



They Only Hate the Term: Explaining Opposition to History Curriculum Policy and Critical Race Theory

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Explaining Opposition to History Curriculum Policy and Critical Race Theory

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Abstract: The George Floyd Protests of the Summer of 2020 initiated public conversations around the need for antiracist teaching. Yet, over time the discussion evolved into policy debates around the use of Critical Race Theory in civics courses. The rapid transition masked the fact that we know little about Americans' policy preferences. Do Americans support antiracist teaching? What factors best explain support/opposition? How does critical race theory factor in? Using a series of original survey experiments, this study shows that Americans maintain strong support for antiracist teaching, but that support is drastically weakened when curriculum features the term "critical race theory."

Keywords: critical race theory, antiracist, curriculum

Glenn Youngkin brought the conversation on critical race theory (CRT) and K-12 history curricula into the national conversation. In a 2021 special election to determine the gubernatorial seat in Virginia, Youngkin - the Republican nominee - made the promise to ban CRT from schools “on day one.”¹ As election day grew closer, anti-CRT messaging became a central part of his campaign. He won by a slim 2% margin.² According to a Fox News exit survey of Virginia voters, 1-in-4 identified critical race theory as the single most important reason that brought them to the polls.³

Youngkin’s victory over incumbent Democrat Terry McCaulliffe sent a flare gun shot into the air of partisan politics. Taking a strong anti-CRT position instantly became viewed as a winning political strategy for Republicans.⁴ Since the Virginia special election, Republican candidates for political office across levels have been following the Youngkin playbook. What started as a strand of legal theory at some of the nation’s most elite law schools is now at the center of education policy debates and partisan elections.

Given the major implications that CRT now has for our politics, I ask and address two pertinent questions. First, what *is* critical race theory? Political leaders looking to weaponize the concept have significantly reduced its meaning and application. So, let us identify what CRT is (and what it is not). Second, I want to explore how Americans actually feel about schools teaching history in a way that acknowledges American’s history with racism, which is what sits

¹ See Seitz-Wald 2021 “In Virginia, Republicans See Education, Curriculum Fears as a Path to Victory.” *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/virginia-republicans-see-education-curriculum-fears-path-victory-n1281676>.

² See 2021 Virginia Governor Results. *CNN Politics*. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2021/results/virginia/governor>.

³ See “Fox News Voter Analysis: 2021 Gubernatorial Election.” *Fox News*.

https://static.foxnews.com/foxnews.com/content/uploads/2021/11/FNVA-Virginia_as-of-10pm-results.pdf.

⁴ See Beeferman 2022 “Candidates Backed by Conservative PAC Sweep Tarrant County School Board Elections.” *Texas Tribune*. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/08/tarrant-county-school-elections-pac/>.

at the core of the CRT discourse. How much support is there for the core idea? Then, to the extent that there is opposition, what lies at the core of the growing disdain?

I address the first question by providing background on the origin of CRT and how it is most commonly used in practice. I show that CRT is not a component of elementary and/or secondary history education. Instead, it is a niche legal theory that spread across the social sciences and even popular culture, but not curriculum design. I, then, address the second question by providing an analysis of public opinion surveys that I have fielded from 2020 through 2022, which is the period in which the CRT debate started to receive national attention. Within the surveys, I also design experiments to test for different core factors that may be motivating public opposition. Ultimately, I find that the biggest source of opposition towards CRT is seeing mention of history curricula that includes the words “critical race theory.” Thus, I conclude, as the title suggests, that Americans opposing CRT seem to largely do so not because of its impact on how schools teach history but because they have come to dislike the term itself.

What is Critical Race Theory?

So, what is critical race theory? It is a concept of legal theory that emerged out of a movement in the academic field of critical legal studies (CLS) dating back to the 1930s. Centering a realist approach to the law, CLS aimed to surface critiques of law that fostered social and political biases. Legal scholars highlighting injustices around women’s rights, rights for the poor, and civil rights for African Americans and other marginalized racial groups challenged the role of the law in furthering inequities. Out of the critiques of the latter in particular, however, rose critical race theory (CRT).

While the details of when CRT originated differs, the common understanding is that CRT enters the academic discourse around the late 1970s/early 1980s through the writings of pioneers

Derrick Bell, Kimberlè Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. The central idea is that, when looking critically at the practice of law, one determines that racial biases obstruct the ability for the law in and of itself to operate with true blindness, particularly color-blindness (Crenshaw 2019). In other words, the same racial biases and prejudices that have led to violent racial acts such as lynching also play a central role in how the law is applied and practiced in courts and legislative chambers across the United States. CRT furthered the notion that many of America's laws and public policies inherited the same discriminatory intentions as America's staunch white supremacists. Critical race theorists, therefore, push back against notions of racial progress through incrementalism – stressing the tendency of equality theory, liberal politics, legal reasoning, and neutral interpretations of constitutional law to result in regression (Delgado and Stefaniec 2017).

This is an argument that explained several political realities. The Jim Crow Laws that permeated the U.S. South post-Civil-War are an obvious example. However, CRT scholars pointed out its continuation in more clandestine forms. Derrick Bell (1975) initiates the CRT discourse by offering critiques of the *Brown v Board* ruling on the grounds that making segregated schools unconstitutional does not go the full length of protecting the educational interests of Black children – a claim that has been vindicated by the consistent re-segregation of modern schools. From there, we see scholars exposing the insidiousness of redlining and other forms of race-based housing discrimination to underscore how state-sanctioned policies buttressed by American law led to the systematic denial of access to property and home equity (West 1995). They show us how anti-affirmative-action policies have been used to maintain barriers to educational and economic opportunity for Black Americans. CRT scholars detail the

specific policy domains that have employed systematic discrimination practices on the basis of race and through intersections with gender, class, and sexuality.

