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Racial populism, partisan spillover, and Americans' quest for citizen education policy control: implications for European democracies

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ABSTRACT

Ethnoracial populism and partisan polarisation have become key factors in education politics, intensifying the crisis in education policymaking across the West. Rightwing elites promote exclusionary education policies, dubbed 'anti-woke,' that threaten minority and immigrant integration, upending progressive gains. In the US, populism is reflected in many Whites' support for citizen over expert control of education policymaking, including monitoring teacher behaviour through tiplines and penalties, policies that harm morale and perpetuate conflict. Here, we ask whether Whites' support for citizen control in education results from partisan spillover or policy racialisation processes. Two survey experiments show that White Americans are more supportive of citizen control in education when compared with policing. Within education, we find a preference for citizen control over history and international studies curricula, a finding we do not observe with math and physics. Furthermore, support for citizen control is stronger among those who score highly on racial resentment, providing strong evidence of the racialisation of education policy at the local level. By contrast, partisanship is not a consistent predictor of preferences.

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KEYWORDS Racial resentment; partisanship; school curricula; Critical Race Theory (CRT); education policy; United States

Introduction

The rise of ethnoracial populism, closely tied to rising immigration and ethnic diversity, has generated a policymaking crisis and political instability across democracies (Mudde, 2022). The nationalisation of party politics has also contributed to illiberal trends in the US and elsewhere (Hopkins, 2018; Morgenstern, 2017). In the U.S., Trump's ascent empowered the racial populist

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'MAGA' faction, long marginalised within the Republican Party (Masket, 2026). Ethnoracial populism frames the majority racial group as 'the people' in conflict with corrupt 'elites,' including scientists, policy experts, and academics. This virulent populism is central to the anti-science agenda of Trump's Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education.

Education policy and policing have long been areas of political and cultural conflict in Western democracies. In the United Kingdom, for example, there have been battles over the history curriculum (Crawford, 1995; Hussain et al., 2024). Belgium, too, has a consociational democracy (e.g., Lijphart, 2012) that promotes local control of curricula that can lead to conflict over what schools teach (Mangez, 2010). In Germany, West German scholars debated how best to teach about Germany's Nazi past, with debates centring around relativism (Maier, 1988). Spain has traditionally allowed its disparate regions to have substantial influence on the curriculum, which may be responsible for leading to an increase in Basque and Catalan nationalism that does not reflect the national narrative (Huguet, 2006). In the US, hyper-local control of education has led to a number of curricular conflicts, including how and if to teach racial and ethnic history, evolution, creationism, or, more recently, intelligent design (Berkman & Plutzer, 2010; Zimmerman, 2022).

More recently, populists have targeted efforts to expand diversity and inclusion in education and employment, who see such initiatives as privileging minorities over the rightful majority (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021). Under the guise of opposing 'wokeness,' 'Critical Race Theory (CRT),' and 'DEI,' leaders in countries such as the UK (Kippin, 2025), Germany (Meyer et al., 2025) and the U.S. have sought to use policy to restrict academic freedom and civil liberties and impose undemocratic penalties on opponents. Public opinion studies warn that both ethnoracial populism and partisan polarisation pose major threats to democratic policymaking (Filindra & Harbridge-Yong, 2022; Frederiksen & Skaaning, 2023; Gandenberger et al., 2025).

U.S. education policy has long been rife with racial conflict. Although court decisions and civil rights legislation have advanced racial equity since the 1960s, MAGA populism now aims to reverse those gains. Similar challenges have emerged across Europe (Piattoeva et al., 2023). Recently, conservative groups – largely composed of White Americans – have mobilised against school boards and educators, demanding more influence over curriculum and policy. Conservative legislatures have obliged, introducing restrictions and penalties (Kaplan & Owings, 2021; Kim, 2021).

The conflict centres on history and social studies education, especially with the spread of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) measures (Carbone et al., 2024). Surveys reveal waning public trust in school professionals (Horowitz, 2022). What drives this mistrust? Is it the nationalisation of partisanship through

local politics (Hopkins, 2018) or a continuation of historic racial struggles in education (Henig et al., 1999)?

Two strands of political science, and specifically public opinion scholarship, offer insights. The first, rooted in race politics, emphasises how America's decentralised, unequal education system reflects deep racial divides (Michener, 2019). Following *Brown v. Board* and the Civil Rights Act, research has traced cycles of school segregation and resegregation (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993), a phenomenon that now affects Europe as well (Brandén et al., 2019; Messing, 2014). Racial composition affects funding patterns (Taylor et al., 2020), while Whites often resist funding Black-majority schools (Filindra et al., 2024). Greater Black representation in school boards improves outcomes, yet electorates tend to diverge from student demographics, especially in diverse districts (Meier & Rutherford, 2016). The CRT debate highlights how race continues to shape education politics (Shah et al., 2023). Public opinion studies show that references to CRT appear to activate racial biases, especially among Republicans (Carbone et al., 2024). This suggests that many racially prejudiced Whites perceive education professionals as a cultural threat, reinforcing support for citizen control over curriculum.

The second perspective focuses on the nationalisation of local politics. Recent research shows growing alignment between national and local political dynamics. Political parties, interest groups, and media increasingly shape local opinion and decision-making (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Hopkins, 2018; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). Education policy is now deeply polarised. National parties emphasise values and standards over equity and funding, increasing conflict (Wolbrecht & Hartney, 2014). National donors have influenced school board elections, and the rise of school choice has diminished teachers' union power (Finger & Reckhow, 2020; Henig et al., 2019). Though partisan polarisation among the public stems more from sorting than extremism, experimental research in public opinion shows that nationalising education debates increases division (Arnzen & Houston, 2023; Houston, 2024; Houston & Barone, 2025). The GOP successfully nationalised CRT debates to mobilise school board voters and gain an electoral advantage (Shah et al., 2023).

To explore these dynamics among the White American public, we conducted two survey studies. The first uses data from the 2022 Kalikow School Poll data (conducted by YouGov) to assess whether White Americans' support for citizen control reflects broad anti-intellectualism or is education-specific. In this study, we leverage attitudes toward policing, another policy area that has been racialized in Europe (De Genova, 2018; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022). In the United States, racial disparities in policing have a long history (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Roach et al., 2022). Demands for police oversight in the United States have emanated from minorities, not White citizens (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004), and civilian accountability boards are

rare outside of major metropolitan areas, and police chiefs resist their establishment (Adams et al., 2025). Similarly, policing practice and – in particular – structures of control over police activity have remained hotly debated in Western democracies including the United Kingdom (e.g., Loveday, 2021), the Netherlands (van Sluis & Devroe, 2020), and perhaps most notably in Germany after World War II (Berkley, 1970).

