial support (for blacks), what about black racial animosity against whites and/or Asians? Is it acceptable because the possibility of political coalition is less likely? Is it, in fact, useful? Moreover, does racial animus not harm black Americans in their psyches and spirits; does it not harm the social fabric for all Americans? Gay's failure even to pay lip service to larger civic ideals of non-discrimination, generosity, and fairness—ideals upon which the American political system has been (even if imperfectly) based for decades—suggests her indifference to the philosophical and psycho-social foundations of a

flourishing pluralistic society. No wonder this black woman could not work up genuine outrage at the thought of Jewish genocide.

Gay's intellectually sluggish performance before the House Committee takes on added poignancy when considered alongside the intellectual and moral narrowness of her feminist and race-advocacy publications. Straightjacketed by the assumptions of the modern academy, in which racial and gender resentment are to be managed by elites through economic redistribution and policy reform, Gay is ill-equipped to lead a university at which murderous global hatreds have begun to collide with snowflake-oriented codes of conduct.

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