

# POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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## What is Critical Race Theory?

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### What You Should Know

From coast to coast, debates over critical race theory (CRT) are roiling our nation's schools, workplaces, and headlines. But there is much confusion about what constitutes CRT and whether it's a niche academic theory or a commonplace world view.

The principal tenets of CRT can be summarized as follows:

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- **America is Systemically Racist:** The American system, and the Western Enlightenment tradition from which it sprung, are built on pervasive racism, and that systemic racism cannot be eradicated without a fundamental transformation of the system itself. Racism is not an aberration, but the ordinary state of affairs in the United States, from its Founding to the present day.
- **Progress is a Myth:** No real progress has been made in race relations in the last two centuries. Instead, systemic racism has simply gone "underground," covertly perpetuating a racial hierarchy that deprives black Americans of power and resources.
- **Collective Equity Over Individual Equality:** The primary unit by which the fairness of a society should be measured is the racial group, not the individual. Every group disparity is presumed to be the result of racial bias and discrimination. Equal treatment of individuals perpetuates racial inequality.
- **Equity** (or equal *results*) between racial *groups* should be the goal.
- **Race Essentialism:** Racial identity is central to existence and how a person experiences the world. A "colorblind society is a cover for the maintenance of white privilege.

## Why You Should Care

Critical race theory, along with similar narratives about the exaggerated evils of the American system, have been gaining purchase in the nation's schools, universities, government agencies, popular culture, and corporations for decades. After the George Floyd-related riots of summer 2020, these pernicious theories gained even greater traction. While the radical worldview of CRT has relatively few adherents among Americans of all races, it has found a welcome home in America's institutions.

- **Education:** Born in the legal academy, CRT has metastasized into virtually every aspect of the K12 and higher education systems. CRT is being taught in public districts all across the nation, in expensive private prep schools, and to teachers through schools of education and teacher trainings.
- **Government:** While the previous administration forbade government agencies and contractors from applying CRT in trainings or policy, the current administration has not only restored those trainings but actively encouraged CRT through federal grants and express policy.
- **Private Corporations:** CRT's influence is not limited to public institutions. Companies like Nike and Disney hire CRT consultants—often for thousands of dollars an hour—to train their employees and managers. Twitter donated \$10 million to the academic center headed by Ibram X. Kendi, a leading proponent of CRT, while the Black Lives Matter group, which embraces the tenets of CRT, received many millions more in corporate donations.
- **Culture:** CRT has also influenced everything from media coverage to Hollywood film casting.

Because powerful gatekeeping institutions shape both how people think now and will in the future, if we are deterred from fighting back against CRT now, its influence and power will only grow in the years to come.

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## Background

### What Is Critical Race Theory?

Critical race theory has its roots in critical theory, a framework developed by a group of offshoot Marxist academics who became known as the Frankfurt School. But CRT jettisons, and in fact downplays, traditional Marxist concerns about class division, which they see as a distraction from the underlying struggle between groups based on race, rather than wealth. (Indeed, some of the most potent criticism of CRT has come from mainline Marxists, who see race as a distraction from the class struggle.)

As Manhattan Institute scholar Christopher Rufo has summed up, CRT “reimagines class warfare as race warfare.”

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America has created the framework for the historically unheard-of levels of liberty and prosperity for citizens of all backgrounds. And, yet, CRT views all American institutions as mere “camouflage” for white supremacy. The ideas enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the balance of power crafted in the Constitution (including the Electoral College, the three branches of federal government, and federalism), and economic capitalism have all been critiqued by CRT scholars as, in reality, vehicles for the perpetuation of white privilege and power. It follows that if a person or an institution is against “white supremacy,” that institution or individual must work towards the destruction of those systems.

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Observing CRT in action in the country’s media rooms, corporate offices, and classrooms makes clear what its proponents mean by their ubiquitous phrase, “do the work.”

- In response to a published **letter** from liberal and leftist luminaries (including Noam Chomsky and J.K. Rowling), expressing concerns about cancel culture and support for free speech, many young, CRT-indoctrinated journalists signed an open counter **letter** stating: “The letter reads as a caustic reaction to a diversifying industry—one that’s starting to challenge institutional norms that have protected bigotry.” In line with CRT’s principles, the signatories argue that free speech is a mere “guise” for maintaining identity-based power.
- The nation’s largest defense contractor, Lockheed Martin, **sent** its white male executives to a diversity training program with CRT consultants. The program’s stated goal was to “deconstruct” their “white male culture” and “white male privilege.” Similarly, a CRT-informed **graphic** released on “whiteness” by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture describes non-racial character traits such as punctuality and hard work as elements of “whiteness.”
- In Raleigh, North Carolina, teachers similarly learned how to grapple with “whiteness,” the alleged skill of “racial mapping,” and how to form “equity teams” in their schools at a Wake County teacher conference.