Comparing views on education and policing, we find significantly greater support for citizen control over education. This effect increases with racial resentment. While partisanship also has a positive effect, it is smaller and less robust. The second study – a pre-registered survey experiment – examines support for citizen control of curriculum across three subject areas: math/physics, U.S. history/civics, and world history. Respondents were more likely to favour parental control in history and world history. Racial resentment again moderated the effect, while partisanship did not. These findings suggest that racial attitudes, not nationalised partisanship, best explain support for lay control over curriculum.

The American case offers a cautionary tale for Europe: it shows how racialized populism can exploit local governance structures, like school boards, to undermine democratic norms, civil rights, and public trust in expertise. As European societies grapple with rising diversity and far-right mobilisation, the U.S. experience underscores the risks of allowing ethnonationalist movements to erode educational equity and academic freedom. Understanding these dynamics can help European policymakers and educators build more resilient institutions in the face of similar populist pressures.

American history wars

Although scholars often view the U.S. as a civic rather than ethnic nation (Almond & Verba, 2015 [1963]; Mylonas & Tudor, 2023), education debates have long reflected racial and ethnic tensions, similar to those in Europe (Crawford, 1995; Mangez, 2010). Current disputes over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and how to teach about race echo earlier battles over evolution, religion, and patriotism in schools (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Zimmerman, 2022). Early twentieth-century newspapers document fiery school board meetings with accusations of ‘un-American’ influences and ideological bias. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan even supported a federal Department of Education to purge Catholic and Black influences (Gordon, 2017). Southern critics of Charles Beard’s ‘New American History’ objected to its portrayal of the Civil War as a defense of slavery rather than states’ rights (Zimmerman, 2022).

A compromise emerged: textbooks highlighted liberal ideals, cast Britain as the villain, and integrated ethnic groups as supporting characters in the American story – while omitting the country’s illiberal traditions (Zimmerman, 2022). By mid-century, this liberal narrative was widely accepted (Hartz, 1991

[1955]). By the 1960s, civil rights movements and revisionist historians revealed the coexistence of liberalism and deeply illiberal policies. Recent work documents similar dynamics today (Grumbach, 2022).

In response, scholars called for reframing U.S. history around marginalised voices. The '1619 Project' exemplified this effort (Hannah-Jones, 2019). Conservatives seized on its controversy, claiming radical content was infiltrating schools without parental consent (Moschella, 2022). They repurposed 'Critical Race Theory' – once a legal concept (Crenshaw, 2011) – to label nearly all race – and gender-related education. The term now functions as a racial 'dog whistle' (Carbone et al., 2024).

Conservative media amplified these warnings. Between January and May 2021, Fox News discussed CRT 1,860 times, often in conjunction with the importance of parental choice in education (Barr, 2021).¹ According to anti-CRT activists, the solution to the problem of 'curriculum wars' is simple: enable citizens to monitor what is being taught at schools and give parents the choice to have their children opt out of specific courses, materials, or schools altogether (Sailor & Kissel, 2021). Republican-controlled states validated and amplified citizens' concerns about these issues. Virginia instituted a 'tip line,' encouraging parents to call in with complaints about educators and school administrators. South Carolina proposed a similar reporting system dedicated to CRT concerns. Elsewhere, parents have begun to exert veto power over lesson plans and class materials (Skerritt, 2023; Ujifusa, 2022). Colorado GOP officials went a step further by urging families to remove their kids from public schools (Clark, 2024). In Florida, the Republican push for vouchers and homeschooling has been so successful that several public schools are slated for closure (Atterbury, 2024).

Not surprisingly, education professionals are alarmed about these developments. Teachers and principals welcome parental involvement in schools and recognise the positive effect of such involvement on children's educational attainment (Shah, 2009). Encouraging parents to monitor teachers, however, likely has a chilling effect on cooperation and threatens to weaken the partnership between educators and parents. It may also discourage educators, instead encouraging them to leave the profession (Skerritt, 2023; Ujifusa, 2022).

Racial politics and education policy

In recent decades, as the EU population changes due to immigration, race and ethnicity have become central to European debates about education policy (Crawford, 1995; Hussain et al., 2024; Mangez, 2010). Yet, racial and ethnic politics has shaped and reshaped the American educational system over time, and, as a result, racism has had an impact on many policy domains (King & Smith, 2013). Public policy scholars argue that

education policy meets the criteria for a persistently racialized policy domain since benefits are disproportionate, and regulatory authority and decision-making are highly decentralised (Michener, 2019).

Much of the early scholarship of race and education developed in response to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act, both of which addressed educational inequality. Historians and political scientists have documented the racial politics of school segregation, desegregation, and renewed segregation (Kruse, 2004; McRae, 2018; Orfield et al., 2014; Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1993; Trounstein, 2018). Education spending at the state level partly depends on the racial composition of the students (Taylor et al., 2020). Public opinion scholarship also shows continued White resistance to funding Black schools from the 1990s to today (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Filindra et al., 2024).

Moreover, scholars of representation have also shown that Black presence in school boards and other local institutions contributed to more equitable education policy outcomes (Kogan et al., 2021b; Meier & Rutherford, 2016). Studies of school board elections have shown that there is a substantial gap between the electorate that participates in such elections and the interests of the students governed by the school board, especially in majority non-White districts (Kogan et al., 2021a). Recent studies also show that race cleavages structured the debates over CRT (Shah et al., 2023).

The public opinion scholarship further underscores the centrality of racism in shaping White Americans' policy preferences (Gilens, 1999; Sears et al., 2000). In recent years, and as a result of the Obama and Trump presidencies, scholars have found that racial attitudes influence not only racial policies but a variety of policies that were previously considered to be non-racial (Filindra et al., 2022; Tesler, 2016). In the domain of education, racism has been central in the White public's resistance to affirmative action (Bobo, 2000; Tolbert & Grummel, 2003) but it is not a correlate of opposition to funding for Black schools (Chudy, 2021; Filindra et al., 2024). Framing experiments have also shown that directly mentioning CRT influences racially prejudiced White Americans' preferences about pedagogy, but does so primarily among Republicans (Carbone et al., 2024). In this context, the salient debate over CRT, is likely to have strengthened links between racial prejudice and negative attitudes toward school professionals in the minds of many White Americans. As a result, racially prejudiced Whites are likely to view teachers and education professionals as a threat to their value system. Therefore, they are more likely to have internalised the idea that citizens, not professionals or the government, should have greater control over education policymaking, especially curricular decisions.

H1. Racially prejudiced Whites are more likely than racial egalitarians to support citizen control over education policymaking (relative to policing)

and curricular decisions in history/international studies (relative to math/physics).

Partisan spillover: the Nationalisation of partisan politics

As in much of Europe (Morgenstern, 2017), partisan politics in the US is becoming increasingly nationalised, with implications for local governance and policymaking (Hopkins, 2018). The traditional view of local politics has been that it has been and continues to be distinct from national partisan politics. Scholars have attributed this difference to the limited functions and vast multiplicity of local authorities (Peterson, 1981), their institutional diversity (Lubell et al., 2009), and the limits imposed on them by states (Gerber & Hopkins, 2011). Others emphasise the Progressive era reforms that decoupled local and national elections, including the institutionalisation of nonpartisan elections (Trounstein, 2009).