It is this attention to systemic racial discrimination that has made critical race theory a particularly useful framework in more recent years. Decades removed from the Black Freedom Movement for Civil Rights (or the Civil Rights Movement), Black Americans remain on the wrong side of persisting disparities in life outcomes, despite America's overall societal progress. For instance, college degree attainment is at its highest level in American history, but White Americans are still more than twice as likely to hold a college degree.⁵ Even during periods of record low unemployment, the unemployment rate for Black Americans still stood at about double the rate for White Americans.⁶ Adding complexity, poor black boys who grow up in similar poverty conditions as poor white boys have remained significantly less likely to land in the middle class as adults (Chetty et al. 2020). These kinds of imbalances have caused not just legal scholars but community activists, and even some social scientists and policymakers, to question the role of systemic biases and the more clandestine residual effects of white supremacy. They grapple with the unavoidable reality that racism exists beyond individual, interpersonal acts of racial hatred. This is the intellectual project that is critical race theory.

The Great Conflation: Critical Race Theory, Antiracism and Social Studies Curriculum

As I have established, Critical Race Theory is a stream of legal critique that has manifested into research, activism, and policy debates around the effects of race as a socio-political force. Media discourse, however, has wedged distance between the truth of what CRT is and the threat it poses for the American education system. This distance, therefore, begs the question: How is CRT

⁵ See "A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent." *Lumina Foundation*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>.

⁶ See "On the Persistence of the Black-White Unemployment Gap." *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/persistence-black-white-unemployment-gap/>.

connected to K-12 social studies curriculum? The forged connection is what I call the great conflation.

The link between CRT and social studies is almost solely political. The public conversation dates back to the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd – an African American male choked to death at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin.⁷ During the nadir of a public health pandemic caused by the spread of Sars-COV-2 or “coronavirus,” millions of people around the world still took to the streets to protest this blatant episode of racial injustice. These protests, though, erupted on the heels of several other demonstrations in reaction to police killing unarmed Black Americans. It was a movement propelled by the previous chants of justice for Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and too many others. From 2016 onward, we continued to see more Black bodies slain by police without officers suffering any consequences. Thus, given this trend of inaction, the participants of the organized demonstrations in 2020 pressed for tangible and meaningful responses.

One action that emerged was to push White parents to discuss anti-racist practices with their children. Antiracism is an intellectual project that looks to place the onus of eradicating racism on widespread efforts that actively weed out anti-black racial discrimination practices and dismantle systematic forces of anti-black racism (Kendi 2019). The project became popularized by works like Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) *How to Be an Antiracist* and Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) *White Fragility*. These works both nod to critical race theorist Kimberlè Crenshaw as a source of intellectual grounding, but these are not CRT texts in and of themselves. Nonetheless, as the protests for George Floyd continued to spread, so too did the call to make household conversations around antiracism a part of the actionable response to racial injustice.

⁷ See “How George Floyd was Killed in Police Custody.” *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

Throughout the summer of 2020, the public discourse continued to shift towards questions of how to educate more children about the poisons of racism in America. However, this conversation reached what would be its first height of controversy well before the protests took place. In August of 2019, backlash against alternative history curricula ensued once journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, who published a collection of essays in 2019 called *the 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, announced a partnership with the *New York Times* and the Pulitzer Center to offer an accompanying curriculum to her project.⁸ This would be a joint effort to make history lessons that centered around acknowledging American's role in exploiting West African slaves, while also discussing Black Americans' important contributions to American society. This new curricular tool sought to help teachers teach students about the realities of America's greatest sin.

The growth in the popularity of the *1619 Project* and discussion of an accompanying curriculum led to a series of critiques, primarily from Republican political leaders. The impugning began after the U.S. Department of Education issued a call for grant proposals for the American History and Civics Program that reflected diversity and thoughtfulness around identity.⁹ The original call also mentioned the *1619 Project* and the writings of Ibram X. Kendi, as well as anti-racist practices. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell and 38 other Republican senators sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona expressing “grave concern” over what they perceived to be a “divisive” politicization of American history and civics. Secretary Cardona then released a revised version of the proposal that no longer

⁸ See “How the 1619 Project took over 2020.” *Washington Post*.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f_story.html

⁹ See “Biden History and Civics Priorities Emerge as Battlegrounds.” *Education Next*.
<https://www.educationnext.org/biden-history-and-civics-priorities-emerge-as-battlegrounds/>.

included references to Kendi, the *1619 Project* or antiracist practices. But, the dam had already begun to break.

Republican leaders initiated policy debates centered on attacking critical approaches to teaching American history. On August 11, 2020, the U.S. Senate approved a budgetary amendment sponsored by Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican representing Arkansas, that established a “deficit-neutral reserve fund” for “prohibiting the teaching of critical race theory” in pre-K and K-12 schools. During a short deliberation on the amendment, Cotton decried that, “Sadly, some want to replace our founding principles with an un-American ideology called critical race theory.” The great conflation between antiracist curriculum and critical race theory was cementing.

After Republican congressional leaders took action, *The 1619* ripple effect continued. On September 2, 2020, President Donald Trump paraded the idea of what he called a “patriotic education,” which will combat “lies about America being a wicked nation plagued by racism.”¹⁰ Two weeks later President Trump announced the creation of the 1776 Commission, which he certified on November 2, 2020, through executive order. The Commission was a short-lived 18-member group tasked with writing a report on the “core principles of the American founding.” Though the group was quickly dismantled once President Joseph Biden assumed office on January 20, 2021, Republican leaders at the state level began authoring bills with the intention of banning critical race theory. As of the writing of this piece, 17 states have such bills or resolutions in place that have been signed into law, and another 11 states have bills in their chambers at various stages. The majority of states (28 total) have some sort of legislative action

¹⁰ See “‘Patriotic Education’: Trump Says he Will Start New Commission.” *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/17/914127266/trump-announces-patriotic-education-commission-a-largely-political-move>.

aimed at keeping critical race theory out of K-12 schools.¹¹ That list includes Virginia, who's bill was signed into law by Glenn Youngkin himself. He delivered on his promise.

