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All Curriculum Politics Is National

> When we do not have definitive research to answer a question about policy or practice, we can easily slip over the line and privilege ideology and belief over other evidence.
>
> —P. David Pearson, "The Reading Wars"

The first thing I noticed about North Dakota Rep. Corey Mock, as I read his biography in preparation for our interview, was his birthday – just two weeks before my own. But he had accomplished a lot in the first thirty-eight years of his life. Mock was elected to his state legislature in 2008, making him a seasoned veteran by the time we spoke more than a decade and a half later, and he had been an active participant in many education policy debates. Between 2012 and 2018, Mock was involved in Democratic leadership in his chamber, serving as the minority leader for the last two years, before founding a bipartisan leadership caucus.

I reached out to Mock because North Dakota, like many red states, has been riven by educational controversies in recent years. In particular, I was interested in two bills that had passed in the previous legislative session. Both sought to impose new curricular standards and regulate what teachers did in the classroom. But one had passed on a near-party-line vote, while other enjoyed large bipartisan majorities. I wanted to ask why Mock himself had voted yes on one bill (along with a majority of his Democratic colleagues), but no on the other (along with nearly all Democrats). A similar pattern had been playing out in state after state.

Chapter 3 demonstrated how the growing nationalization of American politics has contributed to the increasingly polarized public opinion on a variety of education policies. In this chapter, I shift focus from the *masses*,

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the regular voters, to examine the behavior of *elites* – the elected officials like Rep. Mock who actually write education policies at the state level.

Specifically, I focus on political conflicts over state academic and curricular standards – the topic of the two North Dakota bills. Adult disagreements about what American children should (and should not) be taught in our schools are age-old phenomena. Typically, these debates play out behind the scenes – in the pages of dense academic articles published in scholarly journals read by very few people and through concerted lobbying and advocacy efforts of particularly motivated "political entrepreneurs" who work to popularize obscure theories and subsidize the cost of translating these often abstract ideas into concrete policies (Mintrom, 1997). Occasionally, however, these conflicts capture national attention when they intersect with the most salient political issues of the day or when the relevant policy fault lines happen to fall along existing identity-based alliances. This occurred in the 1920s, with the famous Scopes Monkey Trial and a series of efforts by Christian fundamentalists to outlaw the teaching of evolution (Larson, 2003), and again in the early 2000s, surrounding efforts by the President George W. Bush to limit federal funding for sex education to curriculum that focused exclusively on abstinence (Irvine, 2004).

In this chapter, I zoom in on two other more recent curricular controversies and related state legislative efforts to regulate how American history and elementary reading skills are taught in the classroom, the topics of my conversation with Rep. Mock. The first debate, surrounding the extent to which so-called Critical Race Theory (CRT) along with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have infiltrated public schools, attracted particular attention among the political right since the publication of the *1619 Project*, a special 2019 edition of the *New York Times* Magazine that sought to reframe American history around the introduction of chattel slavery into the Americas and the broader contributions of African-Americans to our collective history. As I discuss in the next section, this was not the first time debates about history curriculum – and the extent to which it should celebrate the aspirations of America's founding principles or highlight the many shameful episodes when the country failed to live up to them – came to dominate policy debates.

The second argument, about the role that systematic phonics instruction should play in teaching early elementary students to read, has earned an even more prominent place in historical curricular battles. In his *Atlantic Monthly* article on the California "reading wars" of the mid 1990s, journalist Nicholas Lemann observed that "the two sides have one

of the purest and angriest disagreements I've ever encountered" (Lemann, 1997, p. 129). Lemann quoted an anonymous lawmaker: "We're in the midst of a huge war." Another source used even more evocative language, telling Lemann, "This is worse than abortion."

In recounting how these once-arcane academic debates became the central focus of state education policy innovation in the early 2020s, I highlight the fascinating parallels between these two issues. Both include outsized roles played by two public media personalities – PBS documentarian turned conservative provocateur Christopher Rufo and American Public Media investigative journalist Emily Hanford – whose relentless (and some might say obsessive) focus on these curricular issues helped attract newfound attention from parents, activists, and ultimately state policymakers.[1] Both illustrate the challenging dynamics of translating complex – and often unsettled – scholarly debates about research methodology and epistemology into nuanced policy recommendations made amid heated national political campaigns.

Perhaps most interesting and revealing are the divergent political coalitions that have pushed through state legislation in these areas in recent years. Although both curricular issues raise broader normative and theoretical questions related to teacher autonomy and expertise and the desirability of political oversight of schools, efforts to use legislation to standardize both reading and history instruction have followed quite different paths. In reading, new "science of reading" laws have in most cases been adopted by overwhelmingly bipartisan coalitions, largely erasing the partisan polarization that characterized policymaking on this issue in the 1990s and early 2000s. By contrast, anti-CRT bills have been passed with almost exclusively Republican votes – often in the same states and during the same sessions as the reading legislation. North Dakota's experience, in other words, had been replicated in state after state.

In describing and ultimately helping explain these diverging dynamics, my account leverages a variety of information sources and modes of inquiry. I complement large-N, quantitative analysis of state legislative roll call votes with original interviews with a broad set of informants, including education scholars and researchers, prominent policy activists, and ultimately the elected officials themselves. As I discuss in the concluding section, the recent wave of state curricular policymaking also can

[1] In another fascinating parallel, Columbia linguist and *New York Times* columnist John McWhorter played a supporting role in both debates, harshly criticizing *1619 Project*-inspired history curriculum and repeatedly advocating in favor of phonics.

also inform theoretical models of federalism, presidential leadership, and the emergence of bureaucratic cultures – topics relevant in many policy spheres outside of education.

HONEST HISTORY OR POLITICAL INDOCTRINATION?

The country we know today as the United States of America was not founded in 1776, with the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, but rather in August of 1619, when the first ship carrying enslaved Africans reached the colonies. So argued the editor's note leading off the special August 2019 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* titled the *1619 Project*. The note continued:

> This is sometimes referred to as the country's original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country's very origin.
>
> Out of slavery – and the anti-black racism it required – grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence from Britain

In the lead essay of this issue, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones argued perhaps even more provocatively, "Our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all." Hannah-Jones would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for her essay, and the special issue of the magazine would fly off newsstands, with copies appearing on eBay at significant markups.

Almost immediately, however, the publication generated significant questions about the historical accuracy of some of its most controversial arguments – including the claim in Hannah-Jones's essay that the founders "believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue." "Some might argue," she concluded, "that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy."

A group of prominent academic historians quickly challenged this claim in a letter written to the newspaper's top editors. Although the historians were sympathetic with the broader goal of making slavery a more central theme in the understanding of American history, they

objected to what they described as clear factual errors in the piece. "These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or 'framing.' They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism. They suggest a displacement of historical understanding by ideology," the historians wrote.[2] In a separate, blistering piece written for *Politico*, another historian, Northwestern University scholar of African-American Studies Leslie Harris, revealed that she had "vigorously disputed" the claim that the Revolutionary War had been fought to protect slavery during the *Times*' fact-checking process, only to see it remain in the published article (Harris, 2020*b*).

In response to growing criticism, the magazine's editor declined to issue a correction, writing: "Within the world of academic history, differing views exist, if not over what precisely happened, then about why it happened, who made it happen, how to interpret the motivations of historical actors and what it all means."[3] (However, the paper did slightly edit the introductory language of the online version of the magazine.)

The controversy may have remained limited to the pages of national news outlets and social media were it not for the decision of the *Times* to partner with the Pulitzer Center[4] to develop school curriculum organized around the magazine. The specter of a disputed historical account – depicting an unconventional theory for the causes behind American independence, written by an avowedly political journalist and challenged by a number of respected historians – being adapted for wide classroom use attracted considerable attention among prominent conservatives. In February 2020, Robert Woodson, an African-American economic development advocate, organized an effort he called "1776 Unites," featuring the voices of well-known right-of-center African-American academics and intellectuals writing in response to the *1619 Project*.[5] These efforts

[2] Although most of the criticism focused on lead essay penned by Hannah-Jones, some also found questionable assertions in other pieces in the magazine, including an essay by sociologist Matthew Desmond linking slavery and capitalism and claiming, incorrectly, that certain modern accounting practices have "roots [that] twist back to slave-labor camps."

