



Bans on “Critical Race Theory” Will Fuel Our Social Divisions

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As a nation, we are divided. This is clear in lots of domains including, notably, issues around race and racism. And this is hurting our democracy.

Among elites, ideological divisions have stalled legislative efforts and undermined constructive debate. Among everyday people, these divisions have led to mutual distrust and dislike, and even political violence. The path forward, then, is through a shared understanding and commitment to civic values. Bans on “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) are not part of the solution. They will only fuel the social divisions that we are currently experiencing.

Bans on CRT are advanced under the guise that education about race and racism is “divisive.” Those who support these bans claim that critical historical accounts of race and racism—like teaching the history of slavery and its legacy—are harmful. But research has shown this is not true. It has shown that teaching critical historical accounts of race and racism can narrow divisions.

Research suggests that critical historical knowledge about race and racism can bring White and Black people in the U.S. closer together in their understanding and perceptions of systemic racism. For example, in [seminal research](#),

Key Takeaways

- Racial and ideological divisions threaten our democracy, by stalling legislative efforts and undermining constructive debate, and by sowing distrust and dislike.
- Research has shown that historical knowledge and, specifically, critical historical knowledge about race and racism can narrow those divisions.
- Bans on “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) prohibit the teaching of critical historical accounts of race and racism. These bans will fuel our divisions.

White students at a historically and predominantly White institution and Black students at a historically and predominantly Black institution completed a survey about their critical historical knowledge and perceptions of racism. Results revealed that White students thought racism was much less pervasive, compared with Black students. They also knew less critical history, compared with Black students. Moreover, differences in historical knowledge accounted for differences in perceptions of racism today. In other words, the data suggest that White students, on average, thought racism was less pervasive because they knew less critical history. Black students, on average,

thought racism was more pervasive because they knew more critical history. Importantly, White students high in historical knowledge thought racism was just as pervasive as Black students high in historical knowledge. These findings have been replicated in [other studies](#) with college students at racially diverse institutions.

[In follow-up research](#), White individuals were randomly assigned to listen to an excerpt of Fresh Air. In the experimental condition, participants listened to an excerpt of an interview with historian Richard Rothstein about historical discrimination in housing policy and American “ghettos.” In the control condition, participants listened to an excerpt with journalist Barry Estabrook about animal intelligence. Then, participants answered questions about perceptions of racism. Results revealed that the experimental condition—getting some education about the historical discrimination in housing policy—increased White participants’ perceptions of racism as pervasive, bringing them closer to Black people’s perceptions of racism. [A study](#) with elementary school students found similar effects. Critical historical information, in other words, can start to bridge the racial divide on issues of race and racism.

Similarly, research suggests that providing historical knowledge about race and racism can bring liberals and conservatives closer together in their understanding and perceptions of systemic racism. [In this work](#), White individuals answered questions to gauge their knowledge of critical history. They also answered questions about their perceptions of racism today. Results revealed that White conservatives thought racism was much less pervasive, compared with White liberals. Moreover, they knew less critical history. And again, historical knowledge accounted for these differences in perceptions of racism. That is to say, the data suggest that White conservatives thought racism was much less pervasive because they knew less critical history. White liberals thought racism was more pervasive because they knew more critical history. Importantly, conservatives high in critical history knowledge thought racism was pervasive, just like liberals high in critical history knowledge.

In our research, we extend these findings. We randomly assigned White participants—conservatives and liberals—to receive information about historical discrimination or not, using the same Fresh Air episodes as the study above. We then asked participants about their perceptions of racism and support for efforts to redress racism. Results revealed that both conservatives and liberals saw racism as more pervasive and were more supportive of efforts to redress

racism after learning about historical discrimination. What this means is that conservatives with critical historical information were more in agreement with their liberal peers; conservatives without critical historical information were less in agreement with their liberal peers. Critical historical information, then, can start to bridge the ideological divide, especially around issues of race and racism.

If we want to come together and solve some of our most intractable problems—problems around race and racism—then we must ensure people have shared historical knowledge about race and racism. Bans on CRT and “divisive” content prevent this kind of shared knowledge. Accordingly, they are likely to widen ideological divides and thwart our ability to solve the problems that face us.

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