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**KOCH FUNDED MORAL PANIC:  
ULTRA RIGHT THINK TANKS  
AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

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# Executive Summary

A new, artificially created moral panic is gripping the nation. As recently as one year ago, most Americans were entirely unaware of the existence of Critical Race Theory (CRT). **But now, thanks to right wing operatives hijacking an obscure academic concept to attack any approach to education or policy that acknowledges the existence of historic and structural racism in this country, it is almost inescapably present.** According to a Media Matters analysis, mentions of CRT on Fox News have doubled month after month to a dizzying **600 times in May 2021.** An UnKoch My Campus review of published materials from Koch network think tanks reveals that the anti-Critical Race Theory movement is a product of a coordinated dark money campaign.

The Koch network coffers have funded varying lines of attack on progressive positions, including the first authors to pen anti-CRT propaganda in the summer of 2020. Affiliated national think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, FreedomWorks, and the Manhattan Institute, among others, have used their influence to generate and spread talking points, briefed state and federal legislators on model policy, and attempted to generate grassroots mobilization against local school districts. In addition, the State Policy Network has worked to spread similar messaging at the state level.

**This influence is not without consequence: State politicians were almost entirely silent on the topic until Koch-funded entities started pushing the issue earlier this year.** Now, more than 25 states have introduced legislation or taken other action that, backers claim, is aimed at banning “critical race theory” (CRT) from schools and government programs. Several of these states have already passed these bills.

The story of how this obscure term came to dominate public discourse underscores the strong influence of billionaire networks, especially that of Charles Koch, over the public conversation. **If these billionaires are successful, the anti-CRT campaign will endanger the public school system, academic freedom on campuses, and the broader movement against structural white supremacy.**

# Analysis

UnKoch My Campus reviewed the published materials of **28 think tanks** and **political organizations** with known ties to the Koch network. Each piece dealing substantially with **Critical Race Theory** was summarized and catalogued. In addition to several high profile national think tanks, UnKoch My Campus reviewed published materials by State Policy Network think tanks. The State Policy Network is an overarching association of think tanks focused on promoting radical free market policies on the state level.

UnKoch My Campus' research prioritized states with active legislation against Critical Race Theory to better understand the relationship between state legislation and Koch network activity.

Think Tank	Number of published pieces on CRT
The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research	43
Heritage Foundation	37
State Policy Network	19
FreedomWorks	16
American Enterprise Institute	15
Cato Institute	7
Reason Foundation/Magazine	4
The Federalist Society	3
Mercatus Center	1
American Legislative Exchange Council	1

This review is not an exhaustive survey of each piece written by every Koch associated organization, as the network is very large and difficult to track. This review aims to illustrate the relative scale of attention paid to the issue, and to understand the rhetorical tactics Koch network think tanks have deployed around Critical Race Theory and their efforts to ban it from public schools.

# Analysis Cont'd

SPN Think Tanks	State	Number of published pieces on CRT
Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs	OK	12
John Locke Institute	NC	2
Show-Me Institute	MO	2
Goldwater Institute	AZ	2
Idaho Freedom Foundation	ID	1

The review focused primarily on the period from June 1st, 2020 to June 30th, 2021. However, UnKoch My Campus researchers did review earlier materials where available to understand how Koch network think tanks dealt with Critical Race Theory before its current iteration. Most mentions of CRT only bring it up in passing (for example, to describe a certain academic discussed in a different context). **Material on CRT published after June 1st 2020 exhibits a significantly different tone and focus.**



During the investigation period, UnKoch found that Koch network think tanks published 146 articles, podcasts, reports, or videos about Critical Race Theory. 13 out of 28 of the think tanks reviewed published at least one piece. Out of all the publications reviewed, only one article defends CRT as having any merit.

All others attack CRT or use association with CRT as a criticism of other targets.

The following is a discussion of the origins and purpose of the anti-CRT campaign based on analysis of this new body of literature.