[3] The *Times* published the historians' original letter as well as its response, and both are available at www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html.

[4] Despite the same name, the Pulitzer Center is not affiliated Columbia University, which awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

[5] The essays would be published in 2021 in a book titled *Red, White, and Black: Rescuing American History from Revisionists and Race Hustlers*.

would only accelerate in the aftermath of the murder George Floyd that May, which set off a wave of racial justice protests and a more general racial reckoning.

Over the summer of 2020, growing conservative criticism of the publication gave rise to political action. Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton introduced legislation, "Saving American History Act of 2020," that sought to cut federal funding to schools that incorporated the *1619 Project* into formal instruction. Although the proposal quickly died, copycat bills were also introduced in several state legislatures.[6] The issue gained new political prominence when President Donald Trump, responding to anonymous tweet claiming that the *1619 Project* was being taught in California schools, announced that the federal government was investigating the matter. "Department of Education is looking at this. If so, they will not be funded!" he wrote in an early morning tweet on Sunday, September 6.

The president would return to the topic several times throughout the course of that fall's presidential campaign, including by issuing an executive order the day before the November election establishing a "1776 Commission." The order cited a "a series of polemics grounded in poor scholarship [that] has vilified our Founders and our founding" and claimed that, "[d]espite the virtues and accomplishments of this Nation, many students are now taught in school to hate their own country, and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes, but rather villains."[7]

The early criticisms of the *1619 Project* curriculum – perhaps fueled by the salience of the election and raw debates unfolding over the summer of 2020 – soon merged with broader conservative attacks on government and corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This campaign was spearheaded by Christopher Rufo, a one-time documentary-maker and failed Seattle city council candidate. Working as a fellow at the right-leaning Manhattan Institute, Rufo had begun publishing exposés on controversial DEI trainings – starting with his home city of Seattle. Diving deep into the footnotes of some of the training materials, Rufo discovered that many of the ideas had been drawn from scholars advocating for a mode of legal and social analysis known as Critical Race Theory. This scholarship emphasized the importance of implicit (as opposed to

[6] A group of students in my American State Politics class interviewed the author of the Arkansas bill for a project in spring 2021. He specifically cited Cotton's bill as an inspiration.

[7] The commission issued its widely panned report, calling for "patriotic education," the following January, just days before the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

explicit) biases, examined how racial inequities were sometimes built into the structures and institutions of American government and society, and criticized the aspirational ideal of race-blindness associated with earlier civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King (Wallace-Wells, 2021).

Rufo caught the attention of President Trump during one of Rufo's appearances on conservative cable television and soon incorporated criticisms of the *1619 Project* into broader legislative packages seeking to ban teaching that promoted "divisive concepts," encouraged racial resentment, or rejected the view that slavery and racism represented failures to live up to America's founding principles, rather than inherent motivations for the country's independence. The Rufo-inspired proposals became the basis for model state legislation and legislative efforts that would continue even after the change in presidential administrations.

History Conflicts, Old and New

That political backlash would come in response controversial history curriculum would not have surprised veterans of similar battles, which date back to at least the mid 1800s, when Northern and Southern states adopted markedly different approaches to teaching about the Civil War. The unique political sensitivity of history instruction should not be surprising. "The American people care deeply about the history their children learn. Study of the past, after all, embodies many of the most fundamental messages we, as a nation, wish to send to young citizens," a trio of distinguished historians wrote in a volume on the history of history wars (Nash, Crabtree and Dunn, 1997). "The past we choose to remember defines a large measure of our national citizens. The past we choose to remember defines in large measure our national character, transmits the values and self-images we hold dear, and preserves the events, glorious and shameful, extraordinary and mundane, that constitute our legacy from the past and inspire our hopes for the future" (p. IX).

The authors were speaking from personal experience: In the early 1990s, they became themselves entangled in a deep and highly partisan conflict over efforts to develop a model, nationally endorsed history curriculum. Under President Bill Clinton's signature education program, dubbed "Goals 2020," states were expected to develop uniform standards across many subjects and submit them for federal government review and approval. In 1994, a history center at UCLA released a list of proposed national history standards that quickly attracted conservative ire. Lynne Cheney, the former head of the National Endowment for

the Humanities during several Republican presidential administrations and wife of future Vice President Dick Cheney, panned the proposed standards as providing "a very warped view of American history" and complained, "They make it sound as if everything in America is wrong and grim" (Associated Press, 1994). Republicans would win control of Congress a few weeks later and quickly defund the Clinton initiative, causing the issue to fade from the headlines.[8]

A similar controversy would arise exactly two decades later. In 2014, the College Board – which administers the Advanced Placement exams that high school students take to earn college credit – announced the first major reworking of the "framework" for the AP U.S. History exam in more than half a century. Although the revision reflected teacher demand for greater clarity and specificity of the topics and skills students needed to master for the test, decisions about what was included versus excluded as well as the choice of some politically charged adjectives used to describe figures such as Ronald Reagan quickly prompted a wave of criticism. In a resolution blasting the new framework, the Republican National Committee charged that the redesigned course "reflects a radically revisionist view of American history that emphasizes negative aspects of our nation's history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects"[9] Unlike the editors of the *New York Times*, who doubled down in the face of conservative criticism, the College Board quickly acknowledged the validity of some of the complaints and reached out to critics, inviting them to participate in further revisions. The deliberations and further changes seemed to produce what one initially critical historian described as a "an impressive middle ground" (Simon, 2016).

These were, however, only the most recent salvos in the history wars (for detailed overview, see Jost, 1995; Zimmerman, 2022). During the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, critics attacked what they saw an intentional rewriting of the history of American independence to provide a more favorable depiction of the British – America's newfound ally in World War I. During the 1920s, Chicago Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson led an organized effort to push out the city's superintendent and remove what he saw as "biased" history textbooks. "I will never

[8] Gearing up for his ultimately unsuccessful presidential campaign, Senator Majority Leader Bob Dole would echo Cheney's criticism the following year, telling an audience at a meeting of the American Legion that the proposed standards "disparage America and disown the ideas and traditions of the West" (Schoenberg, 1995).

[9] Available at https://prod-cdn-static.gop.com/docs/RESOLUTION_CONCERNING_ADVANCED_PLACEMENT_US_HISTORY_APUSH.pdf.

rest until the histories in use in the Chicago public schools are purged of their pro-British propaganda," Thompson had thundered (Zimmerman, 2022, p. 9).

Indeed, the record reveals three important patterns in the past battles over history curriculum. First, the political sensitivity of history instruction has, in previous eras, reflected the geopolitical climate of the times and tended to focus on the boogeyman of the moment. Thus, during the Cold War, much focus turned on rooting out what some had seen as anti-capitalist, pro-Communist propaganda. Second, the geopolitical conflicts were most likely to escalate into curricular battles when they happened to coincide with broader activist movements within the academy. Many Progressive education reformers, for example, made little secret of their admiration of the Soviet Union – at least until Stalin's staged show trials to purge his political enemies. This made it easier for critics of Progressive pedagogy to accuse them of being Soviet stooges, a criticism that befell Progressive historian Harold Rugg, who had authored a widely used history text in the 1930s that included some passing critiques of American consumerism.[10]

Third, as the Progressive era illustrates, conflicts are particularly likely to arise when political activists attempt to use school curriculum as a tool in a broader campaign to promote what they view is unobjectionable, positive social change. In the late 1980s, for example, debates about history instruction were hijacked and co-opted by broader political conflicts over multiculturalism. Well-meaning and quite reasonable efforts to ensure that voices of racial and ethnic minorities found more prominent representation in the textbooks sometimes went overboard. For example, one such campaign to promote "Afrocentric" education that centered and celebrated the contributions and history of ancient African civilizations quickly crossed over into outright racism and anti-Semitism. A prominent advocate for Afrocentric education, City University of New York political scientist Leonard Jeffries, made national headlines when he claimed that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a conspiracy organized by Jewish entrepreneurs and that Jews had partnered with the Italian Mafia to build "a financial system of destruction of Black people." World history, Jeffries argued, needed to be understood as a race war between the "Ice People" of European descent and the dark-skinned "Sun People," with

[10] A number of groups, including the American Legion, were outraged over what they saw as Rugg's "socialistic" slant and led a national campaign to have his textbook removed from schools around the country.

the amount of melanin in one's skin also correlating with physical and intellectual prowess (Taub, 1993).