If these real-life examples from just the last year or two seem radical, here is how leading proponent Ibram X. Kendi suggests we transform the American system, in his own **words**:

*“To fix the original sin of racism, Americans should pass an anti-racist amendment to the U.S. Constitution that enshrines two guiding anti-racist principals [sic]: Racial inequity is evidence of racist policy and the different racial groups are equals. The amendment would make unconstitutional racial inequity over a certain threshold, as well as racist ideas by public officials (with ‘racist ideas’ and ‘public official’ clearly defined). It would establish and permanently fund the Department of Anti-racism (DOA) comprised of formally trained experts on racism and no political appointees. The DOA would be responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate*

*private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.”*

An unelected body of bureaucrats with the power to veto municipal, state, and federal laws, as well as to determine who can and cannot run for office and “discipline” people for wrongthink, is obviously tyrannical, and importantly, incompatible with the American system and Constitution. *But that’s the point.*

The nuclear **family, capitalism, property rights**, due process, federalism, **democracy**, and even **“hope for progress,”** have all been targeted by proponents of CRT as cover for racial hierarchy and white supremacy.

Even traits once universally considered important universal prerequisites for success, like punctuality, hard work, being able to communicate well in writing, and the ability to objectively analyze different parts of a problem have been associated with white supremacy by those who adhere to the CRT ideology.

In short, critical race theory is at its heart an argument for revolution and regime change.

## Definitional Semantics Miss the Point

Little wonder then, that CRT is not particularly popular with the American people. Of the solid majority of Americans who have heard of the theory, 58 percent view it unfavorably. And voters’ disapproval is not limited to Republicans; 72 percent of independents view CRT as a negative thing for the country. As it becomes clear that Americans want little to do with CRT, proponents are trying to narrow the application of the phrase “critical race theory” to the academic discipline first taught in law schools.

Even Ibram Kendi is now distancing himself from CRT, agreeing with Joy Reid on MSNBC recently that “you’d have to go to law school” to be an advocate for critical race theory. While it’s true that CRT began in the legal academy, it is simply sophistry to pretend that its fundamental assumptions and conclusions remain only in law schools.

Irrespective of what you call it (CRT, “anti-racism”, wokeness, identity politics, “diversity, equity, and inclusion” etc.), the underlying premises of CRT—that America is systemically racist and that American institutions perpetuate “white privilege”—has become ubiquitous in our public discourse. The Department of Education itself acknowledges the cross-pollination between these various academic theories when it **cites** Dr. Kendi’s work and the *New York Times’* historically debunked 1619 Project in a proposed rule doling out grants to school districts for introducing critical race theory.

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Ordinary Americans do not object to the teaching of civil rights history; this is a canard advanced by CRT proponents who wish to paint their opponents as thoughtless flag-wavers who do not want students to learn about slavery, Jim Crow, or any other negative aspect of American history. But people do object to lessons and trainings that reject the promise of the Declaration of Independence and the American system of governance. And they oppose the notion that collective racial identity trumps individual agency. Recently, as they've woken up to how ubiquitous these underlying narratives are in many aspects of life across public and private sectors, Americans have begun to voice their displeasure with them.

As a result, academics, policymakers, and politicians who previously embraced CRT are now distancing themselves from the CRT label while continuing to advocate the same poisonous practices in classrooms, boardrooms, and government agencies.

Semantic games are an attempt to fool the American people into complacency about the ideological advance of these ideas in our institutions.

## How Can We Stop Critical Race Theory?

Under the cloak of buzzwords like “anti-racism”, equity, and inclusion, critical race theory has seeped into America’s most powerful institutions. As a result, efforts to beat it back will also need to be—in the favorite word of CRT scholars—systemic. Different institutions captured by the ideology will require different strategies to purge the influence of CRT.

### Education

Public schools are not soapboxes for the whims of teachers. Courts have repeatedly recognized that instructors are a form of “hired speech,” subject to state law and local school board direction. Parents across the nation are testifying in front of school boards, running for office, and urging state legislatures to pass laws forbidding the implementation of CRT.

In some cases, public schools implementing CRT practices may run afoul of civil rights law. For example, the use of “affinity groups,” where students or teachers are divided on the basis of race, and each group given differential instruction may violate both Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. No matter a student’s racial background, he or she is guaranteed equal treatment by our nation’s public schools. In practice, the tenets of CRT often violate this promise.

**School choice programs, which reroute education funding to families rather than automatically sending the money to school districts, empower parents with the necessary financial leverage to get districts’ attention.**

One necessary paradigm-shifting solution is the adoption of broad school choice programs. On curriculum matters such as CRT, school districts have proven impressively impervious to the wishes of parents. School choice programs, which reroute education funding to families rather than automatically sending the money to school districts, empower parents with the necessary financial leverage to get districts’ attention.

