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Why Democrats Keep Losing Culture Wars

Republicans often build entire campaigns around false or misleading information as a way to energize their base.

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Filed under [Culture Wars](#)



In his gubernatorial campaign, Republican Glenn Youngkin promised to ban critical race theory in Virginia public schools. ERIC LEE / BLOOMBERG / GETTY IMAGES

Virginia's new governor, Glenn Youngkin, kicked off his term with a political magic trick. In the first of [nine executive orders](#) issued on Jan. 15, the day he took office,¹ he banned the teaching of “inherently divisive concepts, including critical race theory” in K-12 public schools. It was a smart way to show his base he's already jumping on [issues they care about](#). Education policy, particularly the [alleged role critical race theory](#) plays in public school curricula, was a [centerpiece of Youngkin's campaign](#). But the impact of this executive order is less straightforward than it seems, because critical race theory [isn't actually taught](#) in Virginia public schools.

This kind of tactic is increasingly familiar in politics today. Republican politicians, in particular, build entire campaigns around false or misleading information, then implement policies that respond to those falsehoods, cementing them further in our political landscape.

The debate [over critical race theory](#) — a complex academic framework for understanding racism that would never actually be taught to second-graders but that at least [nine state legislatures](#) have tried to ban anyway — is just one such example. There's an entire gamut of culture wars where this dynamic has taken hold. Abortion, [one of the most powerful and long-lasting social issues in modern politics](#), is another example where arguments are increasingly framed in ways that tend to benefit Republicans. And because of that, Democrats frequently appear to be ceding ground, even though voters typically trust them more than Republicans on these issues and [public opinion is often on the Democrats' side](#).

The rebuttal to these issues seems like it should be simple. Why not just tell voters that critical race theory isn't being taught and move on? Or say that abortions are safe and increasingly rare but will always be necessary for some women? But so far, Democrats haven't really figured out a way to convince voters that some GOP messages aren't based in reality. Experts told us that's because Republicans' often misleading framing is effective not because Americans believe it wholeheartedly or because they know all that much about the issue. Rather, the reason why abortion rights and critical race theory sticks in people's minds is that these issues touch on broader anxieties.

“Calling critical race theory an ‘existential threat’ activates racial animus and [fears around white victimhood](#), which are strongly tied to support for conservative candidates and policies,” said [Maneesh Arora](#), a political scientist at Wellesley College. Once those fears have been stirred up, Arora and other experts told us that it can be very difficult for other politicians to dismiss them. In fact, politicians' sparring over the facts — or Democrats' oversimplifying voters' concerns as [“fake outrage”](#) — might make those underlying fears seem more justified.

So that leaves Democrats going into a midterm election year with a serious conundrum: How do they fight a messaging war when the other side is playing fast and loose with the truth?

For years, the debate over abortion has revolved around misleading or downright inaccurate claims — like when former President Donald Trump [accused Democrats of promoting infanticide \(they were not\)](#), or when 20 Republican senators [petitioned the](#)

[Food and Drug Administration](#) to classify the abortion-inducing drug mifepristone as a public health hazard ([it is not](#)).

Myriad state-level abortion policies are also based on faulty or spurious science — including [counseling that requires abortion providers](#) to tell patients, inaccurately, that abortion is linked to breast cancer or infertility; legislation that [limits abortion after a certain point](#) because of disputed research on fetal pain; and [a web of restrictions on abortion providers](#) that similar health care providers don't face, often justified by the incorrect assertion that abortion is dangerous.

Americans are generally not following the ins and outs of abortion politics — if anything, they may be actively avoiding it — but that also works to Republicans' advantage.

[Americans' views about abortion are fuzzy and malleable](#), in large part because they just don't know very much about it. A [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) poll conducted in December 2019 found that Americans tend to overestimate how many abortions happen late in pregnancy, and underestimate how many abortions happen early. And while a majority are aware that abortion performed in a medical setting is safe, they were off about just how safe it is: Only about a quarter know, for instance, that it is [safer than giving birth](#) or getting your appendix removed, which a number of [studies support](#).

Even without much information to go on, the idea that women and doctors, abetted by Democrats, are advocating to “execute” babies — which [Trump has claimed on multiple occasions](#) — might seem too outlandish to believe. But [Tresa Udem](#), a researcher who studies public opinion on abortion, said that this kind of framing is successful not because Americans wholeheartedly believe it but because they don't wholeheartedly *disbelieve* it.

“Abortion later in pregnancy — it’s so rare that the vast majority of people don’t have personal experience with it and it’s never ever talked about,” Udem said. “So if Trump and Republicans come along and say there are doctors ripping babies from women’s wombs at the moment before birth, people will be like, ‘What?’ and there’s nothing in their minds to push back. They won’t necessarily believe it, but they’re not going to *not* believe it. That’s where I think Republicans are really successful.”

Like critical race theory, abortion also taps into much deeper anxieties — in this case, about gender roles. Polls by Udem and others have found that attitudes toward abortion [track closely with broader attitudes](#) about women’s place in society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people who hold traditional views, which often emphasize women’s roles as mothers, are more likely to oppose abortion.