A new scholarship, however, suggests that today's subnational jurisdictions have become integrated into the national partisan fabric (Burnett, 2019; Burnett & Prentice, 2018). National partisan politics have spilled over into local politics through increased presence of political parties locally, national interest group involvement, and partisan media (Caughey et al., 2018; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007; Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Hopkins, 2018; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). These studies argue that mass ideology and partisanship influence public opinion on local issues (cf., Anzia, 2021). As a result, people have become more attuned, aware, and conforming to in-group norms and preferences (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2023; Groenendyk et al., 2023).

Scholars also argue that, over the past decade, national parties have redefined education issues from an emphasis on resources and equality to a focus on values and excellence, leading to higher levels of polarisation (Wolbrecht & Hartney, 2014). There is also evidence that outside money has been pouring into school board elections, reshaping both the process and the education system (Henig et al., 2019). Partisan polarisation in education is linked to the emergence of an education reform movement centred on school choice and vouchers that directly opposed unions (Finger & Reckhow, 2020). However, unions continue to dominate the scene (Moe, 2011). At the same time, even as national parties have become more polarised on education, scholars show high levels of bipartisanship on education policymaking at the state level (Grumbach, 2018), while local parties may be more internally divided than polarised on education issues. At the mass public level, there is evidence of education policy preference polarisation due to sorting more so than extreme position-taking (Houston, 2024). Survey experiments show that the nationalisation of education politics leads to mass polarisation on education issues (Houston & Barone, 2025).

From this perspective, partisanship has become central to citizen political behaviour and the central lever used in political mobilisation. Partisan entrepreneurs can fabricate or reframe issues in partisan terms to galvanise partisans at the local level (Rosenfeld, 2020). Reports show that the controversy over CRT was the handiwork of rightwing activists who turned school training programmes to combat bias and promote inclusivity into a moral panic (Wallace-Wells, 2021). The asymmetric mobilisation of Republican elites on the anti-CRT side also led to the mobilisation of co-partisans in the public (Deshpande et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, studies show that in Republican strongholds, anti-CRT candidates were more likely to win seats in school board elections (Shah et al., 2023). Given the centrality of partisanship in people's political judgments and the concerted messaging promoting mistrust in government and education professionals, we expect that Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to support citizen control over education policymaking and curricular decisions.

H2. White Republicans are more likely than White Democrats to support citizen control over education policymaking (relative to policing) and curricular decisions in history/international studies (relative to math/physics).

H3. Given evidence that sorting has led to a higher concentration of racial resisters in the Republican party, we test whether the effect of racial priors on support for citizen control of education policymaking (relative to policing) and curricular decisions in history/international studies (relative to math/physics) is concentrated among Republicans (not pre-registered).

Study 1: Education v. Policing

In this study, we leveraged an existing survey that included a randomisation of two questions relevant to our topic: education and policing. In the European Union, scholars have raised concerns about the securitisation of migration and the racial profiling of immigrants and refugees (De Genova, 2018; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022). Others show low confidence in police among members of European minority communities and especially individuals who have experienced police abuse (Oberwittler & Roché, 2017; Zmerli, 2024). In the United States, racial disparities in policing have deep historical roots (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Roach et al., 2022) and continue to shape the political and economic opportunities of marginalised communities. Calls for increased police oversight have historically come from racial minorities rather than White citizens (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). White citizens tend to have a more favourable view of the police because they are less likely to be exposed to abusive treatment or have friends and family with such profoundly negative experiences (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). Yet civilian accountability boards remain rare outside large urban areas, especially in majority-White communities, and police

leadership often resists their implementation (Adams et al., 2025). There is evidence that in addition to race, the American public is divided by party on perceptions of policing, with Republicans favouring more police discretion and Democrats seeking greater accountability (Thompson et al., 2025).

The chief goal of the survey was to assess public opinion, not to test our specific hypotheses, but it gives us an initial, if imperfect, evaluation. The Kalikow School Poll was conducted by YouGov on March 11–21, 2022, and included 1,468 non-Hispanic White respondents. The survey is weighted to reflect the US population.

The survey asked two very similar questions about policy control. One references education policy, and the other policing. Specifically, the first question asked:

Who should have primary control over K-12 education policy, including issues such as the choice of school curricula, student disciplinary policies, and graduation and grade promotion requirements? The response options included: 1) Education professionals, such as teachers and administrators; 2) Local governmental officials, such as local school boards or other elected officials; 3) State government officials, such as state legislators or state boards of education; 4) Federal government officials, such as Congress or the U.S. Department of Education; 5) Residents from within the school district. The second question asked: 'Who should have primary control over policing policy, including issues such as police training, use-of-force standards, and disciplinary complaints?' The answer categories included: '1) Police professionals, such as police officers and local police department leaders; 2) Local governmental officials, such as mayors or other elected officials; 3) State government officials, such as state legislators or oversight agency; 4) Federal government officials, such as Congress or the Department of Justice; 5) Residents from within the police department's jurisdiction.

The comparison between education and policing is revealing, if imperfect, for several reasons. First, both are key functions of local government. Second, both have been central to partisan debates in recent years. Third, the two policies are racialized in opposite ways. These differences in the way these policy domains are politicised and racialized allow us to make predictions that support for citizen involvement in each domain will be the mirror opposite. Specifically, we expect that Democrats, and racial egalitarians should support citizen control of policymaking in policing because they have low trust in police professionals and government when it comes to police. Republicans and racially prejudiced Whites should oppose citizen control of policing because they trust police professionals to protect their group interests. The mirror opposite should be the case for education.

Since the two items were randomised in the Kalikow School Poll, we can use the first assignment to create a quasi-experiment and compare responses to education versus policing. Our treatment variable is a binary measure where '1' represents those who received the education treatment first and '0' those who received the policing treatment first. Our dependent variable

is also binary and represents whether respondents selected the ‘residents’ option (1 = residents; 0 = not residents).²

Across the entire sample, 28% selected citizen control in the education question and 11% in the policing question (Table 1a-b). In both cases, about one-fourth of White respondents believe that field professionals (i.e., teachers and police chiefs) should have primary control over relevant policy-making, and one-fifth think that the local government should be in charge. Only 16% of Whites assign primary responsibility to the state government for education, and only 11% think the federal government should be in charge. By contrast, one-fourth of White respondents believe that the state government should have a primary decision-making role in policing, and 17% see the federal government in such a role. Therefore, White Americans want higher-level centralisation in policing than they do in education.

Table 1c shows the proportion of people in each combined cell for education and police. The results show that few people consistently select the same level as the locus of primary control. Looking at the diagonal, only 9.5% of White respondents agree that professionals should have primary control in both fields, 7% seek to assign such control to the local government, 8% to the state government, 8% to the federal government, and 6% to residents.