# The Black Lives Matter Movement and its Backlash

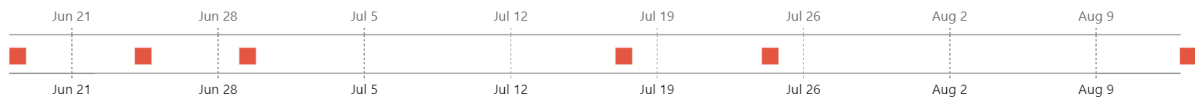
George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis Police was a breaking point for millions of Americans. In one of the largest acts of participatory democracy, over 20 million people protested against police brutality and structural white supremacy. The shocking violence of the murders and the repression of protestors lead to unprecedented shifts in the way that Americans view the Black Lives Matter movement, policing, the law, and American history. Between May 1st, 2020, and the peak of protests on June 1st 2020, support for the BLM movement jumped by 10 points to 53% of all Americans. Shifts in public opinion of that size are rare in American politics, and many institutions responded by reconsidering their approach to racial justice and equity.

Critical Race Theory, in its original context, is a set of ideas developed in the study of law, examining how social and economic differences between races are created by the legal system, rather than by the actions of individuals or psychological factors. Derrick Bell is widely regarded by both legal scholars and Koch network think tanks as a foundational theorist in the movement, and his book, *Race, Racism, and American Law*, focuses on analysis of case law around segregation, access to the vote, discrimination against Black Americans, and legal limits on Black economic participation. However, the meaning of Critical Race Theory was slowly distorted by the right wing discourse in an effort to discredit all social, cultural, and institutional changes that followed the political upheaval in June 2020.

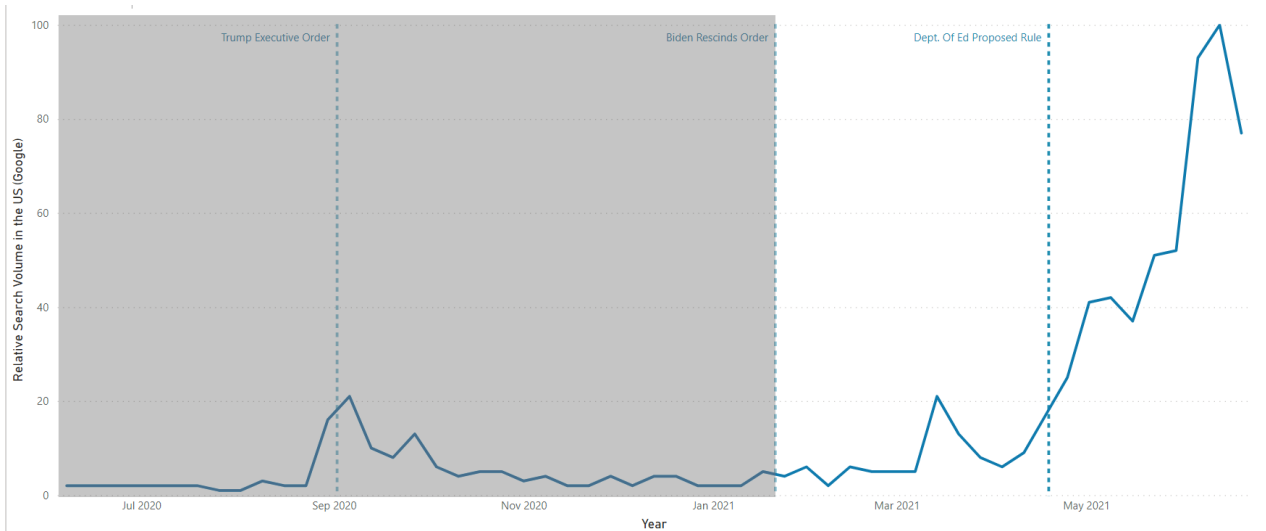
Charles Koch and his allied network of PACs and think tanks viewed these changes as a threat to their radical economic ideology. The legitimacy of the unprecedented concentration of wealth into the hands of billionaires like Charles Koch rests on the idea that the market system is fundamentally fair.