There is deep irony here. State lawmakers have been rushing to push legislation banning CRT and aspects of antiracist teaching. Yet, civics, as an area of K-12 study, has been in desperate need of more aggressive policy action for decades. Civics is the subject area that has been evaluated the least over time by the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) program, which has been testing and evaluating student achievement for students at elementary and secondary levels since 1973. In that span, NAEP has produced 14 assessments of math and reading achievement. How many times have they evaluated student knowledge of civics over that period? Three: 1998, 2014, and 2018. The national inattention to civics education should be deeply concerning.

It's not just a problem of federal neglect. State education agencies have control over the curricula put in place within districts across their states. When it comes to subjects like math and reading, states make attempts to outline clear academic guidelines and expectations. They establish parameters for what the curricula in these subject areas should include and/or emphasize. Some states allow districts to recommend curricula, but even in those cases, the state education agency must approve it based on accountability standards that the state has established. This same process exists for civics and social studies curricula, but states' attention to standards and accountability are much more lax. State education agencies devote minimal staff to civics curriculum administration and oversight. Most states do not produce any sort of statewide civics assessment. The legislative action around banning CRT, therefore, occurs within a larger policy

¹¹ See "Map: Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack." *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>.

environment that has been plagued by inaction when it comes to improving students' knowledge of civics.

* * *

Critical race theory now sits as a paradox. It is a stream of legal thought that calls for the critique of racist laws and systems. However, it is not - nor has not been - taught in K-12 public schools. CRT is a line of intellectual discourse taught at many of America's leading law schools as a specialty area. Law students primarily take courses on CRT as electives. The farthest trickle down from the corners of law schools are undergraduate courses at colleges and universities where some instructors incorporate CRT into social science and humanistic studies. *The 1619 Project*, which made its materials not mandatory for schools but accessible to them, never actually mentions - yet alone advances - CRT. The same fact holds true for *How to Be an Antiracist*, a book that also received for attacks of spreading CRT doctrine. There is no discussion of critical race theory in the text whatsoever. Banning the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 schools is, therefore, akin to barring pig farmers from using horse saddles. It's not applicable by any means.

Underneath the CRT debate, however, is an incredibly important question. Are Americans supportive of history and civics curricula designed to truthfully acknowledge the country's history of racism? This is a critical component of antiracist education. Antiracism, as an intellectual project, seeks to identify and oppose race-based hatred and discriminatory practices. Teaching kids about America's true history of facilitating the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is crucial for recognizing the primary source of anti-black racism and equipping all kids with the tools to eradicate remnants of it. However, it feels as though the issue of antiracist

curriculum was so quickly politicized that public opinion was never granted an opportunity to form. Or, did it?

While the discourse unfolded, I fielded a series of nationally representative surveys to keep a hand on the pulse of important education policy issues that were surfacing during the pandemic. One of the last issues I thought to include was this slowly simmering debate on history curriculum and racism. In the next section, I detail my research design before ultimately providing analyses of the public's preferences for curriculum that teaches kids about the history of racism in America or what I will henceforth refer to as antiracist curriculum.

Measuring Public Support for Antiracist Curriculum

I measure support for antiracist curriculum by fielding a series of national surveys entitled, "Assessing Opinions of Public Education and Political Participation under COVID-19." Through survey research firm Prolific, I fielded the first iteration of the survey in 2020 from July 30th- Aug. 2nd to a sample of $n = 1,273$ respondents. I fielded a replication to an entirely different group of respondents in 2021 from Jan. 21st – 26th ($n = 983$). Specific to antiracist curriculum, I use the surveys to present half of the participants with the following language: "All schools should feature curriculum that teaches kids about the history of racism in the United States." Relying on a Likert scale to capture responses, I ask them to indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

There is also an experimental component to the surveys. As the political debate about antiracist curriculum entered the public sphere, my initial hypothesis was that the source of opposition would be rooted in civil liberties. I suspected that parents, particularly White parents, would object to antiracist curriculum because they would see the teaching of it in schools as an

infringement upon their rights as parents, who should have a say in whether their child is taught controversial topics. As a result, I presented the other half of the respondents with the same statement that I show in the previous paragraph, but with an added clause that the schools feature this curriculum regardless of whether parents give consent. Here is the specific language presented to the treatment group: “All schools should feature curriculum that teaches kids about the history of racism in the United States, regardless of whether their parents consent.”

In addition to the primary statement about antiracist curriculum and the consent experiment, the surveys include additional variables that I use to assess other factors that may contribute to opposition to antiracist curriculum. I, of course, include a list of the usual suspects used by social scientists in survey research. Given the focus on schools and curriculum, I ask about parental status. Because of the politicized nature of the issue, I also record partisan and ideological identities. I include age as well, and due to the racialized nature of the issue, I retrieve racial identity.

To the racialization dynamic, I wanted also to include a variable that helped assess the link between antiracist curriculum and racial politics – not just identity. The distinction is one that has been made consistently in political science (Smith 2004; Hutchings and Valentino 2004). While racial identity is one’s in-group association with a particular racial group, racial politics is any sort of political project where race is the primary driver. The George Floyd Protests of 2020 represent a major episode of racial politics. Millions around the country gathered in mass demonstration against the idea of racial injustice. This political moment, arguably, became a catalyst for conversations around antiracism. Could attitudes toward the protests factor into support for antiracist curriculum? What about the Jan. 6th Capitol Insurrection? With white

supremacists making up a contingent of the rioters, there is reason to believe that the event was, at least to some degree, racially motivated.