Analysis of proportions shows that 29% of White Americans who received the education treatment *first* opted for citizen control. By contrast, only 9% of White Americans selected citizen control in the policing condition when they received that question first. For our key moderator we need a measure of racial prejudice. The 2022 Kalikow School Poll, however, did not include the racial resentment battery or any other conventional measures of prejudice due to its focus on public opinion. The survey did include a measure of support for racial reparations, however. The item reads as:

Which of the following statements comes closest to your opinion about potential reparations for slavery: 1) The U.S. should acknowledge the impact of slavery by both providing cash payments and funding programs designed to help Black Americans who are descendants of slaves; 2) The U.S. should acknowledge the impact of slavery by funding programs aimed at helping Black Americans who are descendants of slaves, but no cash payments; 3) The U.S. should acknowledge the impact of slavery without any additional actions; 4) The U.S. does not need to acknowledge the impact of slavery.

We coded this item on a 0–1 ordinal scale, with 1 representing the option most consistent with racial prejudice (that the US does not need to acknowledge the impact of slavery).

Because this is not a conventional measure of racial prejudice, we sought to test its relationship with the racial resentment measure. We included this measure and the four racial resentment items in the same pilot mentioned above in Footnote 2. A factor analysis confirmed that this item loads on

Table 1. Respondent Preferences for Control over Education and Policing.

a. Views Among White Respondents on Who Should Have Primary Control Over Education Policy (Weighted).	
	Weighted (%)
Education professionals, such as teachers and principals	26.2
Local government officials, such as school board members or mayors	19.8
State government officials, such as governors or legislators	15.6
Federal government officials, such as Congress or the Department of Education	10.7
Residents from within the school district	27.7
	(N = 1,467)
b. Views Among White Respondents on Who Should Have Primary Control Over the Police (Weighted)	
Respondent Selection	Weighted %
Police professionals, such as police officers and chiefs	26.3
Local government officials, such as mayors or city council members	19.4
State government officials, such as governors or legislators	26.4
Federal government officials, such as Congress or the Department of Justice	17.1
Residents from within the police department's jurisdiction	10.8
	(N = 1,467)

Note: Non-Hispanic-Whites only. Weighted proportions.

Table 1c. Weighted Percentages of K – 12 School Control by Police Control Preference (Weighted)						
Primary Control over K – 12 Public Schools	Police Professionals	Local Gov't Officials	State Gov't Officials	Federal Gov't Officials	Residents in Jurisdiction	Row Total
Education professionals	9.5%	3.4%	4.8%	5.0%	3.6%	26.2%
Local government officials	4.8%	7.4%	5.5%	1.5%	0.6%	19.8%
State government officials	3.0%	1.9%	8.4%	1.9%	0.4%	15.6%
Federal government officials	0.6%	0.6%	0.8%	8.1%	0.5%	10.7%
Residents in the school district	8.4%	6.0%	7.0%	0.6%	5.6%	27.7%
Column Total	26.3%	19.3%	26.5%	17.1%	10.8%	100%

Notes: Non-Hispanic Whites only. Cell percentages sum to 100%.

the same factor as the racial resentment items, and inclusion of the item in the racial resentment index improves the alpha from $\alpha = 0.783$ to $\alpha = 0.803$ (See Appendix Table A2a). This assuaged our fears that the item captures attitudes that are not strongly related to racial resentment. Following best practices, models with moderators include controls (Kam & Trussler, 2017). Our controls include partisanship, ideology, gender, having a minor child in the home, age, income, religion, being born again, and education.³ Balance tests show that demographics are balanced across treatments (Appendix Table A3). Collinearity tests show no evidence of multicollinearity.

Table 2 shows the regression results. We use LPM specification because interaction models are difficult to interpret when the dependent variable is binary (Mood, 2009). Logistic regression results are included in the Appendix and show similar but weaker findings: the interaction with racial resentment is significant at conventional levels, but the interaction with partisanship is

Table 2. LPM Results Study 1, Support for Citizen Control of K-12 Education v. Policing (Kalikow School Poll 2022).

	Model 1 b/se	Model 2 b/se	Model 3 b/se	Model 4 b/se	Model 5 b/se
K-12 Education (ref: Policing)	0.192(0.03)***	0.214(0.03)***	−0.116(0.04)***	−0.011(0.03)	−0.134(0.04)***
Racial resentment		0.114(0.05)**	−0.145(0.05)***	0.121(0.05)**	−0.074(0.05)
Partisanship (1 = Strong GOP)		0.051(0.05)	0.071(0.05)	−0.152(0.05)***	−0.032(0.05)
K-12*Racial resentment			0.576(0.07)***		0.431(0.09)***
K-12*Partisanship				0.434(0.06)***	0.189(0.07)***
Intercept	0.097(0.01)***	−0.071(0.05)	0.089(0.05)*	0.021(0.05)	0.117(0.06)**
N	1468	1247	1247	1247	1247
Adj R ²	0.06	0.131	0.193	0.177	0.206
F	57.666	9.291	11.717	10.186	7.043

Notes: Non-Hispanic whites only. The data are weighted. Robust SEs in parentheses. Controls: age, gender, income, education, ideology, child in the home, religion, born-again. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

significant only at $p < 0.10$ (Appendix Table A5). Given the nature of the dependent variable, we also confirmed our results using multinomial regression models (Appendix Table A6).

Figure 1 shows the main effect of the treatment. Compared to policing, White Americans’ support for lay people’s involvement in education policy-making is significantly higher ($p < 0.001$). Specifically, respondents are almost twice as likely to endorse citizen involvement in education than in policing. White respondents are 19 percentage-points more likely to support citizen involvement in education policy than in policing.

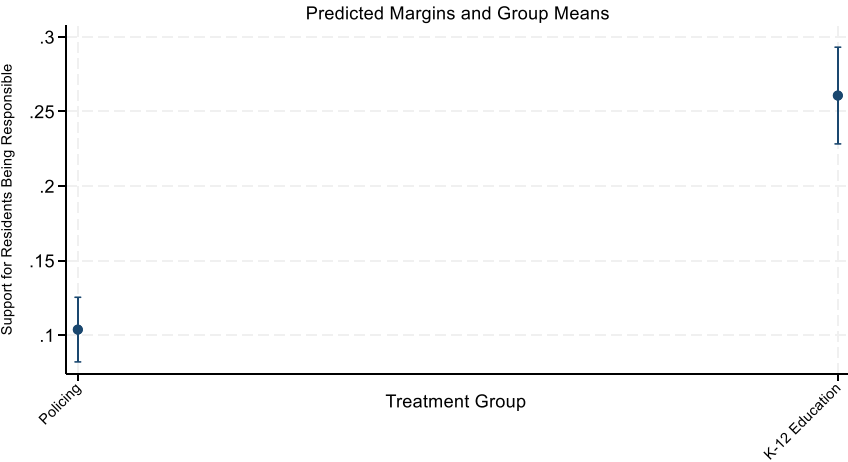


Figure 1. Main Treatment Effect on Support for Resident Control over Policy.