With renewed attention on the economic legacy of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration, the Koch network decided to mobilize a backlash movement.

# Koch Money Leads the Charge on CRT



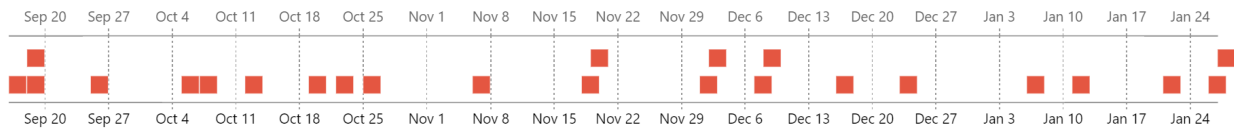
Each red square represents one published work. Data from Unkoch My Campus review, 6/1-9/30



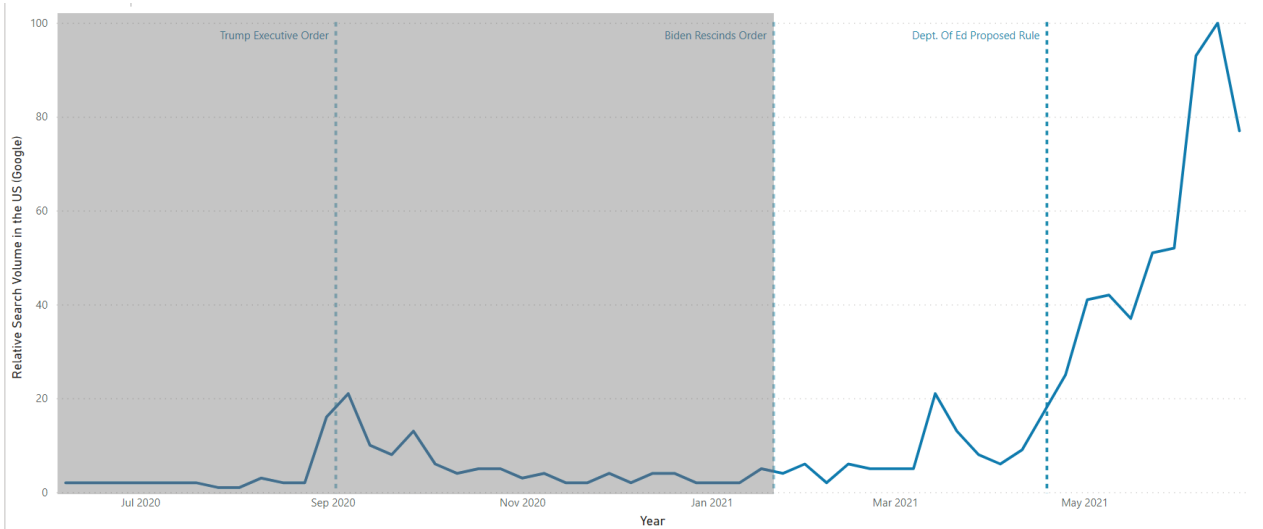
The Koch network coalesced around a strategy to oppose institutional changes in response to the protest movement slowly. The network tried many different dog whistles and lines of attack to discover what messaging resonated best with their political base. Critical Race Theory was an unknown topic to most people on both the Right and the Left before Christopher Rufo popularized the term in the media. Christopher Rufo is a conservative blogger and long-time contributor to City Journal, a publication of the Koch-network funded Manhattan Institute. Like many others, Rufo produced right wing media and platformed his ideas with Koch network support. In early July, he made a thread on Twitter about an anti-bias training held by the city of Seattle that went viral. The thread generated outrage by showing slides from the training out of context. Over the next month, stories about anti-bias training consistently garnered more attention than Rufo's other projects, and led to coverage from the wider right wing news ecosystem.