Many of the same considerations shaped the political reception to the *1619 Project*. What some saw as a reasonable and overdue effort to more prominently center the history of African-Americans and popularize ideas from more recent (and still contested) historical scholarship others interpreted as just the latest effort by deranged activists in the mold of Jeffries to hijack history education to brainwash America's youth using fringy and debunked ideas.

READING WORLD WAR III

Just as with high-profile national arguments about social studies, debates about the proper way to teach reading date back almost to the very beginning of American public education (Mathews, 1966). For the first century, they surrounded the process and order in which reading skills should be taught – pitting supporters of the "ABC method," which focused on students first mastering the alphabet, against their arch-rivals, who argued that students should begin by memorizing whole words, with appreciation of individual letters to follow. The latter group enjoyed the support of one of the most prominent educational reformers of the nineteenth century, Horace Mann, the founding secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Mann, who famously described letters as "skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions," became an early and vocal advocate on behalf of the whole-word method. John Dewey, the father of the modern Progressive education movement, was another promoter, worrying that the skills-based approach associated with traditional "phonics" instruction put too much emphasis on dull and tedious drilling of students on letters and letter-sound correspondence, destroying children's innate love of learning.[11]

By the late 1950s, phonics appeared to have decisively won the debate. Growing American anxiety about falling behind the Soviet Union in the space race coincided with the publication of Rudloph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read*, an unexpected 1955 bestseller that blamed poor

[11] Dewey was not particularly interested in curriculum for traditional academic subjects or in providing formal instruction in skills like writing, reading, or spelling, believing that "the true way is to teach them incidentally as the outgrowth of the social activities." However, his experimental school had to use *some* method of reading instruction, and he endorsed the whole-word method promoted by his University of Chicago colleague Francis Wayland Parker (Mathews, 1966).

reading proficiency of American children on the widespread use of whole-word instruction. As Harvard literacy researcher James Kim has written, "In the context of the cold war, Flesch's back-to-basics, phonics-first, message was embraced by many politicians and citizens who feared that the American educational system was losing ground to the Russians" (Kim, 2004, p. 91). Despite a growing research base of experimental studies providing empirical evidence for the superiority of the phonics method, the new consensus would not survive the end of the 1960s, however.

The second round of reading wars again pitted phonics against a newcomer, which came to be known as whole language. Although whole-language proponents lodged many of the same complaints about the drudgery of phonics instruction as advocates of the earlier whole-word method, they offered a fundamentally different vision of how reading should be taught. In the interest of space, I will not dive into the fascinating details behind the philosophical, methodological, and theoretical foundations of whole language – entire books could be (and indeed have been) written about this topic.[12] Instead, I will briefly summarize the key points of disagreement that divided whole-language and phonics supporters:

- A central tenet of phonics instruction is that reading is an unnatural act for which the human brain has not intentionally evolved. Thus, teaching children to master reading requires systematic and explicit, teacher-led instruction and individual practice, starting with basic skills including phonemic awareness (breaking down spoken words into individual sounds) and phonics (learning the correspondence between written letters and these sounds). Whole language rejects this belief, arguing that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak, and that students immersed in rich and authentic literature will naturally pick up the essential skills on their own, without explicit instruction.
- While phonics prioritizes teaching students the various letter-sound patterns that characterize much of the English language, whole-language proponents argue that English is far too complex – combining influences from many other languages, producing too many caveats, exceptions, and irregular spellings to be accurately summarized by a small set of simple rules of thumb. The extent to which

[12] Interested readers can find useful overviews in Kim (2004) and Pearson (2004).

most written English follows predictable rules and the impediment that exceptions pose to a rules-based approach to teaching reading remains a significant point of disagreement between the two camps.

- Given the importance of letter-sound correspondence, phonics-based instruction requires that students begin with appropriately sequenced decodable texts that limit the vocabulary to words following standard spelling and pronunciation conventions students have learned up to that point. Whole-language proponents find decodable readers too limiting and inauthentic – "linguistically vapid" (Strauss, 2005, p. 27) – preferring to expose children to richer, more traditional texts, including those using irregular spelling structures and letter combinations about which early readers may not have received systematic instruction (to the extent that they received any systematic instruction at all!).
- Perhaps more abstractly, the two camps also disagree about the purpose of reading instruction and the processes by which reading mastery is achieved. Although both sides acknowledge that the ultimate goal of reading is *comprehension* – understanding the messages and ideas encoded in the written word – phonics supporters believe young readers must begin by developing a toolbox to decode written texts and "attack" or "solve" unfamiliar words. Whole language begins with the end point, arguing that the purpose of reading is to construct meaning out of written texts and that decoding the structure of written language by breaking words down into the letters that compose them is only one of several strategies readers can use to extract such meaning.
- Ultimately, the core of the disagreement is about the essential ingredients in the recipe that leads to good readers. Phonics proponents believe these ingredients include set of learned skills that must be taught by a teacher and practiced repeatedly. Reading is a marathon, and before one can run, the child has to learn to crawl and then walk. Whole language proponents believe the essential ingredient is student motivation to find meaning in texts. Such motivation comes only from exposure to interesting and relevant texts, and boring skills-based practice only erodes it.

Most relevant to the present account, and to me the most fascinating aspect of this story, is that the scholarly debate about reading instruction that heated up again in the 1970s took on a strikingly partisan and ideological valence, spilling out of academic journals into political debates.

During my research, I interviewed many observers and participants of the reading wars, asking each the same question: How did phonics become seen as the Republican way to teach reading, while whole language come to be considered the Democratic method? Each offered a plausible answer to this question – but, strikingly, nearly every person's account was a different one!

Harvard's James Kim hypothesized that the ethos of student-centered pedagogy emphasizing teacher autonomy and empowerment that provided one of the philosophical foundations for whole language appealed to teachers and their unions, a core part of the Democratic political coalition. Reading researcher Tim Shanahan, who served on the congressionally mandated National Reading Panel (NRP) in the late 1990s – which I will discuss in more detail in the next section – pointed me to a 2000 *Chicago Tribune* article claiming that Republican presidential hopeful Barry Goldwater had written a pro-phonics plank into the 1964 Republican Party platform. A closer look at the actual platform, however, revealed nothing about reading instruction, although I did discover that the late conservative firebrand (and Goldwater supporter) Phyllis Schlafly was a vocal phonics supporter and had written her own book, the *First Reader*, extolling the method.[13]

Perhaps the most compelling account for the politicization of reading instruction was offered by Linda Diamond, a long-time phonics advocate in California and co-founder of the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education, which played a prominent role in legislative debates about reading instruction in that state in the 1990s. Many whole-language supporters, Diamond told me, had become enamored with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. A foundational text in critical pedagogy, the 1968 book brings a stridently anti-colonial, Marxist lens to debates about education methods. Recounting Freire's experience teaching reading to indigenous peasants, the book "used a naturalistic approach, and that became very appealing in this sort of Progressive education world" that characterized much of the whole-language movement, Diamond told me.

[13] The website selling Schlafly-branded merchandise notes: "It is important to use *First Reader* before the child is taught wrong habits, such as pretending to 'read' by looking at pictures, guessing what is in the text or memorizing a story." As discuss in more detail (Section "'Phonics' to 'Science of Reading'"), this language mirrors recent arguments against the "three-cueing" method widely used in schools today and the target of recently passed "science of reading" bills.

Progressive educators had long complained that "traditionalists" – including phonics proponents – were too obsessed with promoting efficiency and workforce skills (e.g., Kliebard, 1995). This privileged the demands of capitalism and employers over student needs. And to many, teacher-led direct instruction, the preferred method in the phonics camp, felt too authoritarian and top-down. For this community of scholars and educators, whole language's philosophical commitment to student-centered learning was particularly attractive.

Regardless of the original reason for why scholarly debates about reading instruction became so intimately intertwined with modern American partisan politics, the connection was clear to all combatants in the reading wars. Summarizing this political ethos, one group of scholars has written that "whole-language instruction [was] seen as a means for advancing a political agenda descending from earlier Progressive movements in education. They [saw] education as a vehicle for individual liberation and the classroom as a model for an egalitarian society, in which each individual is free to develop at his or her own rate" (McKenna, Stahl and Reinking, 1995, p. 213).

