

# Beyond the Sound and Fury: The Landscape of Curricular Contestation in Texas

**Hannah Kunzman and Danielle Allen**

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May 2024

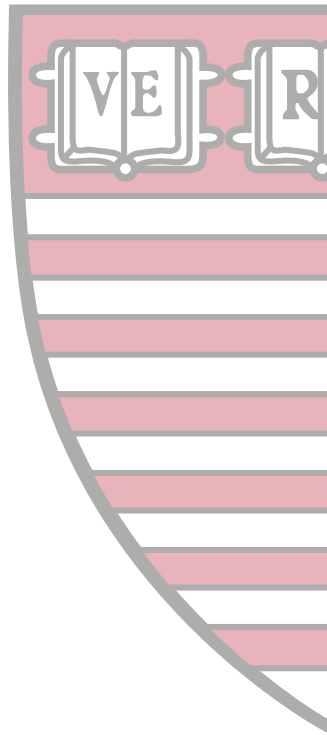
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**HARVARD Kennedy School**

**ASH CENTER**

for Democratic Governance  
and Innovation



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## Executive Summary

Beginning in 2021, state legislators introduced or passed numerous bills intended to shape appropriate content in K–12 social studies curricula. The majority of these bills were, in the language of advocates, “essential knowledge” bills or “CRT [Critical Race Theory] abolition” bills. However, at the same time that these bills were making their way through state legislatures, there were also efforts to introduce, again in the language of advocates, “culturally responsive” curricula or “education equity” bills. Culturally responsive, a term coined by education professor Geneva Gay, describes a curriculum that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and identities that students bring to the classroom. Educational equity also often refers to the inclusion of instruction around structural racism and ethnic studies. In other words, distinctive substantive views about education have motivated two different strategies for shaping K–12 education through state legislation.

These different substantive views have become the site of intense political contestation and have sparked a new iteration of the so-called culture wars. Politicians have hit upon curricular contestation as having the potential for partisan political gain. Their engagement can often distort our view of what are very real and substantively important debates about how young people should be taught. These debates have the political salience they do because they touch upon deeply important ideas and questions. To have productive civic conversations, we must focus on the substantive issues at stake in current debates over K–12 education. This paper aims to shift the focus back to these crucial questions.

Contemporary debates over curriculum introduce questions about what it means to be a parent, what it means to be a citizen, and the role of both parents and educators in raising children who can fulfill the demands of citizenship. The full landscape of contestation is an exchange about models of citizenship and the relationship between private and public actors in shaping the lives of young people. It is also a debate about history. Whose voices matter in our historical narrative? How should we discuss the dark sides of the American story? How should we engage across differences in a democratic society?

This paper offers a case study on contestation over K–12 civics curriculum in Texas. The key takeaways are as follows. First, on-the-ground exchanges are complex and substantive between two camps, an “American greatness” camp and a “systemic transformation” camp. Second, there are many and various spaces of contestation requiring attention, including legislatures, school board elections, and classroom libraries. Third, the debates represent competing interpretations of civic values as articulated by both camps.

## **About the Authors**

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The Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation addresses the threats to American and global democracies with research and field-building to support power-sharing liberalism. Just societies require robust political equality, fully inclusive institutions, and broader avenues for participation and connectedness, all of which rest in turn on the material and social bases for human flourishing. Our multidisciplinary community of scholars, practitioners, and partner organizations work together to shepherd concepts and reforms into practice—to translate research into impact. From community-led initiatives to national-level policies and structural reforms, the Allen Lab works to renovate American democracy.

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The Mission of the Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at is to develop ideas and foster practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 2021, state legislators introduced or passed numerous bills intended to shape appropriate content in K–12 social studies curricula. The majority of these bills were, in the language of advocates, “essential knowledge” bills or “CRT [Critical Race Theory] abolition” bills. Typically, they aimed to constrain how teachers and students could discuss topics relating to sex, race, and gender, and to encourage interpretations of American history focused on national achievements. At the same time that these bills were making their way through state legislatures, however, there were also efforts to introduce, again in the language of advocates, “culturally responsive” curricula or “education equity” bills.<sup>2</sup> Culturally responsive, a term coined by education professor Geneva Gay, describes a curriculum that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and identities that students bring to the classroom. Educational equity also often refers to the inclusion of instruction around structural racism and ethnic studies. In other words, distinctive substantive views about education have motivated two different strategies for shaping K–12 education through state legislation.

These different substantive views have become the site of intense political contestation and have sparked a new iteration of the so-called culture wars. Politicians have hit upon curricular contestation as having the potential for partisan political gain. Their engagement can often distort our view of what are very real and substantively important debates about how young people should be taught. These debates have the political salience they do because they touch upon deeply important ideas and questions. To have productive civic conversations, we must focus on the substantive issues at stake in current debates over K–12 education. This paper aims to shift the focus back to these crucial questions.

Contemporary debates over curriculum introduce questions about what it means to be a parent, what it means to be a citizen, and the role of both parents and educators in raising children who can fulfill the demands of citizenship. The full landscape of contestation is an exchange about models of citizenship and the relationship between private and public actors in shaping the lives of young people. It is also a debate about history. Whose voices matter in our historical narrative? How should we discuss the dark sides of the American story? How should we engage across differences in a democratic society?

These are ramifying questions that interact with other areas of education and political life. At various points in time, the two camps that are active in the curriculum debates discussed here have also been involved in deliberations over other school-related issues such as masking or gender and school bathrooms. However, in this paper we focus only on contestation over civics curriculum, setting aside the relationship between that debate and other polarized themes in the K–12 landscape. More specifically, we provide a case study on contestation over K–12 civics curriculum in Texas.

This Texas-focused case study provides a lens through which to understand the structure, nature, and landscape of the debates taking place. It largely centers around events that occurred from 2020 to 2022, although some of the curriculum developments discussed here began as early as 2014. Certainly, there is a long and important history behind this case study, and the landscape has already shifted since the start of writing this piece. Public attitudes, alignments among advocates for one approach or another, and central issues will continue to be in flux.

Before turning to the fine-grained texture of the case study, we will review the three major takeaways. First, on-the-ground exchanges are complex and substantive between the two camps, the “American greatness” camp and the “systemic transformation” camp. Second, the spaces of contestation requiring attention are many and various—including legislatures, school board elections, and classroom libraries. Third, the debates represent competing interpretations of civic values as articulated by both camps.

**Complicated exchanges rather than one-sided backlash.** The rise of essential knowledge legislation in Texas might at first glance be taken as a one-sided backlash to political and social shifts. Yet other curricular models and strategies are also simultaneously being advanced in Texas. The contestation is an exchange about what and how to teach.

To understand the major ideological groupings in this debate, this case study defines two camps. This necessarily simplified approach aims to draw out two distinct and important viewpoints in the debate. In reality, however, these camps exist along a continuum. On the one hand, an American greatness camp promotes CRT abolition and essential knowledge legislation to pursue a vision of America in which group identity does not play a prominent role and American exceptionalism is widely embraced as an outlook on the country's history. This camp sees itself as needing to undertake a project to reverse or redirect gains made by progressives in recent decades to recover a sense of national pride and solidarity. On the other hand, the systemic transformation camp supports the development of "culturally responsive" curricula and "educational equity" and aims at curricular strategies that inculcate critique to reform or transform understandings of citizenship, history, and nationhood.

The names chosen for each of the camps aim to capture their spirit in language that they themselves would endorse. The American greatness camp is a reaction against the perceived direction of the nation, with the term "American greatness" reflecting Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." Ron DeSantis also called for "a revival of American greatness" in his 2023 campaign kickoff speech in Iowa (Goldmacher and Nehamas 2023). The rhetoric around American greatness often appeals to an imagined past, but this camp is not merely backward-looking. To illustrate, the journal *American Greatness*, which was created in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections, argues that "the soil of the conservative movement is exhausted," and instead the journal aims for a "rediscovery of the *American* part of conservatism's efforts" (Buskirk, Ponzi, and Boychuk 2016). The American greatness camp's fundamental goal is to look to the past to inspire the future. It also sometimes draws on religious values or is motivated by religious belief. The Texas Freedom Caucus, a group of members of the Texas House of Representatives aiming to "amplify the voice of liberty-minded, grassroots Texans," criticized proposed Texas social studies standards changes in August 2022 for requiring "a de-emphasis of our society's Judeo-Christian values upon which our state and national governments were founded" (Freedom Caucus 2022).