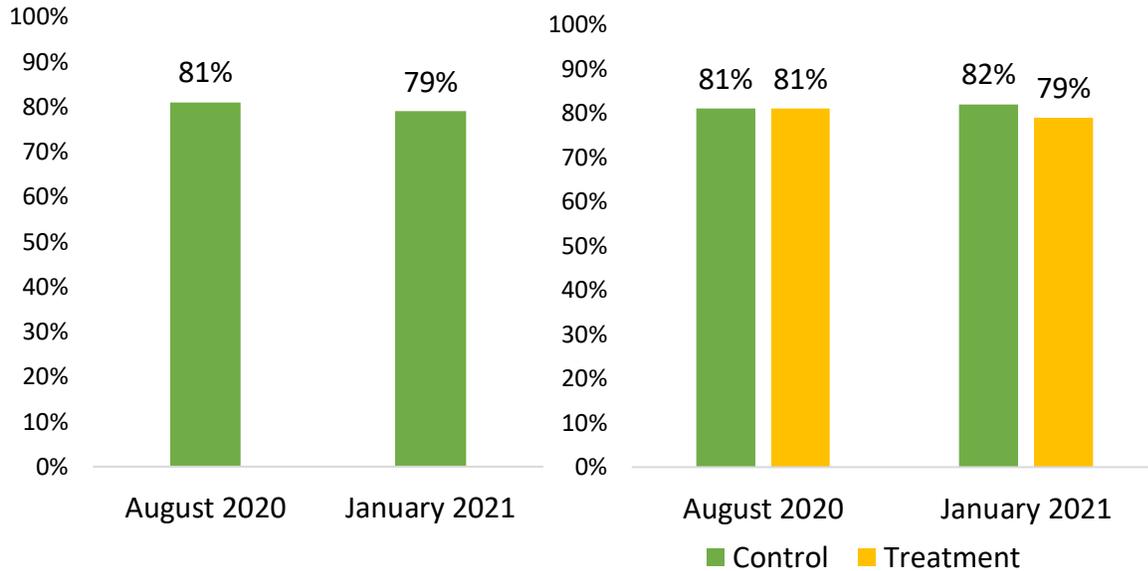
I test this. I presented survey participants with the following language: “I OPPOSE the summer protests that occurred in reaction to unarmed African Americans being killed by police officers.” Once again, they can agree or disagree on the full Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Given the presence of self-identified white supremacists, there is also reasonable suspicion that the January 6th Capitol Insurrection was motivated by racism and xenophobia. I, therefore, include the following statement: “I OPPOSE the protests that led to the U.S. Capitol being raided and damaged on Jan. 6th, 2021.” However, given that the event did not occur until after I fielded the first survey, I only collected reactions to the Jan. 6th Capitol Insurrection in the 2nd iteration and beyond. In sum, I measure public support for antiracist curriculum and a host of factors that I have reason to believe are related to that support or opposition.

Do Americans Support Antiracist Teaching?

The analysis from my survey data collection effort reveals what has run counter to the public narrative. Americans, on average, express overwhelming support for antiracist curriculum. Figure 1 provides the results for the control group responses to the 2020 and 2021 iterations of the survey. In measuring support for antiracist curriculum, I distinguish between respondents who indicated that they either strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the statement shown in the survey compared to the survey participants who chose disagreement or the neutral response. As we can see, about 80% of the samples expressed some level of support for antiracist curriculum, and the results remain virtually unchanged over the two iterations. Also, in terms of

the parental consent dynamic, respondents shown the treatment were equally as likely to support antiracist curriculum in 2020 and only 3% points less likely to support it in 2021.

Figure 1. Public Support for Antiracist Teaching with and without Consent Message



Note: Results are means derived from two separate surveys of national samples of Americans.

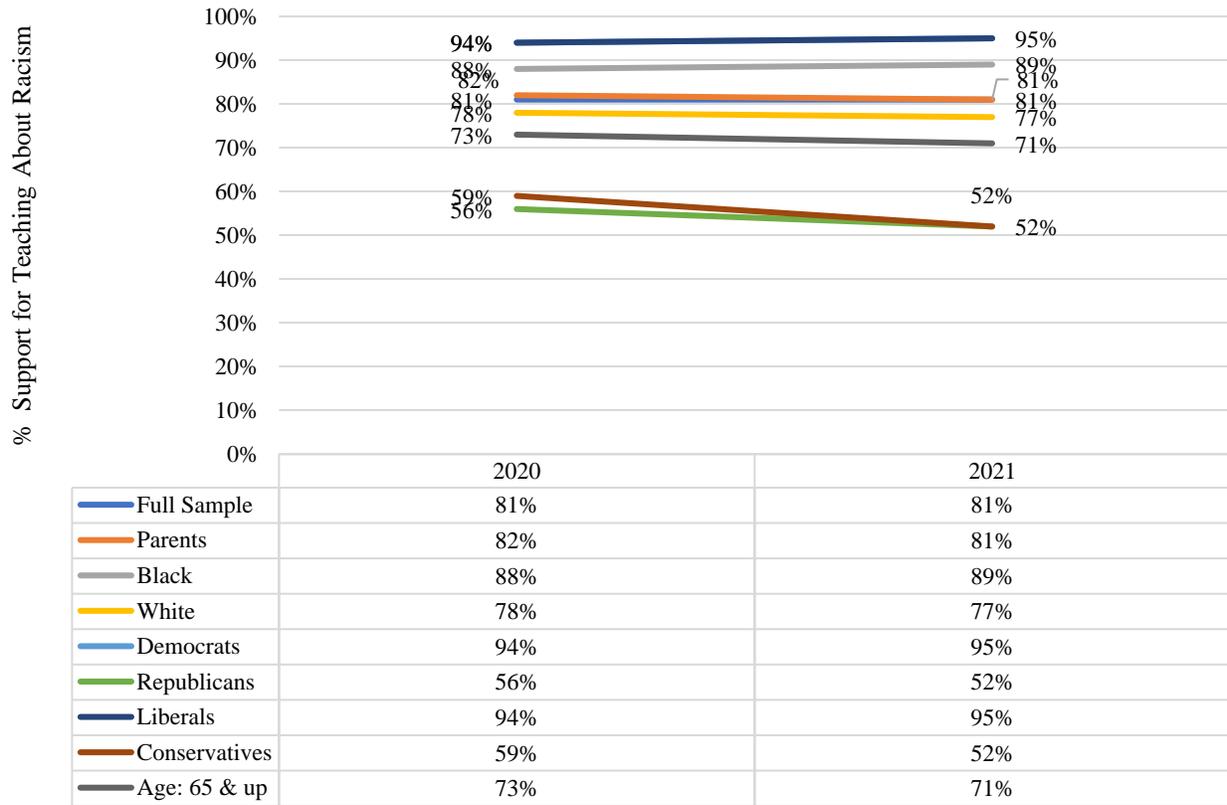
A concern, though, is that the overall results may be a function of sampling bias. Perhaps the size of liberals or people of color in the sample are artificially weighing the results in a certain direction. To confront this potential issue, I examine support for antiracist curriculum for specific demographics of respondents. In Figure 2, we have average support for antiracist curriculum for not only the full samples but also parents, Black and White respondents, Democrats, Republicans, liberals, conservatives, and seniors. Included at the bottom of Figure 2 is a table that provides the raw percentage numbers that feed into the graph above. Every single demographic, on average, expressed some level of support for antiracist curriculum, whether it be parents (82% in 2020; 81% in 2021), White Americans (78% in 2020; 77% in 2021), conservatives (59% in 2020; 52% in 2021), or Republicans (56% in 2020; 52% in 2021). The