## Government

Members of Congress have **urged** the Federal Communications Commission to review the agency's policies through the lens of how they may have "disparately harmed Black Americans and other communities of color." The state of Vermont initially rolled out coronavirus vaccines based on racial preferences. And of course, all K12 public schools and public universities are staffed by government employees acting on behalf of the United States.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not curtail anyone's First Amendment right to express support for the ideas underlying CRT, but it does bar government actors from treating citizens differently on the basis of race. Expect these questions to be litigated in federal courts in the coming months and years.

Federal legislation has also been introduced to try to remove taxpayer dollars from the promotion of CRT. For example, Senator Ted Cruz (R, TX) and Representative Burgess Owens (R, UT) have attempted to ban the use of federal funds for any kind of employee training that uses "race or sex scapegoating or stereotyping," effectively reinstating the previous administration's executive ban on the practice.

## Corporations

The free market system of the United States, ironically abhorred by CRT proponents, protects some corporate speech and association rights, including to the right to force employees to participate in CRT-drenched "diversity" trainings. However, when corporations work hand-in-glove with government actors to accomplish policy goals that government is barred by the Constitution from doing, there may be legal consequences. Additionally, some of the "wokest" corporations may be subject to other kinds of regulation, such as anti-trust prosecution, or other affirmative lawmaking curtailing their power to **interfere** with what are properly political issues left to the sphere of politics and democracy.

## Media and Culture

Media is one of the more promising spaces for pushback to CRT and other woke ideologies. While the old names within the media space have fallen completely to CRT-style ideology, independent voices not beholden to those gatekeepers have experienced enormous success in recent years in podcasting, Substack, or other new formats.

And while Hollywood finds itself more and more in the grips of CRT, endlessly bean-counting the racial identity of every actor in every film—and still finding itself on the receiving end of **criticism**—some sectors of the entertainment industry, such as stand-up comedy, show signs of declaring "enough is enough."

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## Why Critical Race Theory is A Problem for America

Critical race theory, and its underlying principles, are incompatible with the American system, a fact about which honest proponents are open. One of CRT's framing architects, Richard Delgado, for example, plainly recognized this unresolvable tension, writing, "critical race theory

questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.” In undermining the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the principles of 1776, CRT is a direct threat to the nation that remains the freest most prosperous nation on earth, drawing millions of immigrants, of all racial backgrounds, from around the globe.

The racial essentialism inherent in the CRT worldview not only reduces whites to oppressors and people of color to the oppressed, it cuts off Americans of all races from their country’s history—an admittedly imperfect heritage, but one that is, nevertheless worthy of pride of in the context of world history.

Escaped slave and American statesman Frederick Douglass wrote in his peerless speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July*, in 1852:

*“But I differ from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. It is a slander upon their memory, at least, so I believe... In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing [slavery]; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT.”*

With far more legitimacy than today’s grievance peddlers, Douglass wrestled throughout his early life with the question of what patriotism he owed a country that enslaved him. But his final conclusion was miles away from the false and unproductive division of CRT. He recognized that while the United States, like all civilizations, had made grievous mistakes, that its founding was a “promissory note” for future generations and, in fact, a rebuke to slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of unjust racial inequality, including that perpetuated by CRT.

My parents are immigrants to the United States. I share no ancestral blood with Frederick Douglass or, for that matter, George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. But I consider them in a very real way to be my countrymen and forefathers. CRT, which encourages people of minority racial backgrounds to disdain the blessings of American citizenship, cuts them off from a glorious heritage that could bring all Americans together in gratitude for both the Founding and the progress we’ve since made towards a “more perfect union.”

Identity politics and racial essentialism are dangerously tribal forces to stoke in any polity, but they’re especially damaging in the United States. Unlike most other countries, the United States has no tribal nation at its core; rather, this has been a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse country from its roots onward. Diversity can be a strength, but only if we find common ground in our nation’s founding principles. Only then can we ensure that American citizens of different backgrounds and faiths and from all corners of the earth have an understanding of themselves as American that knits us together despite our many differences.

*E pluribus unum*—“out of many, one”—isn’t just a motto of the United States that appears on our Great Seal, but presents its greatest challenge, one which its institutions and culture must constantly strive to meet.

# What You Can Do

## Get Informed

- **Read: Critical Race Theory Would Not Solve Racial Inequality: It Would Deepen It** by Christopher Rufo
- **Watch High Noon with Inez Stepman: On the Formation of Political “Identities” and the Right Way to Fight Critical Race Theory** with Mike Gonzalez
- **Read: Critical Race Theory in U.S. Schools** by Glenn Loury and John McWhorter

## Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what’s going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

## Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

## Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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### ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN’S FORUM

Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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