

Study finds powerful narrative can drive policy action, cultural change

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The ability to grab listeners with a compelling story, complete with heroes, villains and victims, is not only a must for great literature, it is increasingly a tool for changing policy.

A new paper [published](#) last month in *Policy Studies Journal* examines how disseminating largely false narratives around the issue of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and [public schools](#) not only propelled people to demand bans on teaching CRT, but also influenced their beliefs about broader political and [policy](#) issues and could have implications for the future of public education.

The paper, "Narrative spillover: A narrative policy framework analysis of critical race theory discourse at multiple levels," was written by Melissa Arnold Lyon, an assistant professor in Rockefeller College's Department of Public Administration and Policy; Rebecca Jacobsen, a professor at Michigan State University's College of Education; and Ariell Rose Bertrand, a Ph.D. student at MSU's College of Education.

By studying the rise in ban-CRT narratives, the team looked at how storytelling in policy debates activates listeners and can change the way they think about established institutions and culture.

The narratives around banning CRT proved perfect for studying this phenomenon because the conversation around CRT, introduced by conservative think tanks, spread so quickly from nothing to a major talking point with a call for legislative action.

"The Manhattan Institute's Christopher Rufo, who is closely associated with the introduction of the ban-CRT policy narrative, explicitly stated his intention to 'recodify [the term CRT] to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans,'" the article says. Rufo's appearance on Tucker Carlson's show on Fox TV attracted the attention of President Trump, who met with Rufo and then talked about CRT in a September 2020 speech.

Rufo's narrative about the harm caused by CRT spread through new parent groups, came up in increasingly contentious school board

meetings across the United States and, by January 2021, resulted in more than 140 bills in 44 states calling for the ban of CRT in public schools, with 18 states passing such bills.

"Even though there was little to no evidence of CRT in schools, the rapid dissemination of this narrative led to large increases in public support for a ban on CRT," Lyon explains. "Exposure to CRT narratives led to calls for banning CRT across partisan and [racial groups](#), but they were particularly strong for white individuals and Republicans."

The authors' study also uses the CRT policy narratives to show how such narratives can change how people think in broader terms about long-standing beliefs. "The ban-CRT policy narrative leveled serious charges against the public school system, suggesting that there was a widespread effort to introduce students to a harmful curriculum," the article says.

"The combination of racial identity politics and the highly polarizing rhetoric that was spread rapidly through well-developed social media networks may have resulted in a powerful policy narrative able to breach status quo beliefs and institutional norms regarding schooling, schools, and teachers."

While topics such as curriculum and [school choice](#) have long caused conflict in [school districts](#), President Trump and other Republicans used CRT to create a new firestorm in the public perception of public schools, according to the authors.

"The case of CRT demonstrates how a powerful narrative can quickly sweep across the nation and shape policy opinions to such a degree that the influence of the narrative spills over into beliefs about societal institutions and cultural norms. Indeed, the onset of ban-CRT policy narratives may be contributing to a remarkable cultural and institutional shift in the way we view our teachers and schools," the article states.

Lyon added, "Even though the public tends to have very high levels of trust in their local teachers, we see that the folks who heard CRT narratives had decreased trust in their own local teachers and schools to discuss race or even to supplement the curriculum generally. We see this as evidence that ban-CRT narratives have the capacity to chip away at long-standing cultural norms regarding our public schools."

More information: Ariell Rose Bertrand et al, Narrative spillover: A narrative policy framework analysis of critical race theory discourse at multiple levels, *Policy Studies Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/psj.12523](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12523)

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