Note: Non-Hispanic Whites only. 2022 Kalikow School Poll. LPM regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals. Results are weighted.

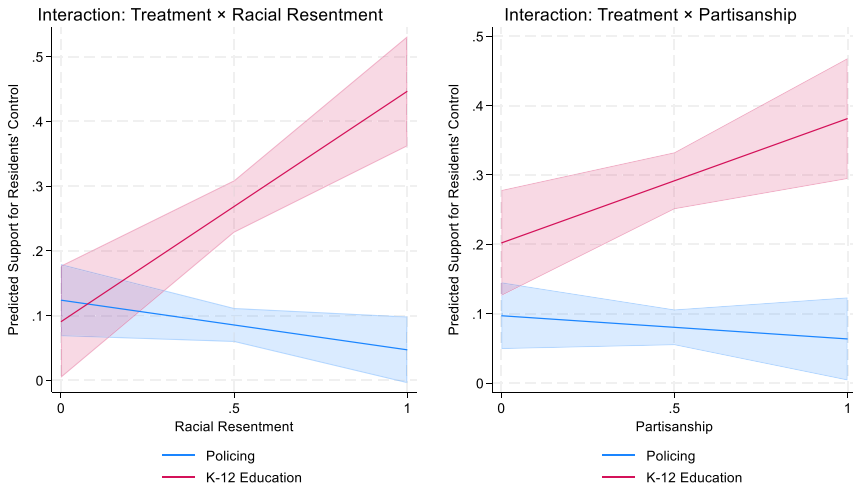


Figure 2. Interaction Effects with Racial Resentment and Partisanship on Primary Control over Policy (Kalikow School Poll, 2022).

Notes: Non-Hispanic Whites only. The data are weighted. LPM regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals. Controls include: partisanship, ideology, gender, minor children in the HH, age, income, education, religion, born again.

Figure 2, left panel, shows the effect of the treatment as a function of racial resentment (proxy measure). The figure is based on an LPM regression model with demographic controls (see Appendix Table A4). The full models are in Appendix Table A4. As the figure shows, support for citizens' control of education policymaking increases steadily as racial resentment strengthens (Hypothesis 1). The reverse, however, is true for policing: support for citizen control *decreases* as racial resentment *increases*. Figure 3, right panel, shows the effect of the treatment on support for citizen involvement in policymaking as a function of partisanship. This is a test of the nationalisation of partisanship hypothesis (Hopkins, 2018). Partisanship has no effect on support for citizen control of policymaking in policing, but when it comes to education policy, support for citizen involvement increases as a function of identifying as Republican (Hypothesis 2). Robustness checks included in Appendix Table A4-A6 show that the interaction with partisanship becomes statistically significant when both interactions are included, but the inclusion of that interaction in the model does not impact the explanatory power of racial resentment (proxy measure). Logistic regression results confirm the results (Appendix Table A5). Multinomial regression results provide a similar picture (Appendix Table A6).

Scholars have argued that, as a result of partisan sorting, most racial resen- ters may have sorted into the Republican Party (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). This would suggest that the effects of racial resentment mask differences in the concentration of racial resentment

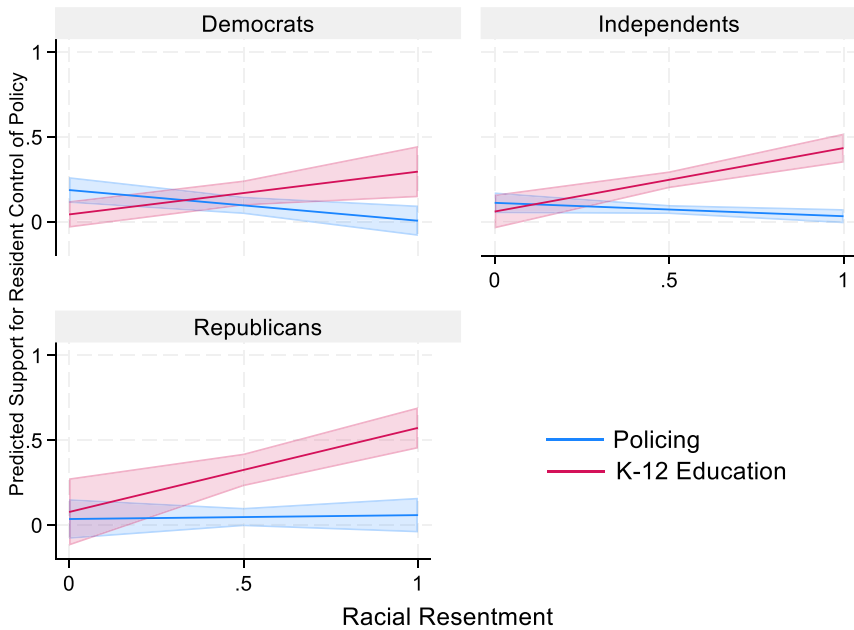


Figure 3. Three-Way Interaction Effects between Treatment, Partisanship, and Racial Resentment (Kalikow School Poll, 2022).

Notes: Non-Hispanic Whites only. The data are weighted. LPM regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals. Controls include: partisanship, ideology, gender, minor children in the HH, age, income, education, religion, born again.

within a party (Hypothesis 3). We test this possibility with a three-way interaction. Our proxy measure for racial resentment and partisanship are correlated ($r = 0.566$). The mean level of racial resentment among Democrats is $M = 0.348$ ($SE = 0.010$), among Independents it is $M = 0.590$ ($SE = 0.020$), and among Republicans it is $M = 0.768$ ($SE = 0.010$). This suggests that racial resentment (as measured) is far more concentrated among Republicans than Democrats. The results show that the interaction is not significant, which indicates that support for citizens' control in education policy is not concentrated in racially prejudiced Republicans alone, but it is more widespread along both the racial and the partisanship dimension (See Appendix Tables A4-A5).⁴ Graphing the interaction (Figure 3) is instructive because it suggests that racially egalitarian and racially conservative Democrats are not divided on citizens' control over the two policies, unlike Independents and Republicans. These results should be viewed as directional only.

Overall, consistent with our expectations, our results show that White Americans are more supportive of citizen involvement in education policymaking than in policing. Furthermore, both partisanship and racial resentment play an important moderating role in shaping White support for citizens' involvement in education policymaking. Therefore, this quasi-experiment offers

evidence of both racial and partisan spillover effects when it comes to White Americans' support for citizen control of education policymaking.

