



What is critical race theory?

Fast facts

Critical race theory has generated a lot of buzz recently. Schools are trying to puzzle out what it is. Legislation to keep it out of public schools is making headlines. Disagreements have erupted across party lines about how to right past wrongs. So, what is critical race theory and why is it so controversial?

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- [Critical race theory](#) (CRT) is covered in some graduate and law schools and has five major tenets:
 - The first is [counter-storytelling](#), which is the idea that sharing the lived experiences of people of color is necessary, especially if those stories are not being told via mainstream sources.
 - The second is that racism is part of everyday life and an embedded part of our society, also called the **permanence of racism**. According to CRT, racism is present in legal institutions, law, and sometimes other societal structures (**systemic racism**), with the intent to give more or less privilege to certain races. Consequently, well-meaning people living with those laws and institutions participate in racism. To have a less racist society, critical race theory concludes that we need to change institutions rather than focusing on changing the prejudice of individuals.
 - The third tenet is [whiteness as property](#). This is the idea that your racial identity was tied to privilege early on in America's history and now parts of culture associated with being white are deliberately protected by laws and institutions that have arisen from that history.
 - The fourth tenet is [interest convergence](#), developed by Professor [Derrick Bell](#), and it stipulates that black citizens achieve civil rights victories only when white and black interests are the same.
 - The fifth is **critique of liberalism**. "Liberalism" can mean different things, but in this case scholars of CRT are against schools of thought that don't acknowledge racial differences, such as "color blind" policies, for example, because CRT sees color as something to be celebrated. Liberalism is also criticized by CRT for the ideas that racism is only deliberate aggression and is contrary to the norm. Both ideas are rejected by CRT. [Other aspects of liberalism are also sometimes critiqued](#), such as that America was founded on the principals of "equal opportunity for all" or will improve through "incremental change."
- Additionally, CRT is rooted in the idea that race is a **social construct** rather than a **biological** one. For example, there is no one feature that determines someone's race (skin color, eye shape, hair texture), and what society acknowledges as a race rather than a nationality or ethnicity has changed over time. Critical race theorists argue that race is a concept society has created.
- Popular criticisms of CRT include that it focuses too much on experiences over empirical data, that it focuses on group identity over universal human traits, and that it divides people into groups of oppressors and oppressed.

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- [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), who coined the term “critical race theory,” maintains that critical race theory will continue to evolve over time as society changes: [“It cannot be confined to a static and narrow definition but is considered to be an evolving and malleable practice.”](#) Conversations about critical race theory can quickly become convoluted because of discrepancies over what people believe about CRT: what it encompasses, what organizations it supports, and what policies CRT has informed.

What legislation has been introduced around critical race theory, and why is it controversial?

- [Twenty-six states have introduced bills](#) that would limit how teachers talk with students about racism or sexism, and nine states have passed legislation billed as against “critical race theory.”
- There is no school curriculum in any state that has been written by scholars of critical race theory, and in most cases, critical race theory is not mentioned by teachers to students at all. However, because CRT is a way of looking at historical events and institutions, it has become a catch-all term for a host of issues. These include ways of teaching about gender equality, homophobia, racism, and white supremacy—whether these topics have anything to do with the tenets of the graduate school discipline of critical race theory or not. This has caused additional confusion as parents and teachers try to understand what legislation is addressing, whether what it is addressing is present in their school, and what their personal stance is on it.
- Federal legislation includes Senator Ted Cruz’s endorsement of the [“End CRT Act”](#) (or “Stop CRT Act”), a bill that would cut federal funding for any school where teachers endorse any of the following:
 - That one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex
 - That the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist
 - That an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously
 - That an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment due to race or sex
 - That members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex
 - That an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex
 - That any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex
 - That meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race

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- In June 2021, legislation was introduced in Congress that would cut federal funding to schools that teach history using the [1619 Project](#), a *New York Times* series on how slavery impacted American history. If passed into law, the [Saving American History Act](#) would require the **U.S. Secretary of Education** to identify the cost of these lessons and subtract it from the school's federal aid.
- In Idaho, Governor Brad Little [signed a law in April](#) limiting the ways that teachers can discuss race and gender and banning what the legislation called tenets of critical race theory. The tenets in the Idaho law are different than those typically included in CRT, though some concepts overlap. The law forbids schools to adhere to the ideas:
 - That any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior
 - That individuals should be adversely treated on the basis of their sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin
 - That individuals, by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin
 - That no distinction or classification of students shall be made on account of race or color (except when collecting demographic data).
- The proposed bills [have been controversial](#) in part because it isn't always clear what the effects and limits of the bills would be in the classroom. If teachers are unsure what phrasing will get their school penalized during lessons on events like the Holocaust or civil rights movement, will they instead opt not to teach those subjects at all? Will teachers be able to mediate conflict in multicultural classrooms without making anyone feel "discomfort, guilt, or anguish"? Communication between teachers and parents may also be difficult when no one can agree on common terms to discuss school curriculum.

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