The systemic transformation camp also seeks to reinvent the status quo but not by looking to the past. Instead, representative advocates aim to escape the past and to transcend inherited political and social structures.<sup>3</sup> The camp's political vision varies in emphasis. For instance, an essay from the *New York Times Magazine's* 1619 Project argues that schools fail to "help us understand the evil our nation was founded on," and the associated curriculum puts the legacy of slavery and contributions of Black Americans in American history at its center (Stewart 2019). Yet, other organizations highlight broader goals. The National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project aims to equip individuals to explore "what kind of justice we need individually, relationally, and systematically" and to "address polarizing issues through ongoing constructive conversations" (National SEED Project). The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning seeks to make "cultural responsiveness a meaningful aspect of everyday life," both at the individual and institutional levels (Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning n.d.). Across a diversity of visions, the shared rhetoric of the systematic transformation camp focuses on systemic transformation—and the role that students can play in bringing this about.

Certainly, a great deal of internal variation characterizes each camp, and, perhaps surprisingly, they also overlap in some interesting ways. Both camps have concerns about standardized curricula and include advocates who seek empowerment or education for their children outside of public institutions.



In one article from the I619 Project, Nikita Stewart argues that “many black children learn the fuller history at home” and describes her experience of grappling with her own family’s history through interviews from *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938* (Stewart 2019). Donald Yacovone argues that state-adopted American textbooks perpetuate white supremacy. He suggests that students and teachers can access online resources—such as free textbooks and primary sources—to gain a fuller picture of American history even while national textbooks may lag behind (Yacovone 2022). American greatness organizations such as the Heritage Foundation have also developed alternative curricula for teachers or homeschooling parents, including civics resources that contain “positive stories” about American history (Heritage Foundation n.d.).

The two camps share a desire to reexamine the aims of civics and history education. Both are frustrated with what they see as historical and current failures to achieve high-quality education but differ significantly in how they define it. The two are engaged in a substantive exchange of ideas about civic values and interpretive models of national history, a moment that continues the national story of contestation over our most foundational civic commitments. Seeing the current culture wars in this light—as a two-sided conflict—helps make more sense of unfolding events.

**Broadening battlegrounds.** A second important analytical framework for understanding current events is the concept of “broadening battlegrounds.” This is not the first time in history that curricular debates have gripped the nation. In David Tyack’s words, “textbooks resemble stone monuments” and serve as the distillation of aspirations about national identity (Tyack 2003, p. 40). The debates over history curriculum design are representative of broader debates about national meaning, which are extending far beyond the walls of the schoolhouse—including to spaces that have, until recently, largely eschewed explicit partisan engagement, such as school boards.

The various arenas in which the alternative educational perspectives come into conflict—including legislatures, school board elections, and classroom libraries—are the “battlegrounds.” Focusing only on one area of contestation threatens to overlook how citizens of different backgrounds and occupations, including students, teachers, politicians, and parents, are engaged in these debates throughout different battlegrounds.

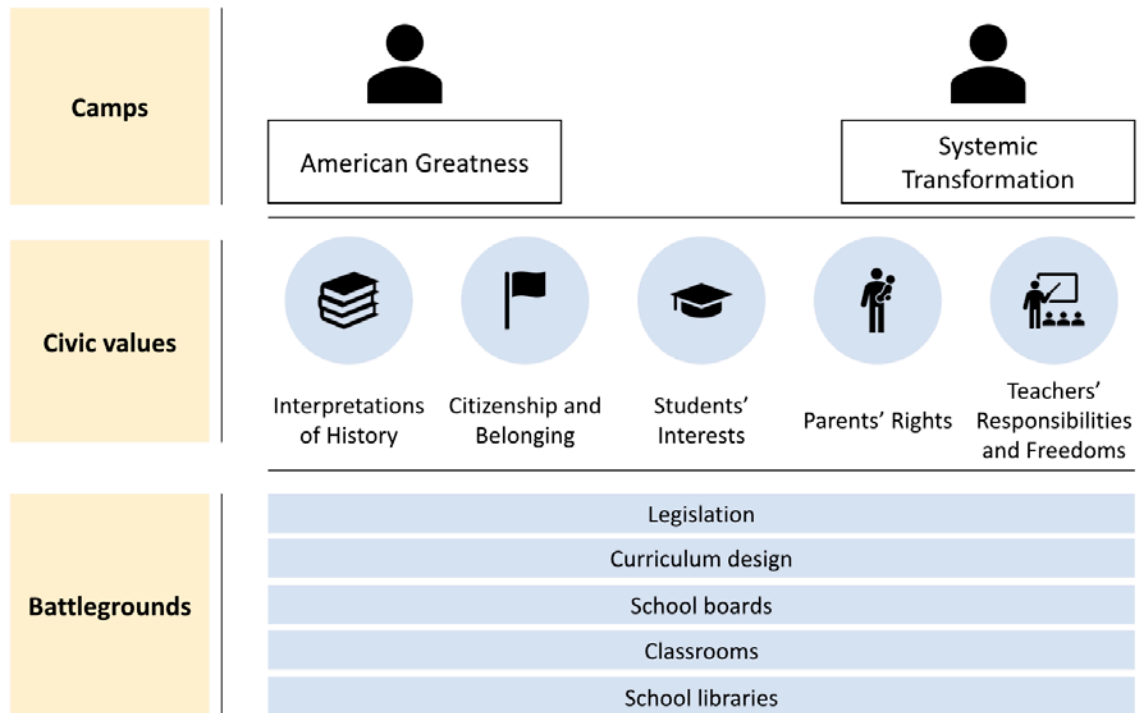
The case study we focus on will explore these primary areas of contestation in some detail to gain a fuller picture of the curriculum debate in that state. However, this framework of broadened battlegrounds could be useful for exploring how debates over curricula are unfolding in other states as well.

**Substantive debates over interpretive models and civic values.** Finally, our case study supports the view that the debates unfolding between the American greatness camp and the systemic transformation camp, across the many battlegrounds of their engagement, reflect competing interpretations of civic values. Five major themes are being contested: interpretations of history, definitions of citizenship and belonging, students’ interests, parents’ rights, and teachers’ responsibilities and freedoms.

Put most broadly, the American greatness camp emphasizes the positive contributions of marginalized groups in a story of linear national progress, a “melting pot” model of civic belonging, an interpretation of student interest that prioritizes safety and parental authority, elevated parental influence, and pedagogical decisions that reflect the values of parents and local communities. On the other side, the systemic transformation camp endorses critique as a means of progress and calls attention to analysis of power and structural systems, proposes the “quilt” model of civic belonging, affirms the importance of identity to a student’s interests, endorses limited parental authority, and encourages the teacher’s role in exposing students to a diversity of values. Table 1 in Section 2.3 provides a comparison of the camps’ values and their interpretations.

Figure 1 shows a schematic laying out the analytical framework used in the case study: the two camps are contesting the meaning of five civic themes, across multiple zones of contestation, or “battlegrounds.”

**Figure 1: Case Study Framework**



**Why Texas?** Texas is a particularly salient case through which to explore the curriculum debate, for several reasons. First, the state has experienced significant demographic changes, including growing non-white populations (Mayes, Shapiro, and Levitt 2021). Second, some historically conservative districts have seen Democratic gains in the past few elections, although there was some Republican rebound in 2022 (Ura, Covington, and Khatib 2022). As a result, there is a great deal of contestation over Texas’s political future, both at the state and local levels. K–12 curriculum is one arena in which we can observe such debates over fundamental civic questions.