The partisan valence – and the widespread view among activists that phonics was inherently a "conservative" approach to reading – clearly rankled many prominent phonics proponents, most of whom saw themselves as political liberals who believed helping disadvantage children master reading was essential to delivering both racial and economic equity. Cognitive scientist Keith Stanovich, who authored some of the earliest path-breaking empirical research on the psychology of reading starting in the 1970s, seemed clearly offended by the notion that phonics supporters were just Republican apparatchiks when I asked him about the partisan divide. "We were called right-wing by the whole-language proponents, but that was a strategy to discredit us among teachers," he told me. "The final irony here is that the teaching method that really supercharges social class differences in achievement is whole language!"[14]

[14] In a book compiling his highest-profile research, Stanovich criticized whole-language proponents for their dogmatic politics: "We must stop creating a progressive politics where to be of the left you must oppose science. We must stop expelling people from the progressive coalition unless they check their brains at the door. . . . The cleavage between progressive social policies and scientific research that the extreme whole language advocates have caused in the field has many negative effects, not the least of which is that it gives right-wing forces a club with which to attack teacher autonomy and progressive educational reforms" (Stanovich, 2000, p. 387).

"They all called us right wingers just because we were phonics people," Linda Diamond explained, emphasizing her own progressive bonafides – her mother had served as president of the Southern California Democratic Club and her father, a self-avowed Communist, had been hauled in to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee during Sen. Joe McCarthy's Red Scare. P. David Pearson, a long-time literacy scholar and retired dean of the UC Berkeley School of Education who describes himself as a "moderate" in the reading wars, told me nearly all of the phonics supporters he knew were progressives ideologically sympathetic with the "Bernie Sanders wing" of the Democratic Party – a far cry from the right-wing stereotype associated with the approach.

California Dreams or Nightmares?

By the mid 1980s, whole language was clearly ascendant in the educational zeitgeist. Writing in 1989, Pearson seemed almost astounded by its takeover of the education world:

> The reading field seems to have a special knack for attracting wide-scale reforms – one after another, after another, after another. But never have I witnessed anything like the rapid spread of the whole-language movement. Pick your metaphor – an epidemic, wildfire, manna from heaven – whole language has spread so rapidly throughout North America that it is a fact of life in literacy curriculum and research (1989, p. 230).

As I discuss in the concluding section of this chapter, it should not be surprising that many educators – and, more importantly, professors teaching in the colleges of education that prepare future teachers – found much to like with the whole-language paradigm. It's focus on student-centered pedagogy and emphasis on having students "construct" individual meaning out texts aligned well with the dominant theoretical paradigms popular among education scholars. This is also one reason why many anti-racist texts, including those that would ultimately become targets in the CRT-debate, saw wide adoption on education school curricula several decades later.

As whole language gained new adherents, supporters flexed their political muscles – for example, pushing for laws that prohibited the use of state money for phonics-adjacent curriculum such as spelling books (Kim, 2004). California represented the first major political showdown, where whole-language supporters would win the battle but perhaps also lay the foundation for losing the broader war.

In 1982, California voters elected an energetic education reformer Bill Honig as state superintendent. The Democrat promised a "back to basics" overhaul of the state's education system and oversaw the development of several statewide "frameworks" to provide guidance to textbook publishers and local districts about curricular expectations. At the time, the social studies framework attracted the greatest attention and controversy – pitting advocates of multiculturalism who demanded greater focus on the perspectives and contributions of various underrepresented minorities and traditionalists who believed the history books underplayed the influence of Christianity on the country's history and traditions. Honig seemed to endorse both views, and the final framework called for a spicier approach to history instruction that required schools to "accurately portray the cultural and racial diversity of our society" while recognizing the "centrality of Western civilizations as the source of American political institutions, laws and ideology." When activists on the left remained unsatisfied, objecting that the additional focus on minorities was full of stereotypes and was still presented from a white perspective, Honig fired back, calling critics "tribalists," "separatists," and out-of-touch academics who "make a livelihood discrediting broader cultural ideas" (Reinhold, 1991).

On reading, however, Honig seemed to embrace whole language – by accident, he later claimed. Honig agreed with whole language's embrace of authentic texts in the classroom in place of monotonous worksheets, drills, and short, poorly adapted excerpts. The reading framework rejected dumbed-down textbooks and called on schools to have students read great literature. Conspicuously, the document spent little on basic reading skills, including phonemic awareness and phonics – lessons previously covered in the disfavored textbooks.

Whether Honig realized he had thrown his support behind whole language or whether he had been hoodwinked remains unclear. Writing in the *Atlantic*, Lemann described Honig as a "privileged idealist from San Francisco, tall, skinny, and enthusiastic to the point of obsession." When I spoke to Honig, now in his mid 80s, he seemed to have the same energy and passion. Honig had always understood the importance of phonics, he told me, and took for granted that it was regularly taught in schools without being explicitly singled out in the state framework. "We really pushed literature. We wanted all kids to have a good basis in humanities," he said. "Our framework really pushed that. . . . What we screwed up on – I just assumed everyone would be teaching phonics, so we mentioned it but we didn't really push it. I've never heard of whole language,

but whole language usurped that framework and said, 'See, you don't have to teach phonics!'"[15]

Whatever the intent, whole language came to dominate California reading instruction. In a survey administered alongside the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a federal exam designed to track changes in student achievement over time, 87 percent of California teachers reported heavy reliance on literature-based readings (vs. 50 nationally) and 52 percent reported little or no instruction on phonics (vs. 33 percent in other states) (Kim, 2004).

The 1992 NAEP, the first to produce separate test scores for each state, shook California education politics like an earthquake. Long seen as a national leader in academic achievement, the newly released scores had put California neck-in-neck with Mississippi at the bottom of the pack. "State's Pupils Among Worst in Reading," a front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed the day after the results were released.[16]

Honig, by then forced out of office in a conflict-of-interest scandal, channeled his limitless energy into a new effort to restore phonics in California schools, bringing the passion and zealotry of a religious convert.[17] He teamed up with Linda Diamond, the CORE co-founder I quoted earlier in this section, and Marion Joseph, a retired aide to a former state superintendent and grandmother of a struggling reader. Together, they lobbied the legislature to pass new laws overhauling reading curriculum and teacher preparation – the "purest and angriest disagreements" Lemann noticed when he arrived in California to write his article – firmly entrenching phonics into state law. Apparently just as shocked by California's slide in the rankings, other states also followed suit. By 1997, nearly three dozen states had passed their own legislation emphasizing phonemic awareness and explicit phonics instruction (Kim, 2004).

[15] Other observers have a different memory of the events. Honig "was extremely naive," Tom Loveless, a curriculum experts who used to lead the Brookings Institution's education policy center, told me. "He fancied himself a progressive and he really fell in love with whole language."

[16] Although state officials blamed California's high immigrant population, this didn't appear to explain the abysmal results. The national exam allowed states to exclude non-native speakers with insufficient English proficiency – and California dropped 11 percent of the students in its sample, the highest rate in the country. California's native English-speaking Anglo students also scored in the bottom fifth of the country.

[17] Not everyone agreed that whole language was to blame for California's poor performance. Some officials also pointed to the education funding cuts that had followed the adoption of Proposition 13 in 1978, reducing local property taxes and capping their future increases.

At the end, the California legislative package passed by nearly unanimous margins, with little or no opposition to the relevant bills. Although no systematic analysis of roll call votes has been done in other states, a number of contemporaneous observers interpreted the new phonics push through a partisan lens. In a 2000 article titled, appropriately, "The Politics of Phonics," curriculum scholar Frances Paterson found that more sixty-five percent of the sponsors introducing phonics legislation at the state level were Republicans, with the rate increasing in later years. Paterson, an apparent whole-language sympathizer, also examined state party platforms and identified provisions supportive of phonics in six Republican platforms. Finding higher rates of introduction of phonics legislation and more mentions in party platforms in states with larger and more active "Christian right influence," Paterson concluded that the "Christian Right is a substantial force in the prophonics movement and in the movement's efforts to translate its advocacy of phonics into state statute" (Paterson, 2000, p. 137).