latter two, conservatives and Republicans, are the only two groups that decline more than 3% points from 2020 to 2021. The support for antiracist curriculum was strong and persisted across groups.

The question then becomes, what explains the minority of opposition to antiracist curriculum? To explore this question, I conduct a multivariate regression analysis to try and assess the relationship between support for antiracist curriculum and the assortment of variables I measure alongside it. I standardized the variables in the statistical model to vary between 0 and 1. This enables me to produce measurements that can be interpreted almost as percentages. Table 1 provides the results of the regression analysis. It shows two columns; the 1st column shows the results for 2020, while the 2nd column displays the estimates for 2021.

For both years, the strongest predictor remains the same. Respondents who opposed the George Floyd Protests of 2020 were most likely to oppose antiracist curriculum. More specifically, if you strongly opposed the protests, you were about 0.28 or 0.27 standard units (close to 28% or 27%) less likely to support antiracist curriculum than someone who strongly supported the protests. The second largest factor in 2020, school satisfaction (those with high satisfaction with their own district schools were more likely to support antiracist curriculum), is less than half the coefficient size, which suggests it has a much less robust relationship with antiracist curriculum. In 2021, the second largest coefficient is another political event; support for the Jan. 6th Capitol Insurrection is negatively correlated (0.14 standard units or close to a 14% difference) with support for antiracist curriculum (supporters of the insurrection were significantly less likely to support antiracist curriculum). Opposition towards antiracist curriculum appears to be a direct function of individual attitudes towards the George Floyd Protests and the Capitol Insurrection.

Figure 2. Public Support for Teaching about Racism, 2020 & 2021



Note: Results are means derived from two separate surveys of national samples of Americans.

Equally as interesting as what turns out to be related to support or opposition towards antiracist curriculum is what is statistically uncorrelated. For instance, parental status is statistically unrelated during both the 2020 and 2021 iterations. In other words, parents are no less likely to express support for antiracist curriculum than are non-parents. White respondents are also no less likely to support antiracist curriculum than people of color. The key caveat to keep in mind is that this estimate is the relationship between identifying as White and support for antiracist curriculum with the other factors held constant. This means that, when we account for the ideological differences and views towards the major political events, White Americans are no less likely to support antiracist curriculum. This also reinforces the primary finding, which is that

– beyond racial identification – one’s position on these racialized political events largely dictates support or opposition towards antiracist curriculum.

Table 1. Modeling Support for Antiracist History Teaching, 2022 & 2021

	2020	2021
Intercept	0.469***	0.874***
	0.029	0.031
Consent Treatment	-0.011	-0.042***
	0.012	0.013
Oppose 2020 Race Protests	-0.281***	-0.271***
	0.018	0.025
Support Jan. 6 th Insurrection		-0.143***
		0.026
School Satisfaction	0.107***	0.046
	0.025	0.027
Parent	0.004	0.006
	0.014	0.015
White	-0.014	-0.015
	0.014	0.014
Female	0.058***	0.044***
	0.013	0.013
Democrat	0.064**	0.005
	0.020	0.021
Independent	0.027	-0.032
	0.018	0.019
Liberal	0.099***	0.085***
	0.016	0.019
High Income	0.017	0.012
	0.018	0.018
Middle Income	-0.016	-0.004
	0.014	0.015
Age	-0.070*	-0.080***
	0.029	0.024
n	1273	983

Note: Results are produced using ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regression.

Why Do Some Americans Hate Critical Race Theory?

My analysis of the surveys I fielded in 2020 and 2021 offer evidence of how support for antiracist curriculum seems to work. Despite the surrounding political controversy, Americans across the board seemed to be in favor of antiracist curriculum both in 2020 and 2021. Now, because of the political controversy, the biggest differences in support/opposition seem to a function of political factors. Different views toward the George Floyd Protests of 2020 and the Jan. 6th Capitol Insurrection as well as overall ideological differences between liberals and conservatives appear to be what drives the wedge. This politicization of antiracist curriculum lands us back to where we started, which is with the concept of critical race theory.

Again, schools teaching kids about racism is not remotely the same as teaching CRT. These are two different, distinct practices. Nonetheless, the political discourse led to the great conflation of the two, and that synonymity led my surveying project to take an interesting turn. As I mentioned earlier, I rely on a survey research firm to recruit survey participants. Within the firm's user platform, there is a direct messaging tool. So, survey participants have the option to send direct messages to researchers like me, while they are participating in our studies. While fielding the 2021 survey, I received a message from a participant who completed the survey, but they needed to get something off the chest. "I just want to let you know that I don't have a problem with schools teaching kids about racism, but what I don't support is that critical race theory!"