**Final notes.** Because the primary archive used for this research consists of local, state, and national newspaper stories, there is some slant to this picture. First, evidence is biased toward what popular media conceives of as new and contentious. For instance, we highlight in the section on school board elections that candidates who claim nonpartisanship may be less likely to receive media attention, as news articles may tend to cover outspoken candidates asserting a clear political message. Second, evidence tends to focus on swing districts—a feature, not a bug, of this type of contestation—due to the opportunities it offers for partisan political gain. Consequently, this case study must be read with a recognition that contestation is not evenly distributed across the entire state.

We turn now to the details of the case study, first setting the stage with the national context and then turning to Texas.

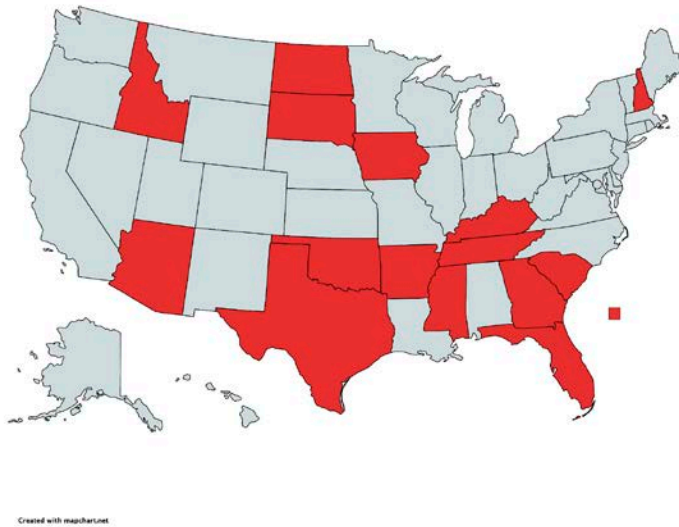
## 2. Case Study

### 2.1. Takeaway #1: Complicated Exchanges Rather Than One-Sided Backlash

**Development of the debate.** In June of 2021, Texas passed a bill, House Bill 3979 (henceforth HB 3979), prohibiting the use of “divisive concepts” in education. The bill stated that “No teacher, administrator, or other employee . . . shall require, or make part of a course the following concepts: (1) one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; (2) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” How did this law come to be? Answering that requires looking at the national context.

In just over a year, the majority of American states saw the introduction of bills restricting what and how teachers could discuss matters of race, sex, and gender (PEN America 2022), a response to national debates surrounding race, identity, and the interpretation and representation of American history. While most of these bills died early in the legislative process, 15 states passed curricular restriction bills into law: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas (PEN America 2022). Figure 2 presents a map highlighting these states.

**Figure 2: States with Curricular Restriction Laws (2022)**



**What makes a “good” civics curriculum?** A brief look into the historical development of American history and civics textbooks reveals that today’s controversies reflect long-standing disagreements. However, it also suggests how our historical moment may be unique.

Questions of national character and how to instill civic pride in students underpinned centuries of textbook and curriculum development. David Tyack argues that history textbooks in the 19th century had the overwhelming “motif” that the United States is a “favored nation” and represented a tale of continuous progress (Tyack 2003, p. 48). However, this narrative also posed problems—how could textbooks explain internal fractures such as the Civil War in this story of unity and progress? Tyack notes that the nonpartisan position of textbooks made it difficult for writers to navigate highly polarized

subjects such as the Civil War. Some textbooks dealt with the controversy by avoiding any lingering on the underlying moral questions. For example, they would quickly turn to the “cheerful” story of the successful laying of the Atlantic telegraph cable in 1866, producing a content whiplash that circumvented the difficulty of the Civil War aftermath (Tyack 2003, p. 50). These compromises foreshadow the debates of today—should textbooks aim to instill civic pride in their students even if it means glossing over the dark sides of history?

Another central question for civics and history textbooks has been how to include the diverse voices and stories that constitute America. Whose historical truths take center stage, and how should schools incorporate voices that have been relegated to the periphery? A central approach has been “additive.” Instead of writing a new American “story” that challenges ideas about progress or national character, textbook writers often just expand the curricula to include diverse histories that emphasize the positive contributions of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and racial and ethnic groups. Jonathan Zimmerman argues that historically, curriculum debates have focused on “inclusion” rather than the overall narrative structure: “Each ‘race’ gets to have its heroes sung . . . but no group may question the melody of peace, freedom, and economic opportunity that unites them all” (Zimmerman 2002, p. 214). He points out that these debates are not recent developments but instead can be traced throughout the 20th century, as post-World War I immigrants and Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement both advocated tremendously for their inclusion in history curriculum (p. 216).

Members of the systemic transformation camp generally aim to teach students more than just a story of American progress. Instead, the goal is to give students the ability to criticize and reckon with political and moral failures throughout our nation’s history. The American greatness camp instead prioritizes cultivation of patriotism as the ultimate aim of civics education. As a result, our current curricula debates are not merely disagreements over propositional knowledge—that is, the facts that children should learn in a classroom—but rather an ongoing struggle to define the goals of the American education system. In other words, the question is not just what we want students to know about American history but also what we want them to believe about how the past connects to the present and the future.

The American greatness camp named this difference as stemming from whether educators embraced or rejected CRT, a legal theory that shifts from thinking about racism as solely a product of individual prejudice to seeing it as a structural phenomenon produced by the law itself, across the whole of our legal institutions. For instance, North Dakota’s “CRT abolition” law (HB 1508) prohibits teaching “the theory that racism is not merely the product of learned individual bias or prejudice, but that racism is systemically embedded in American society and the American legal system to facilitate racial inequality.”

**The rise of the CRT debate.** One flash point in the CRT debate was the *New York Times Magazine*’s 1619 Project, an interpretation of American history that placed “the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States” (*New York Times Magazine* 2019). The 1619 Project has faced criticism from individuals across the political spectrum (Serwer 2019), with the Texas state legislature going beyond criticism and banning its use in K–12 education.