As we noted, however, this study has limitations: it was not designed to be an experiment, and it lacked the racial resentment battery, requiring us to use a proxy. Furthermore, education and policing are very different policies, and there is no elite demand for citizen control of policing decision-making. Instead, the emphasis has been on the demilitarisation of police departments and making mental health training available to police officers (Fernandez, 2020; Ray, 2020). This imperfect comparison may have artificially increased the partisan or the racial effects or both.

Study 2: Parental control over history v. math curricula

The second experiment was in the field between November 9-15, 2021, including 1,080 non-Hispanic White respondents. The mean length of the online interview was 12 minutes (St. Dev. = ± 1.2 minutes). The study was thus fielded about six months after the peak of the CRT controversy (as captured by Google data). The questionnaire was programmed in Qualtrics, and the survey company Lucid provided the sample. The demographics of the sample mirror those of the White American population (Descriptives, Appendix Table B1a). Like other online sample providers, Lucid uses an opt-in panel, and, thus, we cannot claim strong generalizability due to a lack of probability-based sampling. Scholars, however, have used Lucid samples successfully in many experiments that have continued to produce valid experimental results even throughout the pandemic (Peyton et al., 2021). The study included attention checks to ensure high data quality. We excluded individuals who failed the attention checks from the analysis, leaving an effective base of 921 respondents. We preregistered our analysis plan for this experiment with AsPredicted.org (See Appendix B, Section A for a copy of the pre-registration plan).

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: math/physics, U.S. history, or world history/international studies. Each respondent received the following question:

People have different views on who should bear responsibility for deciding what topics are taught to school children in classes such as [**math and physics/history and civics/international studies and world history**]. Please rank order the following in terms of who should have the most responsibility (1) to least responsibility (4) in making such decisions.

The options were: 1) parents; 2) teachers; 3) school board officials; 4) education experts. We created a dependent variable for 'parental responsibility' which ranges from 0 (least responsibility) to 1 (most responsibility) (4-point scale).⁵

Table 3. OLS Regression Results (DV = Parents should have main responsibility, ranking).

	Model 1 b/se	Model 2 b/se	Model 3 b/se	Model 4 b/se	Model 5 b/se
Civics and History	0.179(0.03)***	0.183(0.03)***	0.063(0.06)	0.211(0.05)***	0.099(0.06)-
Int. Studies & World History	0.21(0.03)***	0.196(0.03)***	0.126(0.06)**	0.183(0.05)***	0.13(0.06)**
Racial resentment Partisanship (1 = Strong Republican)		0.248(0.05)*** 0.043(0.04)	0.13(0.06)** 0.04(0.04)	0.249(0.05)*** 0.056(0.06)	0.104(0.06)* 0.103(0.06)*
Civics & History*Racial Resentment			0.229(0.09)**		0.309(0.10)***
Int. Studies/World History*Racial Resentment			0.13(0.09)		0.14(0.10)
Civics & History*Partisanship				-0.055(0.08)	-0.152(0.09)*
Int. Studies/World History*Partisanship				0.021(0.07)	-0.022(0.08)
Intercept	0.354(0.02)***	0.091(0.06)	0.158(0.06)**	0.088(0.07)	0.147(0.07)**
N	921	895	895	895	895
Adj R ²	0.05	0.145	0.148	0.144	0.149
F	32.978	10.359	9.776	9.69	9.236

Notes: Non-Hispanic whites only. Data collected on Lucid platform (November 9-15, 2021). Robust standard errors in parentheses. Controls include gender, age, income, education, religion, underage child in the home, and ideology. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

The moderators for this experiment are the four-item racial resentment scale ($\alpha = 0.76$) (higher values indicate greater levels of resentment) and the one-item partisanship scale (7-points, higher values indicate strong Republican).⁶ Consistent with best practices, the measure was asked after the experimental questions (Valenzuela & Reny, 2020). Racial resentment is a tested measure of racial prejudice that scholars have used extensively in research on policy preferences (Tesler, 2016). As with the first experiment, we control for ideology, gender, minor children in the household, age, education, religion, and income. Balance tests show that the demographics are balanced across treatments. Descriptive statistics can be found in Appendix Table B1. Collinearity analysis shows no concerns of multicollinearity in the models.

Given the ordinal nature of the dependent variable (4pts) and the presence of interaction models, we opted for linear regression analyses (Table 3). The full models are in Appendix Table B3. Alternate specifications with ordered logistic regression are in Appendix Table B2. Table 1, below shows the main effect and interaction results but we do not show the control variables. Our first main expectation was that White Americans would support parental involvement in U.S. History/civics more than in math/physics or international studies/world history. Parents should not want involvement in math/physics, where White racial interests are not challenged or very relevant, but seek more parental involvement in history, where

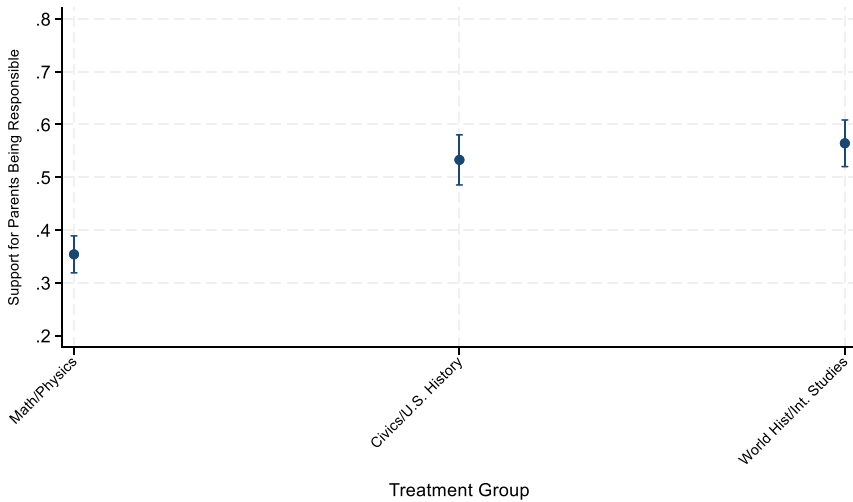


Figure 4. Main Treatment Effect on Support for Parents Bearing Most Responsibility for Curriculum Selection.

Notes: Non-Hispanic whites only. OLS regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals.

experts have challenged dominant racial narratives. Our expectation was that support for parental control in international studies/world history would fall in between the other two.⁷

Figure 4 shows the main effects of the treatments on support for parental involvement in curriculum design. As the figure shows, White respondents are significantly less supportive of parental responsibility in math/physics curriculum design than they are in U.S. history or world history ($p < 0.001$). Specifically, they are 18 percentage-points more supportive of parental control in history and 21 percentage-points in world history. Furthermore, contrary to expectations, White Americans do not differentiate between U.S. and world history when it comes to parental involvement preferences. This could be because Whites may believe that challenges to White racial interests are also introduced in critiques of colonialism and American foreign policy.