This single justification led me to field the third survey with a new twist on the experimental design. Instead of randomly assigning half of the respondents to express support for antiracist curriculum regardless of parental consent, I leaned in on the conflation, and asked the treatment group whether they supported "a Critical Race Theory curriculum, which teaches kids

about the history of racism in the United States.” The only difference between control and treatment, now, are the words “critical race theory” inserted into the latter. I fielded the third iteration of the survey in March of 2022. The other questions used to construct the additional variables for the analyses remained the same.

I also fielded the experiment in the third iteration after the original experiment, parental consent, seemed to have little-to-no impact on support for antiracist curriculum. For both of the first two iterations of results, the coefficient size, which indicates the strength of the correlation between having received the treatment and expressing opposition towards antiracist curriculum, was extremely small (no more than 0.05). Moreover, the estimated impact of the treatment only reaches statistical significance in 2021. The interpretation of the results of the experiment for the first two waves is that, in 2020, the idea of parental consent did not matter at all on average, and we can be confident that there was a small negative impact imposed by the idea of consent in 2021. This is consistent with the initial results in Figure 1. However, it does not leave us with much to write home about.

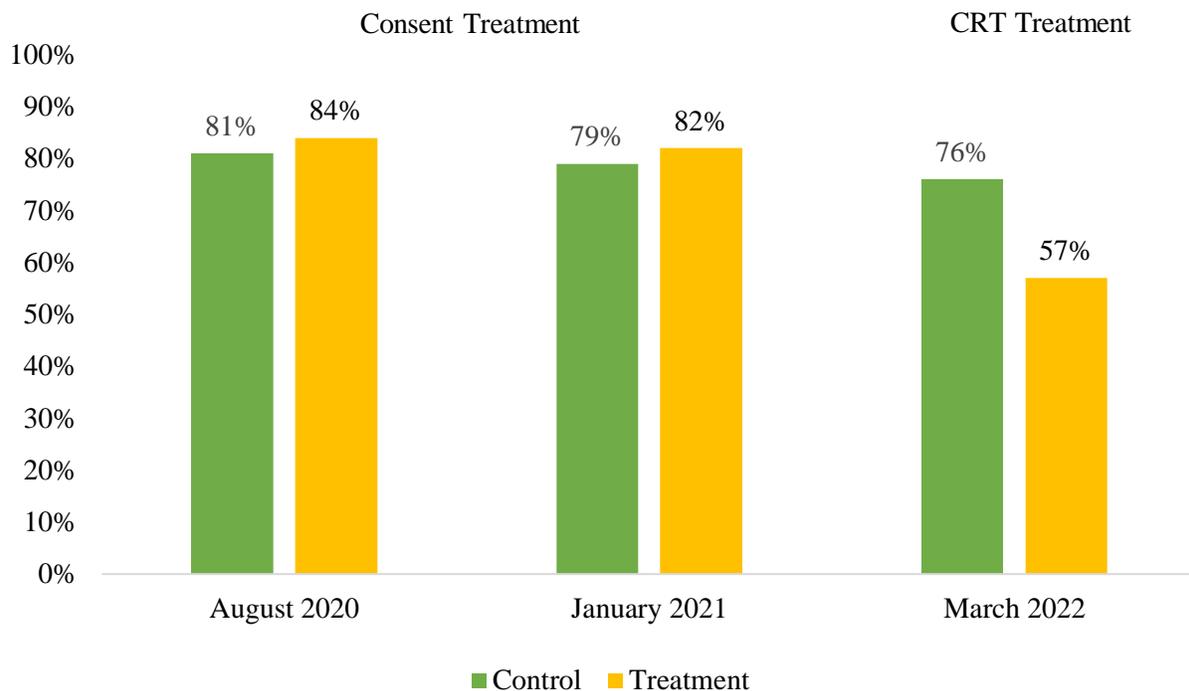
When I tested the critical race theory treatment, I saw a major difference. While the parental consent experiment only resulted in 3%-point drop in support between treatment and control in 2021, the CRT treatment led to an almost 20% decrease in public support for antiracist curriculum in 2022 (see Figure 3). When I conduct an additional regression estimate for the 2022 data with the new treatment, the multivariate results are consistent with the raw treatment effects shown in Figure 3. As column 3 of Table 2 shows, respondents who received the treatment were 0.185 standard units (around 19%) less likely support antiracist curriculum. This makes my very simple language-tweak-of-a-treatment the third most impactful variable on preferences for antiracist curriculum. The only stronger predictors beyond having received the treatment are the

two variables that have remained strong throughout the entirety of this analysis, which are one's opposition towards the 2020 racial injustice protests and/or one's support for the Jan. 6th Insurrection, respectively.

There is a concern that the effect of the treatment may be a part of a larger zeitgeist effect. Perhaps the CRT treatment works because any racialized curricular idea or concept would be negatively received once we get to the year 2022. Maybe it's just the spirit of the times. Perhaps anything mentioning race, whether it be CRT or "antiracist curriculum," drew more disdain than in previous years. I look more closely at the control group to explore this possibility.

Figure 4 reveals what I find. There is indeed an overall downward shift in support for antiracist curriculum happening from 2021 to 2022, but that shift is extremely small (5% points) relative to the effect of the treatment (20% points). Still, except for liberals, the shift is consistent across demographic groups within the control group. According to the table on Figure 4, the biggest drop is amongst control group Republicans, who are 8% points less likely to support antiracist curriculum in 2022 than control group Republicans were in 2021. However, even despite the small overall decline across groups (for the control group), Republicans were the only group in 2022 to have less than a majority express support for antiracist curriculum. In other words, there is a small falling tide, but the support for antiracist curriculum remains above sea level.