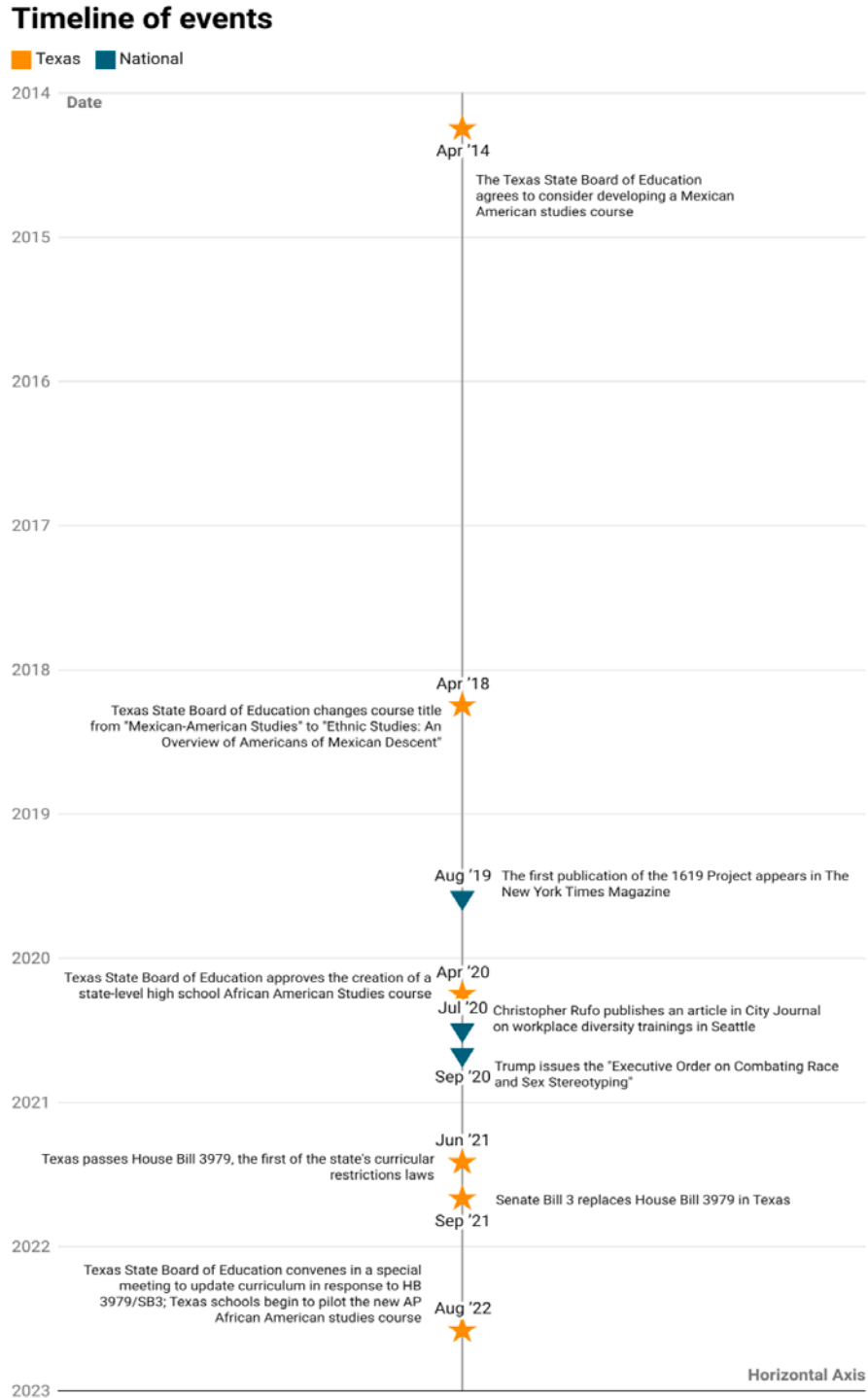
Less than a year after the 1619 Project was published, nationwide protests erupted over police brutality and institutional racism, sparked by George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis. This national reckoning escalated the already upward trend of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) workplace trainings (Norwood 2021). In July 2020, an employee of the city of Seattle sent evidence from an antibias training session to journalist Christopher Rufo,<sup>4</sup> who analyzed the material in an article titled “Cult Programming in Seattle.” Rufo concluded the article by arguing that these forms of programming are “part of

a nationwide movement to make this kind of identity politics the foundation of our public discourse. It may be coming soon to a city or town near you” (Rufo 2020).

His work was picked up by conservative news outlets and activists, including Fox News. After watching Rufo’s appearance on Fox News, then-President Donald Trump was galvanized into taking action against the “CRT movement.” Two days later, his budget chief issued a memo laying the foundation for what would become the “Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping” (Meckler and Dawsey 2021). This executive order prohibited “divisive concepts” in federal contractor training. It argued that to “promote unity . . . and to combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating,” trainings should not include the discussion of the idea that America is “irredeemably racist and sexist” or that some people “simply on account of their race or sex, are oppressors” (Trump 2020). Although President Biden eventually rescinded the order, the Trump executive order catalyzed a movement in state legislatures to produce similar laws. Now, the language of the executive order lives on in several state laws, such as in HB 3979 in Texas.

These developments, shown in Figure 3, led to the extension of curricular contestation across a diversity of battlegrounds in Texas, which we turn to next.

Figure 3: Timeline of Events



Created with Datawrapper

## 2.2. Takeaway #2: Broadening Battlegrounds

Current debates extend well beyond the classroom, and in Texas, legislative efforts have initiated much of the debate surrounding curricular content. The resulting legal changes have further complicated statewide curriculum decisions, and these debates have also filtered down to the local level. School libraries in particular have been hot spots, and, importantly, school boards have also been a major site of clashes between the two camps. Understanding how the ideas have manifested in different battlegrounds is central to analyzing the debate as a whole.

### 2.2.1. Legislation

Legislation has been an important site of contestation, and the American greatness camp has been particularly successful in passing legislation that aligns with its goals in Texas. Despite this, however, the systemic transformation camp has continued to debate the effects and implementation of anti-CRT legislation and has countered its impacts in curricular design at the state level.

In June 2021 in Texas, HB 3979 became the first of the essential knowledge curricular restrictions bills signed into law in the nation. As we have seen, the bill prohibited teaching the message that one race or sex is inherently superior to the other and banned the teaching of the 1619 Project. At the same time, it passed the House (which has a 57/43 percent Republican/Democrat split), with some items that seemed to have the potential to expand or protect the teaching of what would be considered “controversial issues.” For example, after additions from House Democrats, the bill’s suggested curriculum included the United Nations’s Declaration of Human Rights and the life and work of Cesar Chavez (Zou and Kao 2021). There were also amendments added with specific curriculum requirements: one required the teaching of the history of white supremacy, while another required the teaching of the history of the League of United Latin American Citizens, which is dedicated to protecting the civil rights of the Latino community in the United States. Many of these were already included in the state core curriculum but nevertheless sparked attempts in the process of passing the bill to cut these additions. Governor Abbott signed HB 3979 into law but declared that “more must be done.”

This call to action was answered by Senator Bryan Hughes, who authored SB 3, which broadened the scope and content of HB 3979. The bill expanded from restricting only social studies curriculum to pertaining to all K–12 academic subjects. It also authorized the Texas Education Agency to create an enforcement power to ensure that schools are following rules for the teaching of social studies and mandated that the agency administer a “Civics Training Program” for teachers and administrators. Finally, it removed the curriculum suggested in HB 3979, thus undoing the efforts to insert elements supporting a culturally responsive curriculum (Zou 2021). The shift from HB 3979 to SB 3 demonstrated the push to create a law that could block any progressive attempts to soften the effects of anti-CRT legislation. That said, the prohibition is nonetheless actually narrower than many have interpreted it to be. For example, teachers still may discuss “controversial topics” if they so choose but should aim to present a “balanced” exploration of all sides. Nevertheless, the lack of clarity creates a silencing effect as teachers may be too worried about their employment status to accidentally run up against any boundaries.

Texas also passed HB 4509, which promotes “informed American patriotism” in K–12 school curricula. It was sponsored by State Representative Greg Bonnen, a Republican from the Friendswood district. The law mandates that students study documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the American Constitution, the first Lincoln-Douglas debate, and the Federalist Papers. Following criticism that the bill focused too much on the work of white historical figures, Bonnen proposed an amendment to add speeches by Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. The House accepted the amendment. When advocating for the bill, Bonnen pointed to the disparity in performance between Texas citizens



and immigrants on the US Citizenship and Immigration Services; only 23 percent of Texans under age 45 can pass the exam, while 90 percent of immigrants who take it pass (Menchaca 2021).

Despite Bonnen’s talking point about the immigration exam, the process of passing HB 3979 and SB3 into law shows that the American greatness camp is not simply looking to increase students’ propositional knowledge about American history. For them, curricula should tell a positive version of national history, and students should leave the classroom with “informed patriotism.” The question at stake is not whether students can recite basic facts about American history but whether engagement with “controversial issues” will undermine a student’s positive conception of their nation.

### 2.2.2. *Statewide Curriculum Decisions*

As curricular constraints have tightened in Texas via legislation, curriculum decisions at the state level have become more fraught. Those designing curricula must now also account for the new legislative requirements, and the lack of clarity about the precise prescriptions within the legislation can make this difficult. Nevertheless, despite the impact of the new legislation, there are still exchanges between the two camps happening on the curriculum development level. Although Texas may now have gained a reputation for anti-CRT efforts, it has also historically been at the forefront of movements toward the introduction of culturally responsive curriculum, and those efforts had also already been a site of contestation.

