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## From strategy to sentiment: examining the role of partisan news in fostering white racial consciousness and shaping attitudes toward critical race theory

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### ABSTRACT

Fox News has dedicated considerable attention to Critical Race Theory (CRT), recoding it as indicative of anti-white racism. This study examined whether exposure to these narratives is associated with white audiences' racial consciousness: white identity, perceptions of anti-white discrimination, and white racial mobilization, as well as attitudes toward CRT-related education policies. Using the 2020 Collaborative Multi-racial Post-election Survey, we examine relationships between white Americans' ( $N = 2917$ ) use of Fox News, racial consciousness, and opposition to CRT-related educational policies. We find a positive association between Fox News use and perceptions of anti-white discrimination, with this relationship strengthening during periods of heightened news coverage of CRT. Furthermore, the relationship between Fox News use and opposition to diversity and fairness instruction in K-12 education is mediated by perceptions of anti-white discrimination across ideological groups. We discuss these findings in consideration of conservative media's recoding of CRT and its implications for accessible white racial consciousness and opposition to equity initiatives.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Partisan news; Critical Race Theory; white identity; racial consciousness; framing; media effects

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been propelled to the forefront of political discourse, exemplified by over 300 bills regulating CRT-related instruction in education initiated by Republican lawmakers since 2021 (Deshpande et al. 2024; Johnson, Gold, and Zhao 2022). Although Republican politicians, in both rhetoric and legislation, express opposition to CRT (Deshpande et al. 2024; Safarpour et al. 2024), political elites are not the sole arbiters of anti-CRT discourse. Right-leaning media, such as Fox News, disproportionately published news using language evocative of white identity, such as the terms

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“white” and “racist,” ultimately portraying CRT as a form of anti-white racism (M. A. Smith et al. 2025).

M. A. Smith et al. (2025) argue that such narratives exemplify *identity-based disinformation*, strategically framed narratives that deceptively frame CRT as inherently threatening to white Americans by resonating with the group’s shared imaginaries concerning their relative societal position (15). Identity-based disinformation aims to undermine perceived threats to the status quo and maintain the privileged position of the dominant group, especially when whiteness – the racial invisibility granted to white Americans – and perceptions of white Americans’ sociopolitical dominance are challenged (see Isom, Mikell, and Boehme 2021; St Louis 2021). Research suggests that these strategic efforts have seemingly influenced white Americans’ perspectives. White Americans who oppose CRT describe it as divisive, judgmental, harmful, and racist toward white people (Richmond et al. 2024; Safarpour et al. 2024).

Political discourse surrounding CRT was intentional, representing a strategic campaign to codify CRT into a catch-all for concepts related to racial diversity and to delude the public on matters of race (Benson 2022; Clark 2024; Safarpour et al. 2024). Discourse incorporating identity-laden language to recode CRT may prove especially impactful in meeting this objective, as it resonates with white Americans’ growing sense of misrecognition within America’s sociopolitical systems (Ettema 2005; Wells and Friedland 2023). Research has documented growing racial consciousness among white Americans (Jardina 2019b; 2021), often attributing its increase to status threat (Mutz 2018), changing sociopolitical dynamics (Jardina 2019b), and visibility of social justice causes, such as Black Lives Matter protests (Isom et al. 2022).

While these factors sustain the continued impact of race in American politics, partisan news, particularly when it employs identity-based disinformation, may also prove integral in shaping white racial consciousness. In this study, we examine relationships between Fox News and white racial consciousness during periods of heightened identity-based disinformation concerning CRT. Additionally, we investigate whether white racial consciousness associated with Fox News consumption is related to attitudes toward CRT-related policies, particularly K-12 instruction about racial inequality and diversity. We discuss the implications of this study considering the strategic use of CRT to counter the instruction of race and diversity in K-12 education and to galvanize opposition to diversity initiatives more broadly, ultimately mobilizing audiences toward white protectionism (see R. M. Smith and King 2021a).

### ***White identity and racial consciousness in politics***

Identity proves integral in fostering a sense of self-concept through group affiliation for many individuals (Tajfel and Turner 1986). However, racial identification can also become politicized, manifesting as racial consciousness, wherein political decisions are significantly guided by protecting the racial in-group (Bonilla-Silva 2022; Miller et al. 1981). Racial consciousness is not solely driven by the centrality of one’s identity, instead it is multidimensional, encompassing in-group identity, as well as ideological beliefs about one’s in-group’s social standing, and the belief that collective action is necessary to protect the interests of the in-group (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Sanchez and Vargas 2016, 161).

