

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

## Republicans Are Once Again Heating Up the Culture Wars

By Thomas B. Edsall

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Christopher Rufo, a Manhattan Institute senior fellow and a self-identified brawler, takes full credit for turning critical race theory into a political wedge issue.

In a March 15 Twitter thread, Rufo declared:

*We have successfully frozen their brand — “critical race theory”— into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory.” We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.*

Rufo has been described as “a right-wing Leninist” by the conservative British website Unherd, which took note of Rufo’s assertion that:

*The Reagan-era playbook is not enough; reform around the edges is not enough; a corporate tax cut is not enough. We must take the conditions of cultural revolution as our baseline, as the current reality, and our response must be framed in terms of a counterrevolution that plays not primarily on the axis of economy, but on the axis of culture.*

Fox News did its part.

In the 11 months from January 2020 to February 2021, Fox referred to critical race theory — which has come to be known as C.R.T. — 164 times, according to the liberal advocacy group Media Matters. In the subsequent three and a half months, from May through mid-August, as the contest between Glenn Youngkin and Terry McAuliffe for governor in Virginia intensified, the number of on-air references shot up to more than 1,900.

As many have noted, there is little or no evidence that Virginia public schools actually teach critical race theory — although James F. Lane, the state superintendent of public instruction, included “White Fragility” by Robin DiAngelo and “Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education” in his February 2019 recommended reading list.

But the fact that critical race theory is not formally part of the curriculum is somewhat beside the point. There is clear evidence that this issue touched a nerve across a wide swath of the electorate, evidence that suggests that C.R.T. can simultaneously be a

Republican dog whistle and a significant political liability for the Democratic Party. Fox News raised the salience of C.R.T., but it resonated beyond the network's viewers.

Take the conclusions drawn by Crooked Media, a “progressive media network” founded by Jon Favreau, Jon Lovett and Tommy Vietor, former top aides to President Barack Obama, and Change Research, a pro-Democratic polling firm. Together, they conducted a poll of 1,653 likely Virginia voters from Aug. 17 to 21 that produced worrisome results for Democrats, a warning of what was to come.

Under the headline “Republican Messages,” the two groups reported that “Hot button issues like critical race theory and the rise of socialism are commonly spouted on right-wing media outlets, but this new poll shows that these issues are breaking through to the broader electorate and keeping the race close.”

It's tempting, the authors continued,

*to dismiss some of these bogus issues and conspiracy theories as the result of brains pickled by Fox News and Facebook, but our poll shows that is not the case. Change Research compared Republicans that consume right-wing media like Fox News with Republicans that say they only consume traditional media. Ninety-nine percent of right-wing-media consuming Republicans view critical race theory as a big or medium-sized threat but 86 percent of the traditional media consumers do as well. Additionally, more than half of undecided voters and a third of Biden voters who are not planning to support McAuliffe say it's at least a medium-sized threat.*

A survey conducted on behalf of two conservative groups earlier in the campaign reached strikingly similar conclusions. Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican polling firm, surveyed 400 voters in early June in two Northern Virginia counties — Fairfax and Loudoun — that have proved crucial to Democratic victories in the past. The survey was done for N2 America, a group “committed to promoting and supporting center-right policies and ideas,” and Fight For Schools, which describes its mission as “We Fight Against Implementing Critical Race Theory Concepts In Our Schools.”

This is from the Public Opinion Strategies report on the survey:

*Fully 50 percent of voters in these two suburban counties oppose “Critical Race Theory” being taught in local public schools, compared with just 42 percent who are in support. Republicans (9 percent-86 percent) and Independent voters (30 percent-57 percent) drive opposition, but even one-quarter of Democrats are against “Critical Race Theory” being taught (69 percent-23 percent). Further, public-school parents oppose “Critical Race Theory” being taught in local public schools by 20 points (38 percent-58 percent).*

The survey also reported strong opposition to proposals to eliminate school programs that reveal or display achievement gaps:

“By an overwhelming margin (72-17), voters in these two key suburban counties oppose eliminating advanced math courses in Virginia public schools until the 11th grade” and “fully 62 percent of Fairfax and Loudoun County voters oppose eliminating

the use of advanced diplomas for all public-school students, even high performing students.”