In 2014, the Texas State Board of Education agreed to consider implementing a Mexican American studies course. In April 2018, the Board decided to create curriculum standards for the class but changed the course title from “Mexican-American Studies” to “Ethnic Studies: An Overview of Americans of Mexican Descent.” This change was the result of debate over whether Mexican-American was a “divisive” term. Beaumont Republican David Bradley, who proposed the title change, argued that “I don’t subscribe to hyphenated Americanism. . . . I find hyphenated Americanism to be divisive.” Most Democrats—except for El Paso Democrat Georgina Pérez—voted against the measure (*Texas Tribune* 2018). Finally, after years of deliberation, the Board voted to begin to approve the course for the state-wide learning standards, called Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), in April 2022 (Mitchell 2022). They decided that the curriculum would be based on a course taught in the Houston Independent School District, beginning the development of Texas’s first state standards for a high-school-level ethnic studies course (Texas Education Agency 2020).

Several years after agreeing to consider the adoption of a Mexican American studies course, the Texas State Board of Education gave “preliminary approval” for a state-level high school African American Studies course that would serve as a social studies elective on January 24, 2020, and then unanimously approved the course on April 17, 2020 (State Board of Education News 2020). At the time of the approval, board chair Keven Ellis, a Republican from Lufkin, noted that Texas was the third state in the country to adopt such a course (Korte 2020), which is based on a class created in a Dallas school district.

Now, Texas schools are also adopting the new Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies course, which is interdisciplinary and spans history, geography, literature, art, music, politics, and film. Beginning in 2022, the College Board piloted the course in 60 unnamed schools and plans to offer it to all high schools in the 2024–2025 school year. One of the schools piloting the course was the Young Women’s College Preparatory Academy, a public magnet middle and high school for girls in Houston, Texas. The teacher, Nelva Williamson, told *The Hill* that the course was so popular that there was standing-room only, and students have expressed excitement at the possibility of having similar experiences in college. She also noted that there has been positive feedback from parents, including those who have said that they are also learning from their children as they relay information from the course back at home (Daniels 2022).



The AP African American curriculum was also the target of political debate, with the Florida Department of Education denouncing it as “lack[ing] educational value” and saying the contents were “contrary to Florida law” (Varn 2023). Additionally, in February 2023, a Republican lawmaker in Texas introduced a bill that would ban any AP courses that do not comply with state curriculum laws (Pendharkar 2023). In a press statement, the College Board argued that its framework allows teachers “the flexibility to teach the essential content without putting their livelihoods at risk,” releasing an updated, official framework for the 2024–2025 school year, which will be available to all US schools as an elective course. It noted the new framework as a “significant improvement” over the pilot course “rather than a watering down” (College Board 2023).

Despite these efforts to promote culturally responsive curricula, the rise of anti-CRT legislation has had an effect on statewide curriculum decisions. While current efforts made by those in the systemic transformation camp have not come to an end, they have been stalled. On August 1, 2022, the State Board of Education convened in a special meeting to update curriculum in response to the HB 3979/SB 3. As previously mentioned, the law requires that curricula include an understanding of America’s “moral and political foundations” and engagement with America’s founding documents. The Board must also ensure that curricula respect the mandates of HB 4509: “‘Informed American patriotism’ means a reasoned appreciation, gained through the study of historical primary sources, of why America has been, is now, and continues to be the destination of choice for those around the world who yearn to live in freedom” (Mitchell 2022).

During the meeting, the Board listened to an array of participants including educational experts, ordinary citizens, and a volunteer work group. It was the latter, tasked with drafting changes to TEKS, who advocated for two new ethnic studies courses—Asian American Studies and American Indian/ Native Studies—to be added to TEKS (Mitchell 2022). The group proposed several changes that reflect the goals of the systemic transformation camp in affirming the importance of identity to successful learning and teaching. One of the major suggestions was a list of proposed changes to the Mexican American and African American Studies curricula. For the Mexican American studies course, the group argued that the curriculum should include more specific directives for teaching. Currently, the course describes its content as the “history and cultural contributions of Mexican Americans,” but the group recommended developing a more specific list of topics, ranging from Mesoamerican civilizations to American history after the end of the Mexican American War (1848). Moreover, they also recommended a greater emphasis on the “emerging intersectional identities including Tejanos, Mexican-Texans, Mestizos, Mexicanos, and Mexican Americans” (Mitchell 2022).

As for the African American Studies curriculum, the group recommended removing the vague lesson advice to use “a variety of rich primary and secondary source material.” They also recommended that rather than ambiguously describing history through trends, the curriculum should highlight specific events and documents to ground students’ learning. Moreover, after completing the course, students should understand the history and geography of African civilizations both before and after colonization. The group also suggested that the curriculum should shift the language from discussing the “past achievements” of African Americans in history to describing “past struggles, sacrifice, and perseverance.” Finally, the curriculum should increase the patriotic language used to describe the goals of the course: “This course helps students to love America by understanding all her people, and everyone’s contributions to making her ‘the Land of the Free.’”

A group of Texas students also advocated for a social studies curriculum that included better teachings on Muslims and Islam, and two Asian American teenagers went in front of the State Board of Education to argue for social studies proposals that included an Asian American ethnic studies course and greater emphasis on the contributions of Asian Americans in American history. However, the

Texas State Board of Education decided to delay the vote on social studies course updates until 2025 after pressure from conservative politicians and parents. Some of the opposing parties argued that the proposed changes were influenced by CRT. Another delayed change is the proposal to replace the word “internment” with “incarceration” for the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II (Lopez 2022c).

If the Board accepts the work group’s recommendations, the curriculum’s teaching on slavery will probably be expanded rather than diminished—contrary to what opponents of the bills had predicted. For example, the work group recommended introducing lessons on slavery in the second grade curriculum; currently, slavery does not appear until the fifth-grade curriculum. Notably, *The Texan* reported that the work group “cite[s] intersectional theory in their rationale for comparing the American Indian, Chicano, Civil Rights, Pride, and Women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (Mitchell 2022).

### 2.2.3. Local School Boards

Statewide debates have also influenced the tone and topics of local contestation. School board elections have been a particularly important site in the Texas curriculum debates, revealing a perhaps unexpected aspect of the landscape: the debate is not always about ethnic studies versus anti-CRT or informed patriotism curricula. Instead, “opposition” to the CRT abolition laws sometimes emerges as a rejection of the terms of the debate and an insistence on maintaining the (at least nominal) nonpartisanship of school board elections.

That said, the concepts of “nonpartisanship” and aspirations to depoliticization do not fully capture the current political moment surrounding school boards. There is also some mythmaking at work. Historically, education has always been a site of political contestation, and school boards play a pivotal role in the decisions of local school districts. Administrative reformers of the early 20th century aimed to reduce the “politics” of school boards by advocating that board members act more as technocratic managers than elected officials, but even this effort at depoliticization resulted in its own political effects. School board members increasingly came from the privileged segments of local communities, and activists found that local school boards tended to reject their demands as “social engineering” (Tyack 2003, p. 144–149). These debates about what it means to be “political” in school administration linger until today. What is particularly striking about this moment is that school board candidates have been explicitly linked to and endorsed by national political parties. Yet, it remains a question whether this is an inherently troubling development. Does it matter if school board issues are explicitly identified with political party platforms rather than merely being aligned in substance? Are we merely naming the dynamics that have long existed? This section explores the development of school board debates in Texas to better understand why this political turn could pose problems for civic debate about education.

Nationwide, there have been efforts to influence school elections and local school matters, and Texas is no different. Grassroots conservative groups such as Moms for Liberty have lobbied legislators, and political action committees (PACs) such as the 1776 Project have raised money to back conservative school board candidates. The 1776 Project also endorsed more than 100 school board candidates in states including Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania (Atterbury 2022). Ryan Girdusky, the founder of the 1776 Project, estimated that 70 percent of the school board candidates who he funded won their elections in the 2022 election cycle. The 1776 Project also received a \$900,000 contribution from the conservative PAC Restoration (Oliphant 2022).