At the turn of the new millennium, several developments worked both to accelerate the push toward phonics – moving the issue from individual state legislatures to the national stage – and reinforce its connection to the Republican Party. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Nutrition, a national research agency led G. Reid Lyon, channeled increased funding on applied research rigorously testing alternative instructional interventions. Lyon became convinced about the efficacy of phonics and worked with members of Congress to promote it. In 1997, a Senate committee instructed Lyon to assemble an expert panel to carry out a meta-analysis of research in reading instruction in elementary grades, and in 2000, the final report from the resulting NRP made headlines, giving a strong endorsement for systematic and explicit phonics instruction.

Whole-language advocates were unimpressed. Most of the panel members, these advocates complained, were psychologists, cognitive scientists, and academics, rather than teachers. (The single educator on the NRP wrote a minority report, calling the document "unbalanced" and "irrelevant.") The meta-analysis included only quantitative research utilizing randomized controlled trials, ignoring the qualitative ethnographic research popular among whole-language scholars. And the executive summary to the panel's report, the portion of document that attracted the greatest popular and media attention, seemed to overstate the strength of the evidence found in the more detailed and nuanced 400-page body. For example, while the executive summary offered a full-throttled

endorsement of phonics, the full report suggested that studies found significant differences only in the youngest grades.[18] These benefits were much more pronounced for word recognition than reading comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading, and even then the effect sizes were relatively modest, corresponding to a few months of additional learning. Adding insult to injury, the report also threw shade on independent reading by students – often known by the acronym of "SSR" or "sustained silent reading" when I was in school – a beloved practice among many teachers.

The divided reactions to the NRP report would, in many ways, explain the polarized nature of the subsequent response. In Washington, the document was released amidst a heated presidential campaign, with education a major focus. Texas Gov. George W. Bush, whose brother Neil had struggled with reading as a child and under whose watch Texas had experienced impressive growth on state standardized exam, promised to launch a "Reading First" initiative if elected using only proven, effective programs. After the election, Bush brought Lyon on as an advisor to help write the legislative language for Reading First. Working with Republican staff in the House, Lyon developed a $1 billion per-year program to provide grants to local school districts to help ensure that NRP-endorsed principles were used in the classroom. The proposal was rolled into President Bush's broader educational overhaul, the No Child Left Behind Act, and specified that funding had to be limited to curriculum and programs aligned with "scientifically based reading research."

The federal government's formal embrace of phonics sparked an immediate backlash. Whole-language proponents were apoplectic, writing book-length jeremiads with titles such as *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies*; *Resisting Reading Mandates: How to Triumph with the Truth*; and *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum*. It was no coincidence that all of these volume were published by Heineman, a company largely unknown outside of education circles but with a catalog heavy on whole-language curriculum and authors.

Other curriculum providers whose materials were deemed to be out of compliance with the Reading First requirement took direct action, lobbying powerful members of Congress and filing formal complaints accusing bureaucrats in charge of implementation with conflicts of interest (Stern,

[18] In addition to phonemic awareness and phonics, the NRP also emphasized the importance of fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. But the latter three skills appear to be much less controversial.

2008). The resulting investigation by the Department of Education's inspector general uncovered e-mails from the Reading First program's top administrator using shockingly salty language. "Beat the shit out of them," he instructed another staffer, referring to a curriculum program he thought did not comply with the law, "in a way that will stand up to any level of legal and [whole language] apologist scrutiny. Hit them over and over with definitive evidence that they are not [scientifically based] never have been and never will be. They are trying to crash our party and we need to beat the shit out of them in front of all the other would-be party crashers who are standing on the front lawn waiting to see how we welcome these dirtbags" (Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

In retrospect, President Bush's personal embrace of phonics may have, in the long-run, saddled the effort with political baggage. Bush would go on to become the most polarizing president up to that date, with the sharpest partisan divisions in approval between Democratic and Republican voters (Jacobson, 2006). After the debacle of the Iraq War, opposing the president's education initiatives became a rallying cry for congressional Democrats, NRP member and veteran of both the Bush and Obama administrations Tim Shanahan told me. "It became, you know, 'This is one way we get the Bush administration. . . . You know we can't stand up to him on defense. But we can stand up on education. And even if we were for this, and even if this is a good program, we're going to knock it down.' And that's exactly how it has played out."

For some teachers, an overwhelmingly Democratic profession, the association with the Bush administration made the push for curricular reform a nonstarter. "Forget it, I wasn't going to do any of that," one Seattle-area teacher told Emily Hanford for an episode of her podcast, "Sold a Story." "And, you know, I wasn't necessarily rejecting the curriculum as much as I was rejecting Bush."

Perhaps the most devastating blow came from Russ Whitehurst, a psychologist appointed by Bush to serve as the inaugural director of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES), an agency within the Department of Education that oversees the collection of education data and provides funding for research. IES was charged with evaluating the Reading First program, and the final report was full of disappointment. The evaluation used a rigorous regression discontinuity design, exploiting sharp cutoffs within districts that separated schools that were eligible for Reading First funding from those that fell just short of qualifying. It found statistically significant but substantively modest improvements in decoding skills among students exposed to the program and no difference

in reading comprehension in early elementary grades.[19] "The administration was aghast because No Child Left Behind was essentially a reading intervention and Reading First was that intervention," Whitehurst told me. "So you find a whole political enterprise is threatened by one particular study." To make matters worse, a growing number of experimental evaluations of "Reading Recovery," an intense intervention program targeting struggling first-grade readers based on work of Australian psychologist Marie Clay and popular in the whole-language community but detested by many phonics advocates, found it to be highly effective, including a major IES-funded scale-up study (Sirinides, Gray and May, 2018). Based on this evidence, the program won a coveted top endorsement in the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, an effort to synthesize research evidence and promote adoption of effective interventions, giving it a higher rating than another program favored in phonics circles. ("The What Works Clearinghouse was almost shutdown because of that," according to Whitehurst.)

With President Bush's approval ratings further eroded by the botched response to Hurricane Katrina, Democrats took control of Congress in 2006. In 2008, Democratic President Barack Obama succeeded Bush, and the party quietly cut off future funding to the Reading First program, just as the Republicans had done with President Clinton's history curriculum push fourteen years earlier.

From "Phonics" to "Science of Reading"

Although education remained a top priority for the Obama administration, the president's focus was elsewhere – on improving teacher evaluations, increasing access to high-quality charter schools, and encouraging states to adopt more rigorous college and career-readiness standards (see Chapter 3). With the spotlight largely off reading instruction, the two sides of the reading war settled into an uneasy détente. Many schools embraced what they called "balanced literacy," combining phonemic awareness and phonics instruction – although much less structured and systematic than phonics proponents believed was necessary – with whole-language curriculum and approaches, such as guided reading and reading workshops. Many others continued to encourage struggling readers to use "cues" to solve unknown words they confronted in their reading –

[19] Phonics defenders complained the evaluation was too underpowered statistically, lacking sufficient precision to identify significant effects.

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perhaps trying to sound them out, but also guessing the word based on the picture in the book or the first letter of the word, a practice anathema to phonics supporters who believed it instilled poor habits that would come back to haunt them later.

As I show in the next section, this uneasy peace would collapse by the early 2020s, with the third round of reading wars erupting in state legislatures after the pandemic. What ultimately caused this conflagration? Once again, many of informants I interviewed offered very different hypotheses, so I will do my best to briefly summarize the many separate developments that likely contributed to returning reading to the political agenda.

The first event was a rebranding of phonics as the "science of reading" by Kate Walsh, then-president of the National Council of Teaching Quality, a think tank established by the right-of-center Thomas B. Fordham Institute to advocate for better teacher preparation and merit pay. "It's kind of silly story, but when we were writing about reading twenty years ago, everyone was referring to good reading instruction as 'SBBR,' which stood for Scientifically-Based Reading Research – hardly a good way to engage the general public!" Walsh recalled. "I just said, 'We're just going to have to call this by something else and came up with the "science of reading.'" It stuck – for good or for bad" (Pondiscio, 2022).[20] In retrospect, this would prove to be a brilliant move. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, "follow the science" became a popular motto among anti-Trump liberals.