While Rufo's first thread did not brand Seattle's anti-bias training as Critical Race Theory, he soon updated his messaging. On July 15th, Rufo gave a name to this genre of coverage by calling a training "Critical Race Theory" for the first time. Notably, his July 15th Twitter thread reviewing anti-bias training sessions conducted in the federal government was accompanied by an article published by the Manhattan Institute. Other Manhattan Institute writers had been experimenting with anti-CRT messaging for a few weeks already. Rufo, by combining his criticisms of anti-bias training with the Manhattan Institute's framing of CRT, had found a way to make the label politically actionable.

# Critical Race Theory and the 2020 Presidential Election



Data from Unkoch My Campus review, 9/1/20-1/19/20



Critical Race Theory first broke into mainstream consciousness when Christopher Rufo appeared on Tucker Carlson's show on September 1st, 2020. The numerous connections in the right wing media ecosystem afforded by Koch aligned think tanks helped Rufo become a repeat guest on Fox News shows. The appearance included a direct call to action for the President to ban anti-bias training in government agencies. Rufo says he received a call from Mark Meadows, Trump's chief of staff, the next morning to help draft language for a ban on anti-bias training sessions. Donald Trump, an avid Tucker Carlson viewer, retweeted a thread by Rufo on September 5th. The President later signed an executive order banning many kinds of anti-bias training on September 22nd.

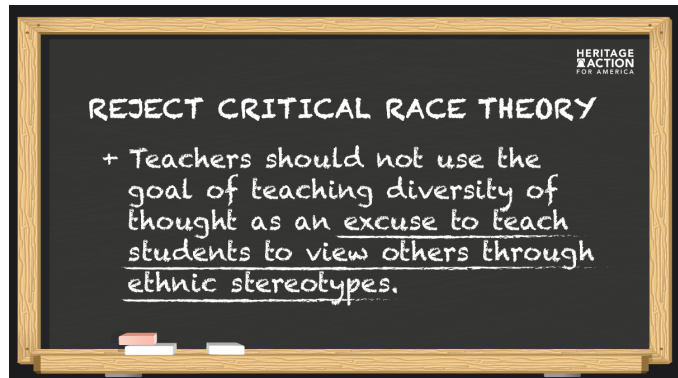
The validation of their work by the President kicked other arenas of the Koch network into high gear, producing articles, videos, and events defending the executive order and defining a right wing construction of CRT to new audiences. Interest in CRT briefly peaked in September, as many speculated that it would become a central piece of Trump's campaign message. However, interest subsided as other stories (especially the confirmation of Amy Coney Barret to the Supreme Court and Trump's personal COVID infection) dominated the news cycle.



# Defining to Confuse

After achieving initial success, Koch network think tanks sought to redefine Critical Race Theory in ways that encouraged political mobilization. While some writers at these think tanks attempted to deal with the texts from CRT scholars like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, most of them have argued that CRT is recognizable by the presence of anti-bias training or educational curriculum that attempts to change individual behavior to be less racist. This is in direct contradiction to the source material of CRT that emphasizes structural causes of racism over individual prejudice.

**This contradiction is a feature of the propaganda campaign, rather than a mistake.**



## Koch funded Heritage Action Disinformation

HERITAGE  
ACTION  
FOR AMERICA

# 3

### IDEAS THAT CRITICAL RACE THEORY HOLDS:

- 1 There is no absolute truth—only competing narratives.
- 2 Individuals are either an oppressor or victim.
- 3 America is systemically racist and must be dismantled.