On the progressive side, Texas Blue Action, a state branch of a national organization dedicated to mobilizing voters for liberal candidates, announced that it would create the organization Safe Schools for Texas to endorse school board candidates in the May elections. The organization focused on elections in the Round Rock, Dripping Springs, Eanes, Hays, Comal, Lake Travis, and Spring Branch school

districts. The president, Lana Hansen, sees the organization's work as filling a gap. She argues that progressive groups have not been responsive enough in their efforts to organize against conservative groups, especially because they did not expect conservative school board efforts to be so effective: "We want to believe that what we're seeing on the other side is so absurd, that it wouldn't be successful. But it's turning out that it is in a lot of communities, and we don't want to see that community be ours." She says that the organization wants to bring in candidates who reject anti-CRT rhetoric as political "talking points" and do not support practices such as book bans (Lopez 2022b).

Some Texas districts, particularly swing districts, have seen school board elections—which are typically quiet local elections—become a hotbed of activity. Importantly, all three of the counties that will be discussed in this section have historically been conservative, but residents have increasingly voted Democratic. To illustrate, Best Places reports that in 2000, Tarrant County voted 60.74 percent conservative and 36.78 percent liberal; now, it leans left with 49.31 voting Democrat (Best Places n.d.a). Williamson County shifted dramatically from 67.8 percent Republican and 27.72 percent Democrat in 2000 to 48.15 percent and 49.96 percent, respectively, in 2020 (Best Places n.d.c). Travis County is now solidly Democratic, changing from 46.88 percent Republican and 41.67 percent Democratic in 2000 to 26.43 percent Republican and 71.41 percent Democratic in 2020 (Best Places n.d.b). As a result, these counties all illustrate some of the broader statewide trends of shifting political affiliations.

The increasing politicization of school board elections is not to be minimized. Although candidates run as nonpartisan in school board elections, Brian Lopez of the *Texas Tribune* reports that the Texas GOP is presenting conservative school board candidate wins as party victories (Lopez 2022a). While media attention has largely focused on the most contentious school board elections, increasing partisanship has affected the political climates of school board elections across the state (Hixenbaugh 2022).

**Tarrant County.** Tarrant County, which primarily encompasses the suburbs of Dallas-Fort Worth, is one place that has received attention for its school board elections. Tarrant has historically been one of the most conservative urban counties, but Democrats have been making gains there in recent elections. For example, Beto O'Rourke beat Ted Cruz there in 2018, and Biden beat Trump in 2020. Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University, argues that the attention given to Tarrant school board elections may be a response to this eroding conservatism (Beeferman and Lopez 2022). The elections attracted the Christian cellphone company Patriot Mobile, which funded a PAC to support conservative school board candidates in the Carroll, Grapevine-Colleyville, Keller, and Mansfield school districts in Tarrant during the May 2022 elections. The PAC, called Patriot Mobile Action, is led by a local political campaign expert and has also contracted with conservative political consulting firms. All but one of the 11 conservative school board candidates backed by Patriot Mobile Action defeated their opponents, and the one who did not win advanced to a runoff election in June and later won. The candidates ran on anti-CRT platforms and called for the removal of books with LGBTQ+ content (Beeferman 2022).

**Williamson County.** In Round Rock—a suburb of Austin—there was a contentious election in which national interest groups, parties, and unions became involved and parents formed PACs. Five conservative school board candidates, who called themselves the "One Family" slate, declared themselves to be fighting against "'political correctness' in schools, 'leftist' teachers' unions, 'pornography' in school libraries, and LGBTQ-friendly policies." The Texas Republican party threw their support behind conservative candidates as well. In response, a group of liberal-leaning parents formed the PAC Access Education, which raised nearly \$30,000 by October 2023 (Oliphant 2022).

Despite all these efforts, all Round Rock candidates who had been endorsed by Texas's Republican party suffered significant losses in the election. Place 6 incumbent Tiffanie Harrison, for example, beat her conservative opponent Don Zimmerman by 25 percentage points. After the May successes

in Tarrant County, the Texas GOP thought that a similar anti-CRT strategy would work in suburban Red Rock, which has also moved away from being a solid red district. Yet even with Republican successes in Texas legislative elections, this was not the case in Round Rock. Harrison argued that she won because families rejected the political divisiveness of this year's school board elections, saying that "Children aren't red or blue. They just wanted people that are willing to serve them and make sure they have what they need in their schools to be successful." She denounced Zimmerman's slogan of "Teach ABCs + 123s, not CRTs & LGBTs" as the kind of divisiveness that parents did not want. In contrast, Jill Farris, another unsuccessful conservative school board candidate, argued that the losses did not reflect the failure of the candidates' positions but rather a changing electorate: "Maybe we were all kind of relying a little bit on this red wave and thought that parents were just as angry as we were" (Melhado and Lopez 2022).

**Travis County.** Nearby, northwest of Austin in the Lake Travis Independent School District, parents formed the PAC Lake Travis Families to fundraise and organize parents to vote for pro- "parent's rights" education candidates. All three conservative candidates who the group backed—Erin Archer, John Aoe-ille, and Kim Flasch—won seats on the school board (Lopez 2022a).

At the state level, the State Board of Education also had important elections this year: all 15 seats were open due to redistricting. Nine incumbents—6 Republicans and 3 Democrats—sought reelection, and 33 candidates—14 Republicans, 11 Democrats, and 2 Independents—ran. During the primaries, two Republican incumbents lost to candidates who ran on platforms promising to rid classrooms of CRT. Aaron Kinsey, who ousted Jay Johnson in District 15, received donations from conservative megadonor Tim Dunn and the Charter Schools Now PAC. In District 2, Republican L.J. Francis also won the Republican primary on an anti-CRT platform, as did Republican incumbent Pat Hardy in District 11. Hardy also presented himself as against the teaching the 1619 Project, although it is already banned under SB 3.

These attention-grabbing examples of unabashedly political, anti-CRT candidates can create the sense that there is little competition from school board candidates who support culturally responsive curriculum or do not otherwise position themselves as anti-CRT. Instead, these elections are asymmetric. As previously mentioned, the opposition candidates are not always positioning themselves as against the essential knowledge laws. Instead, the more common way of opposing anti-CRT candidates is to reject the treatment of school elections as a proxy battle for broader partisan gains. One example of this phenomenon is the Mansfield Independent School District (serving students in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex) race: Benita Reed—who lost against conservative PAC-backed Craig Tipping—described herself on her campaign website as the only "nonpolitical" candidate wanting to keep "racial division and political partisanship" out of schools.<sup>5</sup> We can also think back to Harrison's statement that "children aren't red or blue" and how she was electorally successful because she represented an alternative to political divisiveness (Lopez 2022a).

**Nonpartisanship and curricular debates.** Interestingly, American greatness candidates and groups have sometimes also claimed to reject partisan rhetoric. One of the founders of the Lake Travis Families PAC claimed that one of its goals was to "lower the temperature" on the contentious school board election. One of the PAC's endorsed candidates, Erin Archer, announced that "we need to really focus back on the actual education and take a lot of the political rhetoric and drama that surrounds the classrooms way down." Here, we can see Archer making use of the essential knowledge framework. Her opponent, Laurie Higginbotham, argued that this was a misrepresentation of PAC candidates. She asserted that they focus on "political wedge issues" such as masking and CRT and largely ignore other important school district issues, such as student overcrowding (Lopez 2022b). Higginbotham also asserted that the essential knowledge framing is pretextual.