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund is sharply critical of conservative attacks on C.R.T.:

*The term “critical race theory” has been co-opted by opponents as a catchall and rallying cry to silence any discussions about systemic racism, ban the truthful teaching of American history, and reverse progress toward racial justice. The term has been unjustifiably used to include all diversity and inclusion efforts, race-conscious policies, and education about racism, whether they draw from C.R.T. Attempts to ban C.R.T. are really attacks on free speech, on discussions about the truthful history of race and racism in the U.S., and the lived experiences of Black people and other people of color.*

Youngkin found a way of raising the racially loaded issue, telling audiences:

*We will teach all history, the good and the bad. America is the greatest country on the planet. We know it. We have an amazing history, but we also have some dark and abhorrent chapters. We must teach them all. We can't know where we're going unless we know where we come from. But let me be clear, what we don't do is to teach our children to view everything through a lens of race, where we divide them into buckets, one group is an oppressor and another group is a victim, and we pit them against each other and we steal their dreams. We will not be a commonwealth of dream stealers. We will be a commonwealth of dream enablers.*

Youngkin wound this peroration up with an applause line: “So let me be clear, on Day 1, we will not have political agendas in the classroom and I will ban critical race theory.”

These themes structured the Youngkin campaign. In a revealing postelection interview with Politico’s Ryan Lizza, two top Youngkin strategists, Jeff Roe and Kristin Davison, outlined their campaign plan, which included, but was certainly not limited to, highlighting critical race theory:

“One of our first advertising pieces in the general election — and one of the first things we hammered on — was that the Thomas Jefferson School in Northern Virginia had lowered their academic standards. It was then literally the first stop,” Roe said, moving on to describe the goal of uniting under the Republican banner seemingly disparate constituencies:

*If you're an Asian-American family going to Thomas Jefferson School and they lower the standards to let more kids who aren't in accelerated math into the best school in the country, that's pretty important to you. Advanced math is a big dang thing. But it also is to the Republicans: Why would you not help and want your children to succeed and achieve? So we were having a hard time; those people don't fit in the same rooms together. You know, having school-choice people in the same room with a C.R.T. person with an advanced math [person] along with people who want school resource officers in every school — that's a pretty eclectic group of people.*

Achieving this goal received an unexpected lift from Terry McAuliffe's now notorious gaffe during a Sept. 28 debate:

As Davison recounted the story to Lizza:

*Within three hours of the debate where Terry said "I don't think parents should be involved in what the school should be teaching," we had a video out hitting this because it tapped into just parents not knowing. And that was the fight. It wasn't just C.R.T. That's an easier issue to talk about on TV. That's not what we focused on here; it was more "parents matter." Launching that message took the education discussion to a different level.*

Yascha Mounk, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins, captured the problem with a common progressive analysis of the Virginia election in "You Can't Win Elections by Telling Voters Their Concerns Are Imaginary," a Nov. 3 Atlantic essay — the idea that "Youngkin, an extremist posing in the garb of a suburban dad, was able to incite 'white backlash' by exploiting 'fake' and 'imaginary' fears about the teaching of 'critical race theory' in public schools."

The truth, Mounk continued, "is rather different. Youngkin capitalized on a widespread public perception that Democrats are out of tune with the country on cultural issues."

The idea that critical race theory is an academic concept that is taught only at colleges or law schools, Mounk continued, "might be technically accurate, but the reality on the ground is a good deal more complicated." He noted that "across the nation, many teachers have, over the past years, begun to adopt a pedagogical program that owes its inspiration to ideas that are very fashionable on the academic left, and that go well beyond telling students about America's copious historical sins."

In some elementary and middle schools, Mounk wrote,

*Students are now being asked to place themselves on a scale of privilege based on such attributes as their skin color. History lessons in some high schools teach that racism is not just a persistent reality but the defining feature of America. And some school systems have even embraced ideas that spread pernicious prejudices about nonwhite people, as when a presentation to principals of New York City public schools denounced virtues such as "perfectionism" or the "worship of the written word" as elements of "white-supremacy culture."*

While just under half of respondents (49 percent) described themselves as very or extremely familiar with critical race theory in a June Fox News poll, the theory, and arguments based on it, have become commonplace throughout much of American culture.