As a next step, we investigate the relative effect that racial resentment and partisanship have on White support for parental control over curriculum design. Figure 6, left panel, shows the effect of the treatments on support for parental control over topic selection as a function of racial resentment. The figure shows a positive relationship for both U.S. history/civics and international studies/world history: support for parental involvement increases as racial resentment increases. When racial resentment is at zero, White Americans are somewhat more likely to support parental involvement in curriculum decisions for history and world history than they are for the math/physics. (Hypothesis 1) Among those at the maximum level of racial resentment,

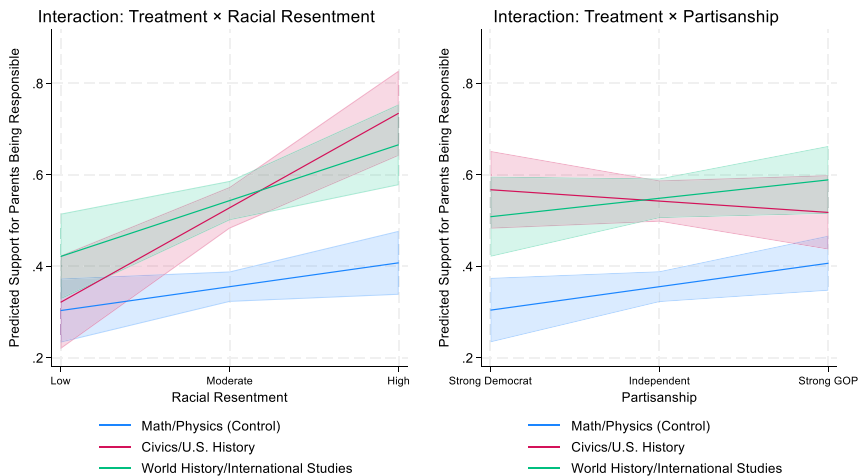


Figure 5. Interaction Effects with Racial Resentment and Partisanship on Parents Should Have Most Responsibility for Curriculum Selection.

Note: Non-Hispanic whites only. Lucid, 2021. OLS regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals. Controls: ideology, gender, age, income, education, religion, and child in the home.

however, support for parental control over U.S. history or world history curricula is approximately 30 percentage points higher than it is for math/physics ($p < 0.001$).

This is not the case for partisanship (Hypothesis 2). As the models show, the interaction with partisanship is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Figure 5, right panel, shows the null effect. Here, support for parental responsibility for topic selection in both history and world history is substantially higher than for math/physics, but there is no difference among Democrats and Republicans.

Results of our three-way interaction (Hypothesis 3) are not significant (Appendix Table B2).⁸ In our data, the correlation between racial resentment and partisanship is 0.38, which suggests variation across party lines. Among Democrats (including leaners), the mean racial resentment score is $M = 0.39$ ($SE = 0.014$), among independents it is $M = 0.535$ ($SE = 0.017$), and among Republicans (including leaners it is $M = 0.649$ ($SE = 0.012$)). The result of the interaction is null, which is not surprising given sample size limitations. The interaction suggests, however, that the effects of racial resentment may be stronger among independents and, to a degree, Democrats, not Republicans. This is consistent with the expectation of greater homogeneity in terms of racial resentment among Republicans, which produces ceiling effects and more variation among the other two groups (Figure 6). A future study with a larger sample is necessary to ensure that this is, in fact, the case.

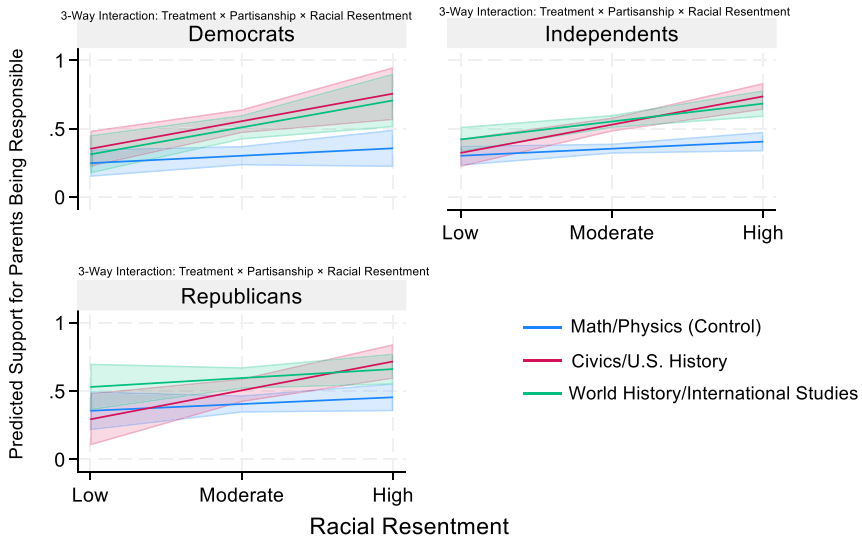


Figure 6. Three-Way Interaction Effects between Treatment, Partisanship, and Racial Resentment.

Note: Non-Hispanic whites only. Lucid, 2021. OLS regression results with robust standard errors. 95% confidence intervals. Controls: ideology, gender, age, income, education, religion, and child in the home.

Discussion

In two different studies, we tested whether partisan or racial spillover, or a combination of the two, may explain White Americans' support for citizen control in education decision-making. Our results show that White enthusiasm for 'parental rights' in education is not the result of a broad anti-intellectualism. Instead, we find strong evidence of the racial spillover thesis, which posits that in the post-Obama and Trump eras, racial priors are chronically activated and influence White Americans' policy preferences in a broad range of policies, not only racial policies such as affirmative action (Tesler, 2016). The first study shows that White Americans are more likely to support citizen control over K-12 education policy decisions than policing policymaking. Furthermore, we show that such support increases as a function of racial resentment, measured through a proxy measure. Conversely, support for citizen control of policing declines as a function of racial resentment. This suggests divergent racialisation processes across the two policies. The study shows weak evidence of partisan spillover. This first study has important limitations. First, lacking the actual racial resentment measure in the survey, we used a proxy measure. Subsequent pilot testing suggests that our measure taps into the same underlying beliefs as racial resentment, but the two are not identical. Second, the comparison between education and policing does not include a neutral policy comparison (e.g.,

transportation policy), which may have artificially increased the gap produced by the interaction with our racial resentment proxy measure.

A second experiment assuages concerns over these limitations. This experiment asked whether, within education policy, White Americans are more likely to support parental control over the history curriculum than the math/physics curricula. There is a long history of White American citizens organising movements meant to control the way history is taught in schools. As discussed, these movements were motivated by racial concerns in the past. As expected, we show that White people are more likely to support parental control over history and international studies than math/physics. We also show that the effect increases as a function of racial resentment but not partisanship. As with the first study, we show strong evidence of racial spillover in education policy, but not a generalised anti-intellectual tendency, nor a partisan spillover.