These claims of nonpartisanship suggest that even politically motivated candidates still see—or at least advertise—their work as rejecting attempts to politicize curriculum. Of course, questions about civic education are inherently “political” in the philosophical sense. What bothers people, then, is the specific *form* of politicization. Here, we return to the question posed at the beginning of the section about the potential problems with explicit partisanship in school board elections. First, party identification creates an unhelpful binary. Even if nominally nonpartisan school boards candidates share views with national parties, the lack of explicit identification allows candidates to have more nuanced views that sometimes break with party platforms. The terms of the debate at the national level do not apply to every school and district, and school board members must have the political latitude to make decisions that work for their district, even if the decisions do not neatly align with their own political parties. This leads to the second point, which is that partisanship can also distract from both the substantive debates and the needs of a particular school or district—for example, Higginbotham’s reference to the issue of student overcrowding. To further illustrate this point, an *Education Week* survey found that more than 9 out of 10 teachers report that they have never taught CRT, yet this has come to define the conversation at the national level (Kurtz 2021).

The problem of partisanship in education debates leads to a final important point: although the state determines curriculum laws, individual school districts must navigate their ramifications. This places a particular burden on teachers and other individuals working in schools. The next section explores this issue.

#### 2.2.4. Classrooms and School Libraries

The curriculum debates place pressure on educators to navigate a politically contested topic without clear guidance, and this challenge has impacted classrooms, libraries, and educator-student interactions. Curricular restrictions have generally been unpopular among educators. A survey from the EdWeek Research Center showed that teachers across the political spectrum (Democrat, Republican, and Independent) largely oppose curricular restrictions on a variety of topics, including slavery, religion, and sexual orientation (Stanford 2022). Another survey from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that 91 percent of surveyed teachers feel like they are “caught in the crossfire of a culture war” (Veney 2023). In a report for EdWeek on these findings, Sarah Schwartz points out the partisan nature of curricular restrictions—Republicans have introduced all the curricular restrictions laws, and so teachers who want to “defend their profession and advocate for public education” find themselves being accused of partisanship (Schwartz 2023). This is another example of how the debate shifts the conversation away from substantive questions about education for a constitutional democracy and instead becomes mapped onto partisan politics, which burdens educators attempting to navigate the changing landscape.

A prime example of this challenge is the Carroll Independent School District (ISD) in Southlake, a suburb of Dallas-Fort Worth that is located predominantly in Tarrant County, which (as previously mentioned) has also had contentious school board elections. While Carroll ISD has been historically conservative, Democrats have been making gains in recent elections. Nevertheless, the school district has declared that schools should ensure books follow certain content standards, and if they do not, the school should dispose of them. The content standards in part reflect SB3’s rule that students should not be made to feel “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” due to their race. Instead, Carroll ISD asserts that teachers ensure their classroom library books provide multiple perspectives, and those presenting narratives that promote a singular perspective “in such a way that it . . . may be considered offensive” should be removed from the classroom. Here, the American greatness camp is embracing the language of culturally responsive pedagogy, albeit to different ends. The call for including “multiple

perspectives” here excludes voices that do not affirm American greatness values. The district’s mandate was released a few days after parental complaints over *This Book Is Anti-Racist* by Tiffany Jewell in a classroom library, which drove the Carroll school board to admonish the fourth-grade teacher.

The spokesperson for the Carroll school board, Karen Fitzgerald, released a statement following the publicization of the district’s books mandate denying that the district had ever explicitly demanded that teachers remove certain books. Instead, the statement argued that the rubric left the ultimate choice to the teachers and was only intended to be a guide.

Some teachers have responded with visual reminders of what they deem to be censorship. One teacher covered their library with yellow caution tape, and another covered the spines of the books with black paper and hung a sign that said “You can’t read any of the books on my shelves” (Hixenbaugh 2021).

The situation in the Carroll ISD illustrates how the ambiguity of legislation can create uncertainty at the local level. What constitutes “psychological distress?” Does “multiple perspectives” include perspectives that are sexist, racist, or homophobic? The lack of clarity in SB 3 trickles down to the district level, leaving teachers to navigate unclear guidelines. This ambiguity, combined with the pressures that teachers may be facing from parents, school boards, or the general climate of contention, may impede teachers’ confidence in their capacities to educate students on the ideas and content that they think is intellectually important. As a result, while national discourse may tend to focus on the battlegrounds that are politically salient on a broader level—such as legislation or statewide curriculum decisions—many of the ramifications of these battles may be most profoundly affecting individual teachers and classroom environments.

### **2.3. Takeaway #3: Substantive Debates over Interpretive Models and Civic Values**

Now that we have looked at the specifics of how legislative, school board, and library battles have unfolded in Texas, we can more completely account for the substantive debate underway over interpretive frameworks and civic values. Advocates of the two camps have different answers to the following questions: How do we communicate historical lessons and narratives, and what do we choose to highlight? How do we educate our students well as citizens? Who gets to decide the answers to these questions?

Table 1 divides the debate into five major themes: interpretations of history, definitions of citizenship and belonging, students’ interests, parents’ rights, and teachers’ responsibilities and freedoms. The first two categories relate to ideas about the role of education in democratic societies, while the next three concern stakeholder interests. The American greatness camp and the systemic transformation camp each have their own answers to the questions relating to these themes. These answers are constantly contested, both between the camps and within them, so these interpretations are largely schematic, designed to show there is a substantive debate at stake here and a wide range of possible answers.



**Table 1: American Greatness Camp and Systemic Transformation Camp’s Interpretations of Contested Values**

Contested Value	American Greatness Camp	Systemic Transformation Camp
Interpretations of history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrative approach: Emphasizes linear progress and civic pride</li> <li>• Rejects the “inheritance” of historical legacies of oppression</li> <li>• Focuses on positive contributions of marginalized groups</li> <li>• Condemns CRT as focused on domination and oppression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering approach: Centers critique as a means of progress</li> <li>• Emphasizes histories of oppression and their ramifications as well as resistance to them</li> <li>• Calls for analysis of power and structural systems</li> </ul>
Citizenship and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The “melting pot” model</li> <li>• Aims for the creation of a unified nation that incorporates individual differences into a singular identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The “quilt” model</li> <li>• Emphasizes the importance of multifaceted identity to successful learning and community building</li> </ul>
Students’ interests	Students should feel safe, with the authority of their parents and community helping to set the standards of what “safety” means	Aims for the affirmation of students’ identities in the broad sense, which may involve highlighting the intersection of identity and structural injustices
Parents’ rights	Parents should have the authority to reject educational materials and lessons based on their relationship to their child	Advocates for a more limited conception of parental authority and highlights a network of stakeholders, including the public and children themselves
Teachers’ responsibilities and freedoms	Teachers’ pedagogical decisions should reflect the values of parents and local communities	Teachers should expose students to a broader diversity of values than what is represented in their family or home culture

**Interpretations of history.** Curricula are necessarily curated visions of ideas and history. Teachers and curriculum designers must choose how and what to present to students—there is no “neutral” standpoint from which to develop curriculum. As a result, this set of contested values represent debates over *educational content*. What should we include in our civics curricula, and how should we present it? The American greatness camp advocates for highlighting the positive contributions of marginalized groups and minimizing the contemporary legacies of exclusion and oppression. Trump’s executive order highlights the American greatness camp’s resistance to the narrative that individuals can “consciously or unconsciously” inherit and thus reproduce legacies of oppression simply in virtue of their identities. This is an “integrative approach,” which seeks to include marginalized groups into the national story without that inclusion challenging the overall story of an arc of progress. This approach is dedicated to ensuring that students gain a sense of pride in their national history and a recognition of “American values,” such as opportunity, and have the capacity to protect and promote these values (Fonte 2023).

The American greatness camp criticizes the systemic transformation camp for depicting the United States as marked by failure rather than success (Fonte 2023). The systemic transformation camp largely rejects this characterization and tends to see itself as attempting not to simply focus on domination—as the American greatness camp accuses CRT proponents of doing—but rather to highlight both

perseverance and the conditions in which this was necessary. This is the “empowering approach,” which aims to have students understand past injustices and how groups worked to change or overcome them. The systemic transformation camp’s aim is that children can gain the knowledge and tools to transform their own social and political conditions. Additionally, for this camp, analysis of power and structural systems is a crucial component, especially in relation to understanding the perpetuation of injustices throughout history. The distinction between the two is exemplified in the debates over the language in the Texas African American Studies curriculum of whether to promote teaching of the “past achievements” of African Americans or the “past struggles, sacrifice, and perseverance.”