Koch network messaging redefines Critical Race Theory in the following ways:

## What it is:

- Anti-bias trainings that argue that white people have a personal duty to address intentional or unintentional racist behavior.
- Educational curriculum or narratives that are not sufficiently celebratory of US progress on ending its own institutions of slavery and segregation.
- Educational curriculum that demonstrates ongoing racist systems in the US after the Civil Rights act.
- Educational curriculum that attributes racial disparities in wealth, incarceration, or representation to racially biased systems instead of individual choices.
- Educational curriculum that attributes racial disparities in wealth, incarceration, or representation to racially biased individuals in positions of power, rather than the choices of those subject to power.
- Any implication that racism exists is recast as a personal attack designed to guilt and shame white people.

Most Americans agree that the country's economic system is unequal. Most people do not think that saying so is a personal threat. In order to make CRT into a threat that matters in the lives of regular people, Koch network think tanks portray it as a corrosive force on the country. They argue that CRT has the following negative impacts.



(Karina Andrew / Whidbey News-Times)

## What it does:

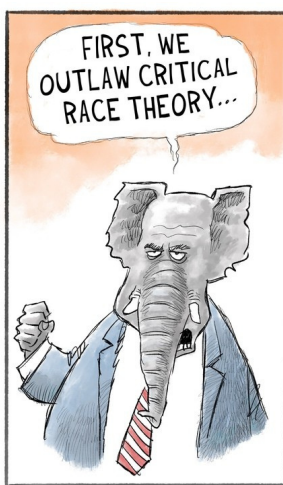
Koch network think tanks also experiment in their messaging to see what will provoke the most outrage. Oftentimes this involves simply publishing inflammatory attacks to see what sticks. While these examples did not become recurring staples of anti-CRT messaging, they demonstrate the standards that these think tanks hold themselves to in order to further their political attacks. At times, Koch network authors have published work claiming the following:

- Attributed the Parkland mass shooting to the alleged presence of CRT in Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School's disciplinary policies.
- Supported an unsound theory that Black people have genetic differences that make them more susceptible to COVID infection (which better explains disparities in mortality rates than our unequal medical system) and blaming CRT for suppressing the theory.
- Partially attributed the January 6th storming of the US Capitol to CRT, claiming that the destruction of civics education is to blame for the insurrection.
- Blamed CRT for contributing to a wave of hate crimes against Asian Americans, by creating mistrust in the police.

Koch network think tanks propose several solutions to defeat the spread of CRT:

- Implement a school voucher system, part of a long campaign to defund public schools.
- Deregulate teacher licensing, to decrease the influence of universities and allow private corporations more influence in schools.
- Relax certain restrictions on which public schools parents can send their kids, a component of modern initiatives to desegregate schools.
- Increase civics education, falsely portrayed as incompatible with teaching about racism.
- Censor educational materials that teach about slavery as a foundational part of the economic development of the US.
- End anti-bias or diversity training in government institutions.

The dramatic mismatch between existential stakes on the one hand, and the proposed reforms on the other hand exposes the intention behind the anti-CRT campaign. These organizations incite a backlash to progress on racial justice, and use the outrage as a Trojan horse for entrenching radical free market ideology in every institution they can influence.



(Daily Kos)



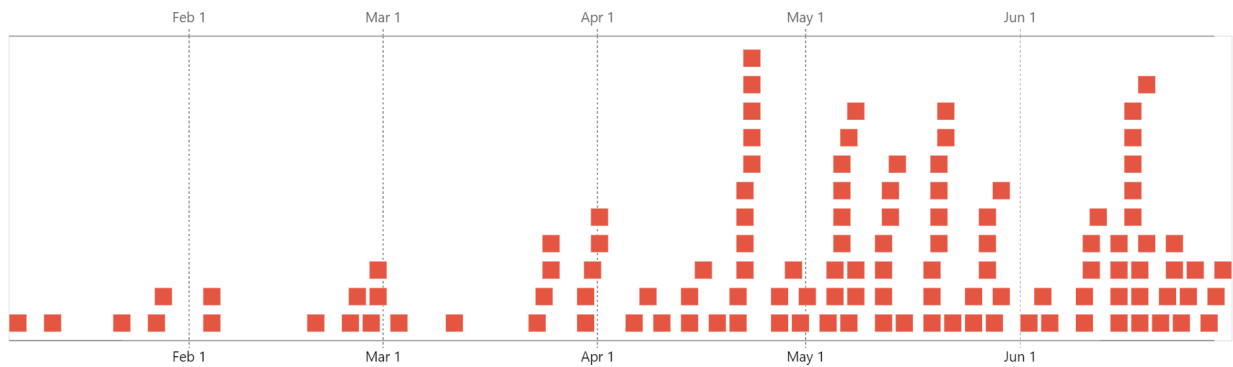
NICK ANDERSON  
© 2021  
CRITICAL  
RACE THEORY