Taken together, these results suggest that White support for citizen control over education policy decisions and especially history curricula is motivated by racial considerations. As was the case with earlier movements, racially prejudiced White Americans are concerned with the presentation and positioning of their group in the official historical narrative, rather than the bureaucratisation of education policy (Zimmerman, 2022). The consequences of White insistence on monitoring what public school classrooms are teaching, combined with conservative political elites' openness to enabling such behaviours, can have grave consequences for the functioning of public schools in many communities embroiled in debates over the teaching of history. These patterns can have a negative effect on teacher morale and their willingness to stay in jobs that are relatively low pay and low in resources.

These studies have important limitations. First, there is concern that racial resentment captures – in part – conservative ideology (Neblo, 2009). Several scholars, however, have shown the reliability of racial resentment as a measure of racial prejudice (Tesler, 2016; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Yet, replication of the studies using other measures of racial prejudice, such as anti-Black stereotypes, would strengthen the contention that racial rather than partisan motivations undergird White support for parental control over school curricula and education policy in general. Second, our interaction results are not fully causally identified because we cannot randomly assign racial priors. The inclusion of relevant controls and of both relevant interactions goes a long way in minimising such concerns, however (Kam & Trussler, 2017). Finally, it is possible that our null effects for the partisanship interaction may be an artifact of our sample size. We used power calculations for medium-sized effects because theory suggests that the conditional effects of partisanship and racial resentment should be fairly large and easily detectible. If the substantive effect of partisanship is so small that it requires a very large sample size to detect, however, it is not substantively and thus theoretically meaningful.

Conclusion

While modern democracies have long turned to technocratic expertise to manage complex policy issues, especially in education, this reliance on professional knowledge increasingly clashes with populist demands for direct citizen control. Historically, reformers envisioned a collaborative model in which educators and parents would jointly shape equitable, effective schooling. Teachers and principals continue to welcome parental involvement and recognise its positive impact on student achievement. The current shift, encouraging parents to monitor and police educators, threatens this partnership. Such surveillance can chill cooperation, erode trust, and ultimately drive educators out of the profession – A lesson that Europe should heed as well. Not surprisingly, many education professionals view these developments as a crisis.

As our findings show, demands for lay influence over curriculum are not simply democratic calls for transparency or responsiveness; they are often driven by racial resentment and anxieties over cultural status. In this context, the push for ‘citizen control’ becomes a vehicle for protecting ethno-racial privilege rather than enhancing democratic accountability. The rise of MAGA populism in the U.S. illustrates how racialized movements can exploit decentralised governance structures like school boards to erode civil rights, academic freedom, and public trust in expertise. While these developments reflect long-standing racial divides in American education politics, they are now amplified by national partisan dynamics that weaponize local debates for broader political gain. As our study demonstrates, racial attitudes – not partisan polarisation alone – best explain why White Americans increasingly favour lay control over what students learn, especially in subjects like history and civics that touch on national identity.

This dynamic offers a warning for other democracies. As European nations contend with rising immigration, diversity, and right-wing populist mobilisation, the U.S. experience underscores the danger of allowing racialized populism to distort participatory governance. When citizen involvement is shaped more by identity politics than by a commitment to pluralism and equity, democratising technocratic processes may not enhance democracy but instead deepen existing injustices. Moving forward, building resilient educational institutions will require not only defending professional expertise but also addressing the social hierarchies that populists seek to reassert through the language of democratic control.

Notes

1. The network has even created a dedicated tab on its website (<https://www.foxnews.com/category/us/critical-race-theory>). The articles blend stories about DEI, criminal justice policies, religious victimhood, and other concerns.

2. We also conducted a test to determine whether using the term ‘residents’ or ‘parents’ in the context of education decision-making affected support for citizen control among White Americans. The study which was conducted in July 2023 on Lucid and included 847 non-Hispanic White respondents used the same question wording as the one used in the 2021 study, but half of the respondents were offered the option of ‘parents from within the district’ and the other half saw ‘residents from within the district.’ The result of a bivariate analysis shows a null effect of the treatment ($b = 0.020$; $p = 0.471$). Furthermore, the interaction between the treatment and racial resentment is also null ($b = 0.050$; $p = 0.658$). This test assuages any concerns that White respondents may respond to ‘parents’ and ‘residents’ differently. For details on this test, see Appendix Table A2b.
3. All ordinal and continuous variables in the analysis are transformed into 0–1 scales consistent with the original nature of the variable. For example, a 4-pt variable with values 1-2-3-4 would be transformed to 0-0.3333-0.6666-1. In the case of partisanship, we transformed the 7pt scale into 0–1 as above in the direction of strong Republicans (strong Republicans are denoted as 1 and strong Democrats as 0). Similarly, ideology is transformed in the direction of conservatives. Racial resentment is transformed in the direction of very resentful. This allows us to interpret the coefficients as maximum effects (the change in probability from 0 to 1) and compare across variables.
4. Exploratory models show null interactions between the treatment and gender and between the treatment and having minor children in the household. We find a significant and positive interaction between the treatment and being a born-again Christian, but only in the LPM model. In the logistic model, the interaction is null. See Appendix Tables A4-A5.
5. The dependent variable is thus coded as: 1, 0.666, 0.333, 0.
6. One could expect that more respondents would feel comfortable with parental involvement or control of the history and international studies curriculum because they expect the average parent to have a better appreciation for topics in these subjects. By contrast, most parents do not have expertise in math and physics. However, there is no reason that this should differ by levels of racial resentment or partisanship.
7. Interestingly, Florida’s Republican Governor Ron DeSantis rejected 54 math textbooks because they ‘incorporate prohibited topics or unsolicited strategies, including [critical race theory]’ Florida Department of Education. (2022). *Florida Rejects Publishers’ Attempts to Indoctrinate Students*. The press release did not specify examples of these topics. Our experiment predates the Florida decision.
8. Exploratory interactions with gender, having a minor child in the household, and being Evangelical are also null. See Appendix.

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Authors’ contributions

The authors claim equal credit for this study.

Availability of data and material

Anonymized data for the study are available at the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8SUFEM>.

Code availability

Code is available in Stata 19.

Consent to participate

All respondents were informed about the purposes of the study, the risks and benefits, confidentiality, and privacy. Since the studies were conducted on the Internet, signatures were waived, and informed consent was obtained through selecting to participate in the survey. Participants were told that they could end their participation at any time and withdraw their data if they so wished. All respondents were also informed about the fictitious nature of the story and were given the option to withdraw consent. The data for those who withdrew consent were discarded and not included in any analyses.

Consent for publication

The IRB-approved consent form either implicitly or explicitly includes consent for publication. In all cases, respondents are told that the researchers are only collecting de-identified data. All data used in the analyses stem from de-identified and aggregated data so there is no way people's individual responses can be tracked from our analysis or the replication code we provide.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics approval

Study 1 was approved by the Hofstra University IRB. The University of Illinois IRB approved Study 2. We certify that the studies were performed per the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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