**Citizenship and belonging.** These contested values relate to the aspirational visions of each approach to education. What does it mean to be a citizen or political participant, and how should educational institutions promote these forms of citizenship? While the first set of contested values focused on the *what*, this set focuses on the *why*. In other words, the first focuses on the curation of educational content, and the second describes the reasons for the curation. What is the ultimate purpose of a civics curriculum—in other words, why do the differences in interpretations of history matter? These questions about citizenship and belonging were at stake in the debate over the title of the Mexican American studies course. Is “hyphenated citizenship” divisive, or does it demonstrate the versatility of interpretations of national belonging? The American greatness camp answers this question with what we might refer to as the “melting pot” model: students should consider themselves to be part of a unified whole, in which individual histories are subsumed under a singular national identity. The aim is that all citizens can connect to, and be united by, American values and form cross-community connections through this shared foundation. The systemic transformation camp highlights how this idea of a singular national identity tends to reflect historical structures of power and thus does not allow for an understanding of identity as multifaceted. As a result, the systemic transformation camp places greater weight on students being able to navigate their American identity from multiple perspectives. This is sometimes referred to with the image of a quilt: students of different backgrounds can retain their cultural histories while still being invested in the transformation of their political communities. As a result, the systemic transformation camp also affirms the importance of identity to successful learning. In this view, students have their own histories that they bring to the classroom, and curricula must recognize how student’s identities intersect with their learning. The American greatness camp, which focuses on unity over differentiation, rejects this approach to curriculum design as “divisive.”

**Students’ interests.** How should students feel after participating in classroom discussions? A current focus on the debate surrounding student interests hinges on the meaning of “safety.” Both camps advocate for students to feel safe, but they understand this goal differently. The language of Trump’s executive order that no individual “should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” demonstrates the American greatness camp’s attitudes toward student safety (Trump 2020). Structural analysis could make students feel uncomfortable if they see themselves working in systems of oppression, and the American greatness camp sees this as undermining their senses of safety. Instead, families must stand up for their children’s safety by ensuring that school libraries and classroom curricula do not produce this destabilizing effect in students, and instead promote a sense of security in their shared, positive civic bonds. In contrast, the systemic transformation camp sees safety as an affirmation of identity in the broad sense. For this camp, truthfully representing students’ identities means communicating a possibly negative story of how their identities are implicated in oppression or domination, and discomfort can be a powerful tool for understanding where change is needed. There can also sometimes be a loss of nuance. The critiques of the *New York Times Magazine*’s 1619 Project illustrate this dynamic. In particular, four historians published a



letter arguing that the work is at times guilty of “a displacement of historical understanding by ideology” (Bynum et al. 2019). The differing interpretations of students’ interests are central to the camps’ visions of progress.

**Parents’ rights.** What is the appropriate scope of parental authority in the educational realm? The frenzy over CRT reflects a pervasive fear among some families that the state seeks to instill in students ideas that do not reflect their parents’ worldviews, and thus minimize the role that parents ought to play in their children’s development. These parents seek to assert their parental rights by supporting school board candidates who market themselves as protecting parental rights, such as the “One Family” slate. Moms for Liberty is perhaps the most well-known group, seeing its members as “dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating, and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government” (Moms for Liberty n.d.). This mission statement reflects the American greatness camp’s view that parents are the critical link between child and world, and curricula that undermines their teachings represents government intrusion on this familial bond.

The fights over classroom libraries demonstrate a similar debate: who gets to determine what information children can access? While the American greatness camp argues that pro-CRT advocates aim to entirely eliminate parental influence, this dichotomy does not reflect the range of possible interpretations of these contested values. The systemic transformation camp sees parents as partners, not leaders, in educational matters; other stakeholders, including the public itself, have their own interests that parents cannot automatically override. For the systemic transformation camp, a pluralistic society may demand that students have some exposure to alternative perspectives than those of their immediate families and communities so that they can navigate a diverse public sphere. Moreover, they see children’s interests as being separate, and sometimes divergent, from those of their parents. The American greatness camp, however, rejects the idea that “the public” has an equivalent stake in educational matters and is suspicious of defining children’s interests as distinct from those of their family. Instead, it sees parents as holding a “trump card” and argues that the systemic transformation camp’s educational vision erodes the family’s unity.

**Teachers’ responsibilities and freedoms.** What is the role of teachers in the project of educating students? How much authority do they have to determine how and what students learn? Both camps show different levels of trust in teachers’ capacities to navigate the challenging task of educating citizens. The suspicion of teachers in the American greatness camp derives not from teachers qua teachers but as agents of the state. The systemic transformation camp may also share suspicion of the ways in which institutionalized narratives come to dominate classroom discussion, but there tends to be greater trust in teachers’ abilities to navigate classroom discussion in an appropriate manner. The camps also have different interpretations of teachers’ responsibilities, which derive from their interpretations of values concerning citizenship and belonging, parental interests, and student interests. The American greatness camp views the role of teachers as deferential to families and the local community, and thus believes that classroom teaching should reflect family and community values rather than challenging them. In contrast, the systemic transformation camp sees the broader public as having a stake in students’ education. For this camp, there is a public interest in having students who can navigate a multicultural society. As a result, it argues that educators should expose students to a diversity of values and perspectives.

### **3. Conclusion and Final Notes**

The questions at the heart of the current curriculum debates are perennial civic matters. They concern our perception of our own national story and our visions for a shared future. The unfolding of these debates in Texas, as well as in other states across the nation, offers an opportunity to imagine models of citizenship that extend beyond the sharp dichotomies portrayed by political pundits or inflammatory candidates. Both the American greatness camp and the systemic transformation camp assert their own interpretations of these fundamental civic questions; our continuing civic education involves contending with these interpretations within our political community. This paper was descriptive and analytic but not prescriptive. The goal was to map the terrain of these debates. The hope is that with an appreciation for the substantive issues at stake, policymakers, scholars, teachers, students, and activists can begin to formulate responses within communities of practice.

## Notes

1. We thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.
2. There are several terms that describe this general approach to curriculum and teaching, including “culturally competent curriculum,” “culturally responsive teaching,” “culturally sustaining pedagogy,” and “culturally relevant pedagogy.”
3. It is worth noting that this camp is less self-consciously coordinated compared to the American greatness camp, and the name reflects this. This camp may not have set out to be a unified group, but in virtue of its opposition to the American greatness values, this network of reformers, academics (especially education schools), and nonprofits has become associated with a set of shared values. The term “systemic transformation” was created by us, intended to reflect these values rather than a common term among this camp. Other possible names for this camp, including “cultural competency or responsiveness,” “social justice,” or “educational equity,” either refer to specific pedagogical methods—and thus risk conceptual confusion—or do not seem specific enough to this debate.
4. See Wallace-Wells (2021) for an in-depth interview with Rufo.
5. See the website at <https://www.drreedformisd.com/>.

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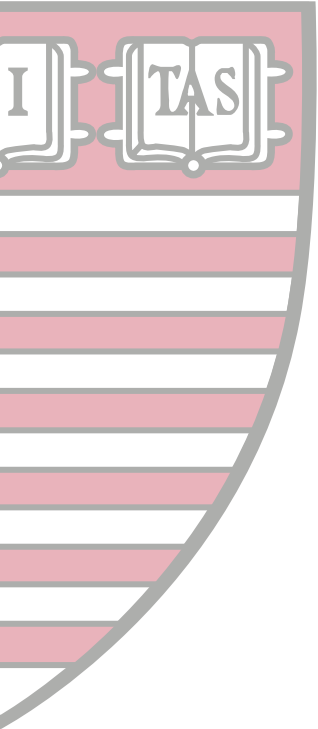
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