The second factor, according to many observers I interviewed, was increasing mobilization and advocacy among parents of dyslexic kids. Dyslexia is an umbrella term for learning disabilities affecting reading development. In the years leading up to the pandemic, many parents of dyslexic children became convinced that whole-language instruction had contributed to their child's difficulties and that more sustained and systematic phonics-based teaching would allow them to become skilled readers. "Their kids are really struggling, and they're probably going to struggle, no matter what kind of instruction they're getting," Shanahan told me. "But they're struggling and those parents want help, and they aren't necessarily getting that. And some of those folks are very political."

[20] Based on an extensive search of digitized books, Shanahan (2020) found that the term "science of reading" actually came into pedagogical use in the 1830s. However, more recent Google search trends data do confirm that the expression really took off in the second half of the 2010s.

Kareem Weaver, an award winning Oakland educator and long-time phonics advocate who now leads the education committee of the region's branch of the NAACP, also suggested that the pandemic itself helped mobilize parents around reading reform. "It was like crying wolf and people weren't paying attention. Then came the pandemic," Weaver recalled about his advocacy efforts. "And that's when it was all of a sudden people at home and you hear your kid in another room doing their reading lesson and the parents thought, 'What in the world what did that teacher say? Wait, wait, wait! You're supposed to *guess* the word, what's the context, what does it look like?' And all of a sudden parents say, 'Hold on, wait, that's not how I learned it. Baby, read this passage to me.'"

In spring 2022, another study also attracted a wave of attention in the education research community. The same team that had carried out the original "Reading Recovery" evaluation a decade earlier had gone back to examine how students had done several years after completing the program. What had originally been a big positive effect in first grade, however, had not only eroded over time but had actually flipped signs by the time students were in fourth grade (May et al., 2023). In other words, struggling first-graders who had received the intervention were doing *worse* three years later compared to peers who had not. Although the follow-on study had major limitations – including significant attrition in the sample and challenges harmonizing scores on exams used in different states – the results seemed to confirm many phonics advocates' arguments that the cueing stratagems taught to struggling young readers would lead them to develop bad habits and leave them poorly positioned to handle more challenging texts.[21]

Everyone I spoke with, however, agrees that Emily Hanford's podcasts through APM Reports, an investigative journalism spinoff from the Minnesota-based public radio broadcaster, played an important role in raising the salience of the issue. She released her first podcast in early autumn 2018, titled "Hard Words: Why aren't kids being taught to read?" The piece attracted attention among education policy nerds and some interest in trade publications such as *Education Week*. Although she would release several more follow-up pieces, her biggest hit would be

[21] Of course, "Reading Recovery" was not *just* a cueing intervention, so the negative impacts could have been driven by other parts of the program. But the same critique can be applied to research claiming to show efficacy of this approach, which often examine programs that bundle cueing with other interventions (e.g., Scanlon and Anderson, 2020).

an investigative series titled "Sold a Story," which hit the internet in fall 2022. In addition to explaining how whole language had come to dominate teacher education, Hanford's series revealed salacious details about the revenues Heineman made selling its whole-language curriculum to big districts and noted that one Heineman author – a retired education professor from my university – had purchased a Maserati with the profits she made from her materials. "Her reporting stood out. And at this stage, there have been a number of reporters around the country that are on that beat, and really kind of trying to do the same story in their local communities," Shanahan explained. "So it's multiplied."

Just as California's dismal performance on the 1992 NAEP set the stage for the state's reading battles, subsequent national tests also contributed to reframing narrative around how poor teaching has contributed to low student achievement. The 2019 release of the NAEP identified Mississippi – ranked forty-ninth in the country in 2013 – as leading the pack in terms of growth, and the only state posting significant improvements in fourth-grade reading. "What's up in Mississippi?" Hanford asked in a 2019 commentary about the so-called Mississippi miracle. "There's no way to know for sure what causes increases in test scores, but Mississippi has been doing something notable: making sure all of its teachers understand the science of reading" (Hanford, 2019).[22] In 2013, the state had toughened its reading accountability laws, including mandatory retention for third-graders whose reading fell short of grade level. In addition, the state allocated new funding to improve teacher training, ensuring that all teachers understood how to implement phonics-based instruction. Mississippi, and its legislative package, would become the template for many states as they would turn to retool their own laws after the pandemic.

CURRICULUM IN THE STATE HOUSE

The first part of this chapter provides the backstory for how and why CRT-related and reading bills achieved such high billing on education agendas in many states by the early 2020s. In this section, I turn to examining how these bills ultimately fared on their way through the legislative process.

[22] As with California in 1992, others challenged the idea that change in reading instruction were responsible for the "Mississippi miracle" (e.g., Thomas, 2019).

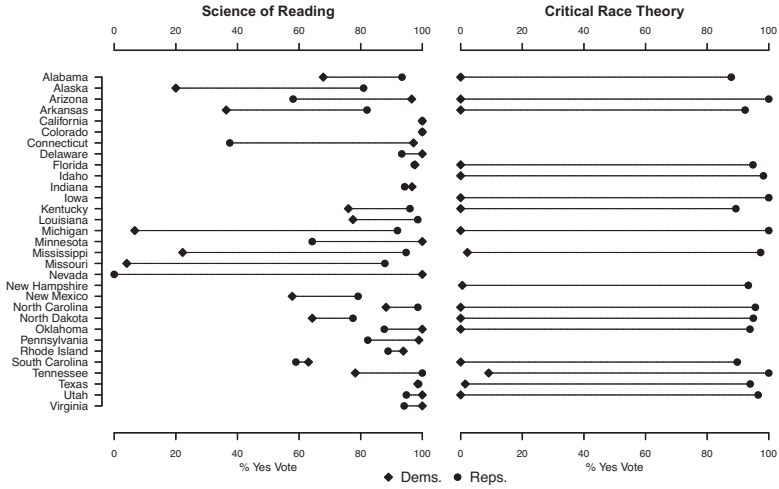

FIGURE 4.1 Legislative roll call votes on Critical Race Theory bans and "science of reading" legislation

The analysis focuses on final passage votes on all CRT and "science of reading" bills in lower (and larger) houses of state legislatures, regardless of whether these bills were ultimately signed into law. The data were collected from state legislative websites by my research assistants using lists of bills on each subject published and regularly updated by *Education Week*.

In several states, the anti-CRT bills passed with very large abstention rates from Democratic legislators, who apparently did not want to go on the record opposing them. For this reason, and to provide the most useful comparison, I focus on the share of legislators voting affirmatively on each bill, thus treating abstentions and "no" votes as interchangeable.

The results are presented in Figure 4.1, which plots the percent of each party's caucus voting in favor of each bill, with the distance between each point representing the degree of partisan polarization on the legislation. Several patterns stand out in this data. First, the CRT bans all passed by nearly perfect party-line votes, with almost no Democrats voting in support. Averaging across states, fewer than 1 percent of the Democratic legislators had voted in favor of these bills. By contrast, most reading bills were adopted by significant bipartisan coalitions, with 76 percent of Democrats and 83 percent of Republicans voting in favor on average. In half a dozen states, these bills passed unanimously or nearly so. The

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partisan divide that Frances Paterson found characterizing the reading debate in the 1990s had largely disappeared nearly thirty years later.

For me, the new bipartisan consensus behind the "science of reading" posed as big of a puzzle as the original polarization seen one generation earlier. The activists and researchers I spoke to seemed equally flummoxed about how to explain the recent developments.

To try to understand the political dynamics better, I reached out to a number of Democratic legislators in states that had recently passed both CRT bans and new reading laws. Specifically, I focused on lawmakers who had voted against the CRT legislation but in favor of phonics. Aside from the specific academic subject – history versus reading – these bills appeared (at least to me) to be quite similar, both involving top-down curriculum mandates and both imposing limitations on the autonomy and instructional practices of classroom teachers. Why did the legislators support one set of mandates but oppose the other?

Although most of those I reached out to did not respond, I was able to interview three Democrats who fit the profile above. None, it is important to note, served on their respective education committees in the relevant session, so could speak only from their perspective as rank-and-file members voting on legislation outside their area of policy expertise. Nevertheless, I found our conversations enlightening.