Figure 3. Antiracist Teaching Support Experiment Results

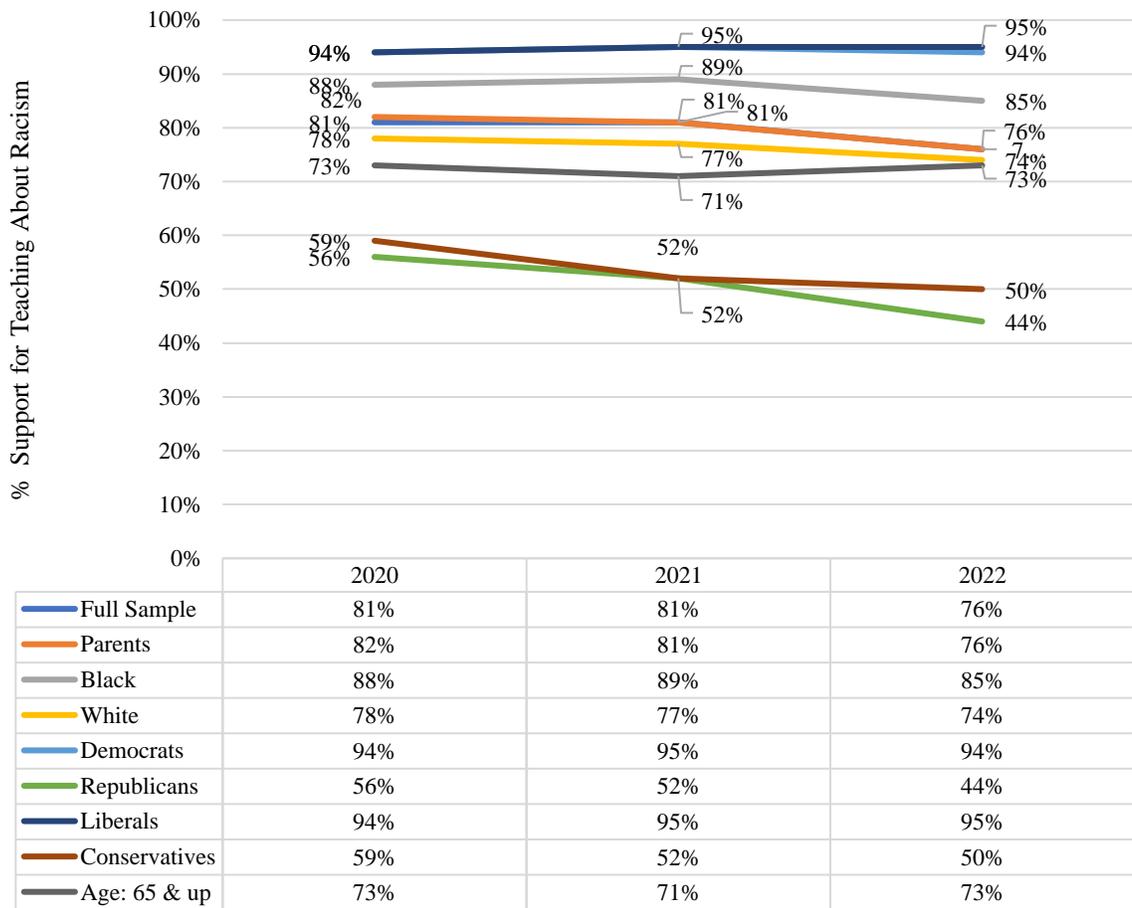


Note: Results are means derived from three separate surveys of national samples of Americans.

In juxtaposition, the literal term “Critical Race Theory” seems to be what considerably drags down support for antiracist curriculum. When I look at the differences across demographic groups between the CRT treatment group and the control group, the power of the simple phrase “critical race theory” is extremely clear. As Figure 5 shows, literally every single demographic becomes noticeably less likely to support antiracist curriculum, when presented with the term “critical race theory.” Support amongst parents is 22% points lower. Democrats and liberals are 15% points less likely to support antiracist curriculum at the mention of CRT. Even Black Americans show a sizeable decline (9% less likely). Meanwhile, support amongst Republicans and conservatives decline by an enormous 30% points. These are moderate-to-seismic downward

shifts. They underscore the title of this essay, which is that, when it comes to support for antiracist curriculum, Americans support the concept; they just have been primed to hate the term “critical race theory.”

Figure 4. Public Support for Antiracist Teaching, 2020 - 2022



Note: Results are means derived from three separate surveys of national samples of Americans.

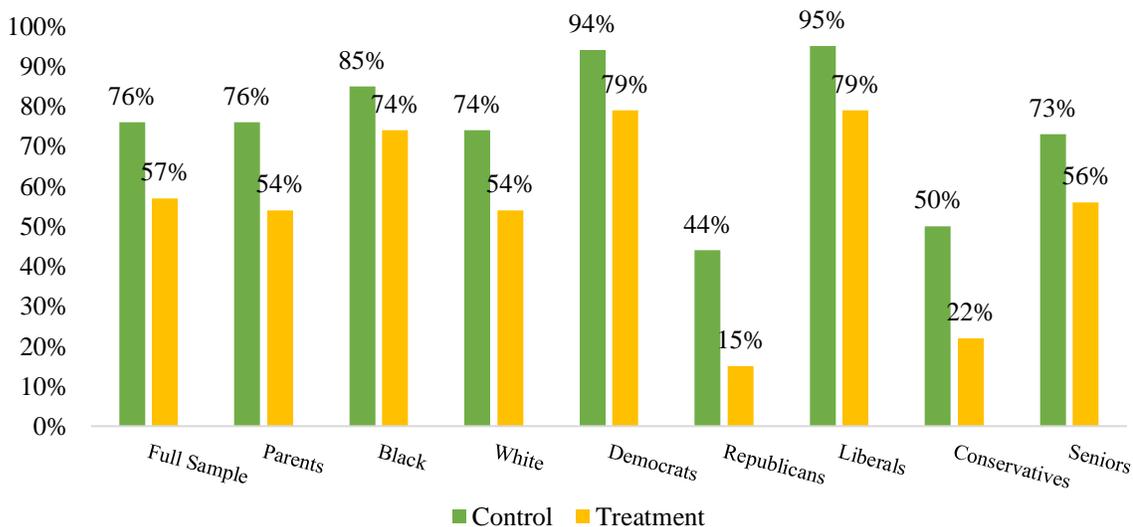
Table 2. Modeling Support for Antiracist History Teaching, 2020-2022