But as misleading ideas about abortion become embedded in policy, those misleading concepts come to feel increasingly real. “There are hundreds and hundreds of policies that have been passed around the idea that women will ultimately come to regret their decision [to have an abortion] and therefore the state has to intervene to protect them and give them the knowledge they need,” said [Alesha Doan](#), a political scientist at the University of Kansas. There’s no evidence that this is actually true — in fact, [the opposite seems to be the case](#) — but the policies give it an air of certainty. “People assume that politicians are passing laws for a reason, so the laws legitimize the idea that abortion regret is widespread and give it traction,” Doan said.

Udem told us that abortion has been a successful culture-war issue on the right because most people don’t need to know much, if anything, about the reality of abortion in America to have an opinion on it. The debate is about values: who gets to make the decision to have an abortion, who should be involved, how much to weigh the life of a fetus.

In that sense, then, critical race theory is similar. Voters ordinarily [trust Democrats](#) over Republicans on education, but invoking critical race theory is different from sparring over class size or test scores. Fundamentally, it’s also about values — specifically, how children should be taught about racism. And it’s taking hold because of conservative white parents’ fears of a [more progressive school curriculum](#).

Recent polling suggests that this often misleading messaging is taking hold, too, as a notable share of Americans — namely Republicans — falsely believe that critical race theory is nothing more than a sinister plot to teach white children that they’re inherently evil. According to a July [Reuters/Ipsos](#) poll, for example, 20 percent of Americans

(including 16 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of Republicans) said they believed that critical race theory “says that discriminating against white people is the only way to achieve equality.” Moreover, 22 percent said they believed that critical race theory “says that white people are inherently evil or bad.” In fact, critical race theory [says neither of these things](#).

And even though a November Economist/YouGov poll found that [a majority of Americans](#) didn't think or weren't sure that critical race theory was being taught in their community's schools, there's still a misunderstanding on how bans on critical race theory [could affect the teaching of related subjects](#) that parents *do* want their kids to learn. A [USA Today/Ipsos](#) poll from late August and early September highlighted that schism: While 63 percent of parents with school-aged children said they supported their schools' teaching about the lingering effects of slavery and racism, just 49 percent said they supported the teaching of critical race theory.

According to historian [Keisha Blain](#), a 2022 National Fellow at New America and professor at the University of Pittsburgh, it's hard to separate the current opposition to critical race theory in schools from a white backlash to a [perceived loss of power and status](#). “We have seen this kind of response before in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. White conservatives began to propagate the false argument that Black Americans were somehow receiving ‘special treatment’ and thereby threatening the rights and opportunities for white people,” she said. “In the end, backlash politics thrive on misinformation, and they always rise to the surface as a way to counter any kind of political progress for marginalized groups.”

Indeed, the framing of abortion and critical race theory fights offers a kind of roadmap that other Republican politicians might use to run successful campaigns over the coming years. But, as several experts noted, GOP voters are not inherently gullible, nor are they more prone than Democrats to believing misinformation. “Both sides are vulnerable,” said [Brendan Nyhan](#), a Dartmouth College political scientist who studies misinformation. “One of the key factors right now is that there's a more developed apparatus for promoting false claims on the right. There's a right-wing media ecosystem that doesn't have a direct parallel on the left in its scope or influence.”

So what can Democrats do in response? One potentially disastrous option for them is to keep engaging with these issues on Republicans' terms. While this might be easier said than done, as partisanship and strong party loyalties [help misleading information spread and thrive](#), Democrats can still realize when they're in a fight they can't win.

That leaves them with two leading possibilities: They could unravel some of the misinformation out there, reframing conversations in ways that are both truthful and potentially beneficial to them electorally. With abortion, that could mean talking about it as an issue that's fundamentally about women's power and autonomy. And on critical race theory, as Blain told us, that might look like them providing evidence on what these bans in schools really mean for public school curricula. For example, over the next several years, executive orders like the one Youngkin issued are likely to lead to teachers getting [reprimanded for doing their jobs](#). (Youngkin, for his part, already [implemented a tip line](#) for parents to report "inherently divisive practices," like teaching critical race theory, in schools.) So if Democrats can condemn those offenses while also reframing public discourse on those issues, public opinion — and the terms of how these debates are framed — may later be on their side. "Democrats need to push back against proposed bills that use the label of 'critical race theory' as a cover to simply remove the writings of Black and brown authors from the classroom," Blain said.

Alternatively, Democrats could coalesce around a completely different message that energizes their *own* base "rather than getting stuck talking about critical race theory — which is something that animates the right, and just isn't really an issue on the left," Arora said. Because of increasing partisan polarization, he said, it's unlikely Republican voters' opinion on this issue will change unless elites in their own circles say otherwise, so it may be prudent for Democrats to focus on where they can unify their own base instead.

Regardless of the choice Democrats make, though, experts said that telling voters their fears and concerns about these issues [aren't real](#) is the worst of both worlds. After all, insisting that the focus on critical race theory is just fake news will only alienate the people who believe it's not — and it won't do much to convince Democratic voters that they should care about the underlying issues either.

Footnotes

1. Youngkin issued [two executive directives](#) that day too.