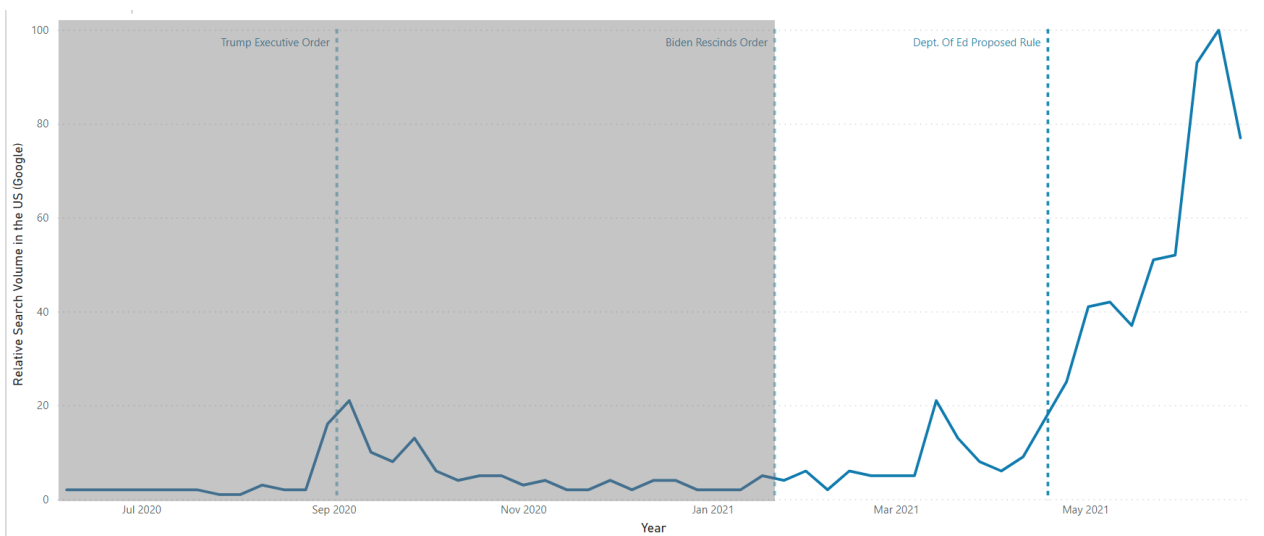
Tom Wright  
CAGLE CARTOONS

(Review Journal)

# Critical Race Theory and the Biden Era



Data from Unkoch My Campus review, 1/20/21 - 6/30/21



Koch network think tanks shifted their strategy to reflect the new reality of a democratic presidency. The pre-inauguration period primarily focused on anti-bias training sessions, particularly in the federal government. After Biden's inauguration, Koch network authors no longer had such a sympathetic ear in the Whitehouse and adjusted their strategy accordingly. The Koch network deployed attacks on CRT in two main areas.

First, Koch network think tanks are tying the Biden administration to CRT. The political utility of creating a panic around an ideology that is allegedly neomarxist, divisive, and so deeply anti-american that it can't be reasoned with, and then accusing political opponents of supporting it should be obvious. In practice, CRT gives right wing writers an effective way to smear any program that addresses (or even acknowledges) the ongoing presence of structural racism in the country.