"I think a big part of it is the nationalization of politics," North Dakota Rep. Mock explained, pointing to the influence of conservative media such as Fox News in stirring up Republican anxiety about CRT even though there was little indication it had infiltrated his state's schools. "I think anytime you have the nationalization of an issue, in this case educational curriculum, you're having to oversimplify the content for the general public to be able to digest it, you lose some of the nuance."

Of course, Mock is a Democrat, so it would be convenient for him to believe the other party was overreacting to the issue. But his Republican colleague Rep. Cynthia Schreiber-Beck, the longest serving member of her party on the House education committee, agreed.[23] For Schreiber-Beck, there were a lot of parallels between Republican opposition to Common Core standards under the Obama administration – as I discuss in Chapter 3 – and current concerns about CRT issues. "It's totally a lack of understanding of the concept and the real meaning behind it," she said when we talked. In her view, many of her conservative colleagues believed that

[23] A self-described moderate, Schreiber-Beck had been passed over for chairmanship of the committee in the current session, they both told me.

schools were teaching kids that certain racial groups were more "special" than others, a perspective she did not believe represented the reality in her state.

When we spoke about the CRT bill, Mock told me he was quite frustrated with the state interference in curriculum decisions, which he thought would be best made at the local level. "We have overstepped our authority. We have micromanaged the education issues many times over." When I asked why this view did not prevent him from voting for the state's "science of reading" bill, which arguably raised many of the same issues, he paused to look up the legislation. Reading through the records, he noted that both sponsors of the reading legislation were chairmen of their respective chamber's education committees, with expertise in the subject matter. He also noted that many people across the ideological spectrum had come to testify in favor of the bill and praised the state's superintendent, a moderate Republican, for bringing both sides together.

Several Democrats in Oklahoma, another red state that has recently passed both CRT bans and reading legislation, offered quite similar explanations. Rep. Ajay Pittman, who had opposed the CRT effort but voted in favor of the reading, also noted that the authors of the reading legislation were chairs of their chamber's education committees, and one was a former teacher. "It makes a big difference for the trust factor," she explained. The other important difference was the political salience of the two issues. Many constituents had organized rallies and church meetings over the CRT bill, and her office was flooded with constituent calls. Reading, however, attracted very little attention.

Many of Pittman's Democratic colleagues were teachers themselves, elected in a wave in 2018 after teacher walkouts over low compensation in Oklahoma had made national headlines. One of them, Rep. John Waldron, was a high school social studies teacher and had previously served on the House education committee. He argued that the Republican push on culture wars issues – including the CRT bill – was part of a broader effort to discredit public schools and educators and pave the way for private school vouchers. "Recently the floor leader said, 'We love education, that's why we beat up on it so much,'" Waldron said. "He was tongue-in-cheek. But educators feel like they're in an abusive relationship."

Waldron also has personal familiarity with the reading wars – his mother had earned a master's degree in English in the 1980s, as the first major legislative battles over the issue were heating up. Most seemed to have forgotten about those conflicts, however, and even Waldron himself

had no problem voting in favor of his state's reading legislation, saying "it was just a great idea and it was science-based." Like both Pittman and Mock, he noted the bill had been carried by respected education committee leaders, including an English teacher.

Of course, as Figure 4.1 shows, not all reading bills passed with bipartisan support. This appears to reflect important differences in the substance of the legislation. Although many of the "science of reading" efforts tend to include similar general language about teaching the five core elements highlighted by the NRP report – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – some also go further into more contentious domains, such as banning "three-cueing" guessing approaches. Most controversial, however, are requirements requiring the retention of third-grade students who fail to meet minimum achievement benchmarks, an important part of the Mississippi model. Inclusion of mandatory retention – and language related to open enrollment opposed by teacher unions – appears to be the main reason Democrat in Missouri overwhelmingly opposed that state's reading legislation, for example. By contrast, language *repealing* existing retention requirements in Nevada seems to explain why Republican legislators there voted against the proposal.

LESSONS LEARNED?

In this chapter, I have described how and why history and reading curriculum filtered to the top of state legislative agendas in recent years. Both issues raise important questions about the relationship between politics, schools, and instructional practices. To conclude, I want to briefly consider the broader implications – or, at least hypotheses – suggested by these recent developments.

One lesson is that the broader nationalization of American politics (Hopkins, 2018) has clearly impacted recent education policy debates. The ongoing financial decline of local newspapers, historically the primary source of information about both local and state politics, and the emergence of both national cable news and social media as the primary drivers of political narratives has resulted in both state and legislative policy efforts increasingly organized around the same national policy fault lines.

However, the precise mechanisms through which policies are nationalized, and the exact media sources involved in raising the salience of individual issues, are quite important. In the case of reading, it seems

clear that Emily Hanford's podcasts played a pivotal role in elevating the salience of reading practices and getting "science of reading" bills on legislative agendas. Hanford herself makes this point in a recent bonus episode, which includes an interview with an Indiana legislator who describes introducing his state's reading bill after listening to her original podcast series. In this case, nationalization did not produce polarization – indeed, if anything, it may have helped *narrow* prior partisan divisions that dominated earlier reading debates. Partisan polarization, in other words, is not a one-way ratchet, and nationalization does not automatically lead to greater polarization.

As with the case of the Common Core standards discussed in Chapter 3, polarization over education policies does appear inevitable when it involves particularly partisan sources – either partisan news outlets or high-profile elected officials. During my many interviews, I put forward the same counterfactual: Suppose, I asked, that President Trump had decided to focus on reading rather than history, and had embraced phonics (rather than attacking the *1619 Project*) as his preferred method of teaching kids how to read, just as President Bush had done? Many chuckled at this question, but nearly everyone agreed the dynamics of both issues likely would have played out quite differently. "I have absolutely no doubt it would have," Shanahan told me. "And it wouldn't have to be phonics. Take any aspect of teaching reading – if [Trump] had embraced it, news media would be up in arms, there would be people trying to shut down school board meetings over this, and you'd be going, 'Boy, those crazy liberals!'"

"If a divisive figure like Donald Trump had come forward and was advocating for scientific-based principles, would those who believe in the scientific method now oppose the scientific method because of Trump?" North Dakota Rep. Mock pondered. After a pause, he concluded probably not. "But they may have questioned his ulterior motives."

The polarizing effects of presidential leadership challenge the conventional way many scholars of American politics have conceptualized executive power. In his famous book, *Going Public*, political scientist Sam Kernell (1997) argued that the bully pulpit was an important lever presidents could pull to advance their preferred policy agendas, using their public influence to pressure lawmakers and overcome gridlock. The actual effectiveness of the "going public" strategy was, at one time, a highly debated topic among scholars, although it seems clear Kernell's model does not work in our modern context of high partisan polarization. Indeed, it may be that presidential efforts to advocate for specific

policies have the opposite effect – consolidating support among their copartisans but also mobilizing opposition from the other party by creating an opportunity to deny the incumbent president a political win and drive down public approval ratings. Some scholars have documented these dynamics in Congress (Lee, 2008), but recent policy debates also illustrate how they impact subnational politics, transforming America's system of federalism into many decentralized, simultaneous proxy wars infected by national partisan divisions.

Exactly this kind of polarization played out during the debates about Common Core. Michael Casserly, the long-time head of the Council of Great City Schools, a membership organization for big urban districts, remembered the great consternation many Common Core advocates felt about President Obama's embrace of the issue. He described a meeting he had with Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, in which Casserly encouraged the president to stay out of the issue. "We wanted Obama to stay as far away from this as we could," he recalled.

Of course, as the recent developments on phonics illustrate, polarization need not be permanent. I suspect one reason the partisan dynamics over reading have changed so quickly is that, even during the height of the reading wars, the conflict was driven by a small group of ideological warriors and policy activists, without penetrating deeper into public opinion. After all, the annual testing and strict accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act attracted far more attention and criticism than the Reading First program. The only public opinion polling on the issue I could find, carried out in March 2020 by Phi Delta Kappa, asked voters if they favored phonics-based reading instruction, whole language, or a "balanced approach" combining both. More than 70 percent chose the balanced option.[24]

The same appears to be true with regard to public opinion on the most controversial social studies and history issues. Although opinion surveys show sharp partisan divisions about some topics – such as what students should be taught about the causes of current racial disparities – there is also overwhelming bipartisan consensus on many others. For example, in recent education surveys by researchers at the University of Southern California, over 80 percent of *both* Democrats and Republicans agreed that high school students should be taught about slavery and the contributions of people of color. And support for teaching about the successes of the founding fathers and about patriotism achieved nearly identically

[24] Unfortunately, the poll did not ask about partisanship.

high levels of bipartisan support. Most voters appear to reject – at least for now – the extreme policy views from activists on both sides, even though these views appear to structure much of the debate about curricular policy. As in the cases examined in Chapter 3, elites have polarized well before the electorate, which may eventually follow.