	2020	2021	2022
Intercept	0.469***	0.874***	0.839***
	0.029	0.031	0.067
Consent Treatment	-0.011	-0.042***	-0.185***
	0.012	0.013	0.023
Oppose 2020 Race Protests	-0.281***	-0.271***	-0.345***

	0.018	0.025	0.045
Support Jan. 6 th Insurrection		-0.143***	-0.212***
		0.026	0.056
Unfair Election			-0.134*
			0.053
School Satisfaction	0.107***	0.046	0.028
	0.025	0.027	0.053
Parent	0.004	0.006	0.064
	0.014	0.015	0.034
School Board Voter			0.029
			0.024
White	-0.014	-0.015	-0.028
	0.014	0.014	0.028
Female	0.058***	0.044***	0.038
	0.013	0.013	0.023
Democrat	0.064**	0.005	0.152**
	0.020	0.021	0.047
Independent	0.027	-0.032	0.072
	0.018	0.019	0.039
Liberal	0.099***	0.085***	0.095**
	0.016	0.019	0.037
High Income	0.017	0.012	0.014
	0.018	0.018	0.031
Middle Income	-0.016	-0.004	0.004
	0.014	0.015	0.026
Age	-0.070*	-0.080***	-0.164***
	0.029	0.024	0.040
n	1273	983	1509

Note: Results are produced using ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regression.

Figure 5. Effect of CRT Treatment Across Demographic Groups



Discussion

The assault on critical race theory is real. People are not attacking CRT because of any social or educational hazard that has occurred due its intellectual construction. Instead, the disparagement is one giant misinformation campaign. The push to politicize CRT is a strategy to align antiracist curricula with the racial resentment that sits at the core of opposition to the George Floyd Protests of 2020 and the larger project for advancing racial equality in the United States (Reny and Newman 2021). I have an entire multi-year series of survey evidence that makes this very clear: “critical race theory” has become a sacrificial lamb for a larger anti-black political movement.

Acknowledging the dangers of the CRT misinformation crusade is important for a few very specific reasons. First, this political project aiming to ostracize CRT casts a cloud over the fact that Americans, across virtually every dimension of difference, have been expressing support for antiracist curriculum in our schools. There are differences in the degree to which different groups express that support, but the overall high volume suggests that there is an

appetite for enabling our classrooms to be places where students are taught an accurate account of our nation's history, when it comes to slavery and race. American schools became the landscape for desegregated public facilities; the *Brown v. Board* decision opened the floodgates for interracial spaces in the Jim Crow South. Schools now have the potential to be the sites that push us to the next step of training future generations to grapple with our past and move towards a society that heals its racial wounds.

The second reason speaks more to the here-and-now. The data shows support for antiracist curriculum and highlights the great conflation between antiracist curriculum and critical race theory. The results are robust and consistent. The data provide the truth. However, truth and reality do not always travel in the same vehicle. My findings exist alongside a reality in which angry White parents and community members are attending school board meetings and castigating board members with largely false accusations of districts teaching kids CRT.¹² Board members and superintendents are receiving threats. School board recall elections are at an all-time high.¹³ Because of the spread of misinformation, it is now an incredibly dangerous time to sit on a school board or work as a superintendent.

The CRT conversation, therefore, raises more fundamental questions about the stability of our local democracies. The townhall was designed as a space for civil dialogue amongst free and equal citizens (Mansbridge 1980). The modern version - the public meeting - is, though seeped in bureaucracy and parliamentarianism, a tangible way for the public to have access to local policymakers, who are legally obligated to govern with openness and transparency (Collins

¹² See "Turmoil erupts in school district after claims that critical race theory and transgender policy are being pushed." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/24/us/loudoun-county-school-board-meeting/index.html>. df

¹³ See "School Board Recalls at All-Time High as GOP Puts K-12 Issues in Spotlight." *US News*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-11-01/school-board-recalls-at-all-time-high-as-gop-puts-k-12-issues-in-spotlight>.

2021). The practical has struggled to manifest into the ideal. School board meetings have been stages for countless episodes of societal backsliding: preserving school segregation, maintaining poor schooling conditions, and inefficient spending. There have been reasons to question the values of school boards.

However, the modern school board is largely an evolution of the past. Today's school boards are largely comprised of community members doing the thankless work of approving district contracts, tracking expenditures, and holding superintendents accountable for implementing the right strategies to improve their local schools (Hochschild 2005). The modal school board is having conversations about the social-emotional health of kids, how to best serve our most vulnerable students, and how our school systems - more broadly - can build a fairer and more equitable society.

They can still improve. School boards can still increase their commitment to meaningful public engagement. They can elevate public comment to something more generative and discursive (Collins 2021). They can use their meetings as spaces for transformative dialogue. However, one of the biggest obstacles to facilitating meaningful engagement is having members of the public come to meetings without intentions to discuss the very real and pressing issues that are happening in schools. The critical race theory debate has been one of those major distractions.

So, in sum, the politicization of critical race theory creates multiple threats. It endangers our ability to expose future generations to the kind of social studies curricula that could ultimately foster racial healing and progress. Meanwhile, the politicization also obscures the simple fact that most Americans do want this type of curriculum in place. Second, it opens the door for conspiracy-based coarse public dialogue that hampers the ability of our local leaders to

hear and address the most pressing problems. Ironically, the threats to critical race theory are manifesting into threats to our democracy. Unfortunately, at the root of it all, we simply find animosity towards a political movement rooted in the spread of misinformation. And, that vitriol has manifested into hatred of one simple thing – the literal term “critical race theory.”

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