On Sept. 9, 2020, for example, Larry Merlo, then the chief executive of CVS, held a "Company Town Hall," at which he invited Ibram X. Kendi to lead "a discussion on what it means to be antiracist." Merlo asked Kendi to explain "what it means to be a racist."

Kendi replied:

*I first have to define a racist idea, which I define as any concept that suggests a racial group is superior or inferior to another racial group in any way, and also to say that this is what's wrong with a racial group, or what's right, or what's better, or worse, or connotations of superiority and inferiority. And a racist policy is any measure that is leading to inequity between racial groups.*

The Racial Equity Institute offers programs lasting from 18 months to two years to battle racism, “a fierce, ever-present, challenging force, one which has structured the thinking, behavior and actions of individuals and institutions since the beginning of U.S. history.”

The institute, which cites the work of scholars like Kendi, Tema Okun and Richard Delgado, lists more than 270 clients including corporations, colleges and schools, foundations, hospitals and health care facilities, liberal advocacy groups and social service providers.

There is no concise agreed-upon definition of critical race theory. Kendi, a professor of history and the founder of Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research, is a leading proponent. He described key elements in a July 21 interview with Brian Lehrer on WNYC:

*What critical race theorists were the first to recognize is that framing certain laws, First Amendment, even newly instituted laws, as race-neutral because they did not have any racial language in them, that indeed, these laws had a racial impact, had an impact that ultimately led to the reinforcement of racist structures in this country.*

More controversially, Kendi argues that many people delude themselves when they say they are not racist. “I think most people across the world are taught to believe — and believe themselves — to be not racist,” Kendi told The Guardian in an August 2019 interview. “I don’t think people realize that when they self-identify as ‘not racist,’ they’re essentially identifying in the same way as white supremacists.” The term “‘not racist’ not only has no meaning,” he continued, “but it also connotes that there is this sort of in-between safe space sideline that a person can be on, when there is no neutrality. We’re either all being racist or anti-racist.”

DiAngelo, writing in “White Fragility,” agrees with Kendi:

*I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the “choir,” or already “gets it.” White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived.*

In “The economic state of Black America: What is and what could be,” the management consulting firm McKinsey reports that African Americans face “gaps in representation, wages, education, business ownership and more.” It’s not hard to see why many who are affected by or sympathetic to the people who are affected by the social and economic disadvantages plaguing African Americans find systemic racism

a plausible culprit. Nonetheless, the immediate political question is this: How should Democrats deal with the “weaponization” of critical race theory?

I asked Anat Shenker-Osorio, a California-based communications consultant who specializes in the development of progressive messaging, especially in techniques to counter conservative and Republican campaign themes. Her reply by email:

*What Democrats need to do is recognize that this is simply Republicans recording a new cover of the same song. They cast a new scapegoat and remix, hoping to divide us along lines of race, background or gender identity, and distract us from their corruption.*

There are, she continued, “proven ways to best right-wing divide-in-order-to-conquer strategies”:

*Democrats begin by saying, for example, “No matter our color, background, or ZIP code, we want our kids to learn to reckon with the mistakes of our past, understand our present, and create a better future for us all.” Embracing the critical — and highly contested — value of freedom, by championing kids’ freedom to learn who they are, where they come from, and all they can become, is also paramount.*

Randall Kennedy, a law professor at Harvard, had a harder edge in his emailed reply to my inquiry: “Democratic candidates should deal seriously and forthrightly with the cultural issues that clearly concern many voters.”

Learning, he continued,

*entails dialogue and pluralism and self-disciplined willingness to listen even to those with whom one may disagree strongly, which is why the far-flung efforts to erase or muzzle the 1619 Project, or critical race theory or other manifestations of anti-racist pedagogy must be rejected. Democrats should put themselves firmly on the side of open discussion, not compelled silence.*

Ultimately, Kennedy argued, Democrats need to articulate a complex set of principles:

*They should vocally eschew bad ideas such as the notion that there has been no substantial betterment in race relations over the past fifty years, or that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln are unworthy of commemoration, or that Black people are incapable of being racist, or that speech that is allegedly racist ought to be banned. At the same time, they should vocally embrace what is difficult for any sensible person to deny: that racial injustice has been and remains a destructive force that must be overcome if we are to enjoy more fully the promising potential of our multiracial democracy.*

I agree.