Finally, the recent debates about CRT and reading also reveal a great deal about the underlying socialization processes that shape the teaching profession. As James Q. Wilson (1989) famously argued, government agencies develop their own "organizational cultures" that, like personalities, influence and constrain their behavior. Although not a function performed out of a single federal agency, public education as a profession has its own distinct culture, reflecting both the selection processes affecting the types of people who are attracted to teaching and the influence of teacher preparation programs run out of university colleges of education.

From the research, interviews, and reading that informed the analysis and arguments in this chapter, I came away with a strong sense that teacher preparation and culture has played a major role in both the CRT and reading debates. For example, a number of systematic studies involving content analyses of course syllabi in the leading teacher preparation programs, carried by both academic researchers and various advocacy groups, have found that they tend to focus more on theory and less on application (Schalin, 2019; Steiner and Rozen, 2004). Overwhelmingly, these theoretical perspectives are rooted in concepts such as "constructivism" and multiculturalism – emphasizing students' lived experience and how it might affect their construction of meaning in the classroom. Many of these theoretical concepts are borrowed or inspired by critical analyses, and that may be one reason why authors such as Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi – whose inclusion in corporate and government DEI trainings first attracted the ire of Christopher Ruffo – often feature prominently in college of education courses, including at my home university.

When I asked former IES Director Russ Whitehurst whether colleges of education were a barrier in getting teachers to adopt evidence-based reading practices, he couldn't help but laugh. "When I was IES director, I always needed an invitation, but I tried to go to the leading schools of education around the country," he explained. "And oh gosh I needed a stiff drink after most. ... Certainly leading schools of education had some faculty who are doing great work, but as an institution they always felt out of place, rowing against the tide."

During my interviews with education scholars and activists, I asked whether they thought that the predilection toward critical pedagogy that caused teacher preparation programs to embrace whole language in the 1980s also affects how teachers are trained to think about and teach US history and civics. Most of those I spoke to rejected the comparison. Reading is a real problem – just look at the percent of elementary students reading below grade level, many of them responded, while CRT is a manufactured crisis, promoted by conservative activists. But upon further discussion, some did agree that many of the controversial, and admittedly isolated, lessons that have attracted the attention of conservative activists – such having students complete "oppression matrices" and "privilege walks" – may grow out of ideas teachers confront during their training.

"What I think is really a mistake for liberals to is say, 'Oh, no, we're not doing anything like that!' They say, 'We don't teach Critical Race Theory, period.' Well, I don't care what you call it, you're teaching things that many would not agree with," former California Superintendent Bill Honig told me when I asked him about the CRT debate.[25]

Linda Diamond, who worked with Honig in California to promote phonics, argued that curriculum makers and textbook publishers are caught in the middle. Specifically, she mentioned one reading curriculum – highly rated by experts – that attracted criticism from both liberal and conservative states. In red states, the curriculum was attacked by some far-right groups on CRT-related grounds. But many progressives also accused the program of not being "culturally responsive" because it focused on building background knowledge that many viewed as too centered on the experience and history of whites. "I'm Jewish and I speak a little Yiddish," she told me. "The term we use is, 'This is *mishegas*.' *Mishegas* means insanity because there is nothing you can do to please everyone. There are these nutty people – on both sides. I think what we are seeing in the CRT debate, some are going overboard."

Keith Stanovich, the cognitive scientist who authored some of the early pivotal papers supporting phonics, also initially pushed back on my suggestion that the reading and culture wars debates were related. In our later conversations, he ultimately came to agree with some of my

[25] As the CRT debates played out nationally, California was undergoing its own version of the culture wars surrounding competing curriculum proposals for the state's new ethnic studies requirement. Honig was part of a moderate coalition supporting a compromise plan that was strongly opposed by a group of activists pushing a competing "liberated" curriculum seeped in CRT.

arguments – and unleashed his deep frustrations with teacher preparation programs. "I absolutely agree with you that CRT and the resistance to phonics ideas stem from the very same lack of intellectual diversity and monocultures within colleges of ed. I would wholeheartedly endorse that," he told me. "It's the same underlying problem, just manifest on different issues. . . . Many of these ed schools are putting more effort into producing policy advocates than they are spending teaching early educators the role of syllable segmentation in an early reading curriculum. That class is training political advocates, not training teachers – and in a public institution, it is a betrayal of the taxpayers' trust."

Interestingly, whole-language defenders appear much more receptive to seeing parallels between the CRT and reading debates. Indeed, many criticize "science of reading" approaches precisely on CRT grounds – arguing that the obsession with quantitative, randomized studies excludes the kinds of reading research most likely to be done by scholars of color. A recent president of the American Educational Research Association wrote an entire article titled "Disrupting Racism and Whiteness in Researching a Science of Reading" (Milner, 2020). "[W]hiteness and maleness are at the very foundation of our understanding of the science of reading," he concluded (p. S252).

"I do see the reading wars as akin to or a particular version of the culture wars," University of Minnesota's Timothy Lensmire, whose research focuses on the intersection of reading and critical pedagogy, told me. Lensmire hypothesized that newfound support for reading reform among Democratic legislators might also represent a form of white liberal guilt or shame – or at least hope that better reading instruction might finally address long-standing racial achievement gaps, a perennial embarrassment in blue states like his.

Given the levels of attention and political capital that legislative battles over curriculum consume, it is perhaps surprising that the actual impact of these state-level interventions on student outcomes remains far from clear. There is a big difference between passing a new law and actually changing what is happening in individual classrooms. Teachers are the ultimate street-level bureaucrats, who exercise tremendous discretion with minimal oversight and top-down legislative efforts don't always succeed in significantly altering teaching practices.

That is certainly the lesson from many earlier curricular battles (e.g., Loveless, 2021; Polikoff, 2021). For example, in their book on debates surrounding the teaching of evolution in the early 2000s, Berkman and Plutzer (2010) included surveys of teachers, asking them to report how

much time they spent on various topics. They then compared what teachers reported they did in the classroom every day to what the relevant laws and curricular standards in their states required – and found almost no relationship, particularly among more senior educators. On the other hand, more recent research leveraging the precise timing of when states changed their content standards on evolution do find long-run impacts among affected student cohorts, not only in terms of understanding of the relevant biological concepts but also employment in science-related sectors (Arold, 2024).

Researchers who have examined the implementation of the Common Core standards and curricula have also emphasized the slippage that can emerge in translating legislative pronouncements into actual practices. Consider Loveless (2021, p. 3): "Saying that standards depend on implementation is a bit like saying skydivers' enjoyment of the day depends on their parachutes opening. Fortunately for skydivers, the probability of the chute failing is infinitesimal. Not so for the odds of top-down policies encountering obstacles on the way to local sites of implementation." Or Polikoff (2021, p. 13): "If we know now, and have known for fifty years, that teaching is an isolating profession defined mostly by individual practice, how can a light-touch reform like standards possibly penetrate the classroom in any meaningful way?"

My sense is that state legislative efforts focused on overhauling curricula and content standards provide great position-taking and credit-claiming opportunities for elected officials, and allow various adults to score easy political points, engage in meaningful self-expression, or attain the satisfaction of seeing their preferred views written into state laws. At least among the researchers whose work provides the intellectual foundations for many of these debates, and among the policy activists and entrepreneurs who do battle on the front lines, almost everyone seems to be sincere in their belief that they are fighting on the side of the angels and that the policies they are promoting will be good for children. But for many advocates, it also seems that winning the political battle often becomes the end in itself, with adult political considerations ultimately explaining the policies that we see adopted. Whether reforms actually move the needle on academic outcomes remains a secondary concern – by the time definitive evidence on this question can be collected, the political attention has usually moved on to the next issue of the day.