## Critical Race Theory and the Biden Era Cont'd

Second, Koch network think tanks have deployed CRT framing to attack or influence public school systems. While school curriculum on racism was a present concern in earlier pieces, it became a primary focus in the following months. Before the election, UnKoch My campus found eight articles between June 1st 2020 and January 19th 2021 dealing primarily with CRT in K-12 education.

By contrast, between January 20th 2021 and June 30th 2021, UnKoch found 72 articles. Koch network think tanks have produced talking points, briefed legislators, and generally pushed state governments to censor their conception of CRT wherever possible.

This push has had the most significant policy implications, with 17 states proposing or passing legislation addressing CRT. The legislation ranges from purely symbolic (a non binding resolution in Utah asking the state board of education not to write curriculum that discriminates based on race) to substantially censorious (a state board of education policy in Florida equating CRT with Holocaust denial and banning teaching that “racism is embedded in American society and its legal system”).

These two approaches came together in an instructive fashion when the Department of Education proposed a new prioritization rule for funding civics programs in public schools. The rule proposes two new priorities for disbursing funds. The Department of Education would prefer “Projects that incorporate racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives into teaching and learning,” and also programs that “Promot[e] information literacy.” Koch network think tanks immediately mobilized to attack the new rule.

## Critical Race Theory and the Biden Era Cont'd

The mere suggestion that diverse perspectives make education better was recast as CRT. Authors accused the federal government of undermining the foundations of American institutions, for irrevocably polarizing the country, of taking over public schools, and so on. One author claimed, without evidence, that “Initially, the rule would apply only to a couple of small grant programs. But it wouldn’t stop there. Its introduction would follow a pattern similar to that of other unpopular national curriculum efforts, such as Common Core, which gained entry to classrooms all over America through a carrot-and-stick approach.” Other authors went as far as to claim this proposed rule was evidence that significant chunks of the Department of Education’s budget was now being used to mandate CRT in every classroom, writing “Whatever the case may be, the Department of Education has done Americans a favor by making its intentions clear: it will use any money Congress gives it for civics education to promote critical race theory.”



(USA Today)

The work of the preceding months spent defining CRT and pushing it through to the mainstream is paying off. As news stories about ongoing legislation combine with a sharply organized campaign around the Department of Education’s proposed civics rule, the prevalence of discussions surrounding CRT is increasing.

Koch network think tanks continue to amplify the movement and supply it with long term staying power by devoting more resources to its coverage.

# Conclusion

As the Critical Race Theory panic reaches a fever pitch in the right wing media ecosystem, it is more important than ever to expose the influence of dark money on public discourse. Despite numerous claims that this movement is “parent lead,” and despite whatever actual rage their work has been able to incite based on disinformation, anti-CRT rhetoric is an astroturfed tool for furthering the priorities of Charles Koch and his wealthy friends. Beyond the initial reporting originating with right wing activists affiliated with the Koch network, think tanks have been using their media connections, influence, and money to produce the talking points that are heard in millions of homes daily. **The anti-CRT programme has led to increased polarization, new political censorship of public school education, and it represents a concerted effort to roll back any institutional changes made in response to the movement for Black lives.**

## Additional Reading:

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory>

Semi-Biographical summary of Christopher Rufo and his process for building his messaging. Lots of smoking gun material on government coordination with his work

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/white-backlash-nothing-new/611914/>

Written shortly before CRT became widely known, this article discusses the historical trend of backlash against progress on racial justice. Note the primacy of peace of mind and tranquility for white America over Black Americans’ push for equal rights- parallels the focus on anti-bias training and education making white folks feel uncomfortable.

[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human\\_rights\\_magazine\\_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory/)

Section on education and segregation is an excellent example of applying CRT to real world examples/case law

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

Technical description of critical theory for the truly committed to read

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