Thus racial consciousness arises when individuals not only deem their identity important but also recognize disadvantages in their relative societal position and see collective action on the part of the in-group as necessary for improving this standing (McClain et al. 2009; Miller et al. 1981). It is for these reasons, scholars argue, that racial consciousness is prevalent among African Americans and Latinos (Dawson 1994; Marsh and Ramírez 2019; Sanchez 2006) and, at times, among Asian Americans (Le, Arora, and Stout 2020) – racial groups whose mechanisms for redressing grievances are often obstructed and whose participation in political spheres has historically been limited or strategically constrained by discrimination at individual and policy levels (Dawson 1994; Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980, 33; King and Smith 2005). For these racial groups, race consciousness prompts a sense of shared fate among the in-group, a group-based political cohesion linked to political engagement and support for economic redistribution or affirmative action, as they are tangible remedies necessary to ensure the groups' sociopolitical protection (Dawson 1994; Dowe, Franklin, and Carter 2020).

As McIntosh (2017) notes in her argument about whiteness as an invisible set of privileges, racial consciousness has not been traditionally applied to white Americans, nor have they historically reported high levels of it (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Jardina 2019b). The status quo benefits white Americans, leaving little need to develop race-based consciousness, as whiteness is positioned as the default and, when this racial order is challenged, public policies have often evolved to preserve this hierarchy (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; King and Smith 2005). The lack of widespread racial consciousness is further underscored in research; much of the research examining white Americans' identity in politics has focused on out-group racial animus (Jardina 2019b; 2021).

While consciousness of their white identity is not expected, especially considering privileged status and political protections afforded white Americans (Du Bois 1975; King and Smith 2005), race *can* become salient when there is a perceived attack on the status quo (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Jardina 2019b). This fluctuation is reflected in rising racial identity among white Americans, with more and more forming a psychological attachment to their racial group (Jardina 2019b, 2021; Schildkraut 2017). Scholars connect these shifts to increasing diversity (Mutz 2018), social justice protests (Isom et al. 2022), perceived status loss (Isom, Mikell, and Boehme 2021; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), and fear of anti-white discrimination (Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2022; Rasmussen et al. 2022).

The lens of racial consciousness helps us understand this phenomenon, particularly the potential for media to affect attitudes concerning status loss in a manner that motivates in-group protective behavior among white Americans. Jardina (2019b) describes this phenomenon as *white identity politics*, occurring when white Americans feel their dominant status within society is threatened and, subsequently, believe they must work together to protect the group's status and power. White racial consciousness effectively compels decisions in which white Americans mobilize for politicians or policies perceived to protect white prerogatives while opposing those viewed as adversarial (Jardina 2021; D. S. Lane, Hansia, and Saleem 2023; Schildkraut 2017). Accordingly, racial consciousness has motivated white Americans' political decisions, including support for authoritarian policies (Jardina and Mickey 2022), and opposition towards Black Lives Matter (Isom et al. 2022; Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2022) and immigration (Jardina 2019a).

While abundant research indicates relationships between white racial consciousness and political opinions among white Americans, less is understood about its origins, particularly the role of partisan media in fostering these perceptions (see Berry, Cepuran, and Garcia-Rios 2022). This is especially important as racial consciousness represents a form of identity distinct from out-group animus (Jardina 2021) – attitudes whose development has been well documented in media effects literature (Dixon, Weeks, and Smith 2019). Republican politicians have taken advantage of the increasing role of white identity in politics, successfully positioning themselves as the effective owners of white identity (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2020).

Republicans' coalescence around white identity is further evident in their embrace of rhetorical appeals and issue positions rooted in white ethnic nationalism and concern about discrimination against white Americans (Bartels 2018; Long 2022; R. M. Smith and King 2021b; Woods et al. 2024). Yet politicians are not the sole source of such discourse. Partisan media engaged in biased coverage attend to congenial topics in both their selection and framing of news (Groeling 2013). For conservative news, this includes discussing race-related topics that align with culturally conservative narratives, such as the threat of Black Lives Matter protests (Smith and Haenschen 2024) or anti-white discrimination (Beabout 2020).

### ***Media strategy, cognition, and white racial consciousness***

We contend that the impact of identity-based disinformation concerning CRT on white Americans' racial consciousness can be understood through the lens of *schema theory* (Ewoldsen and Rhodes 2020). News frames of political issues construct and maintain cognitive schemas – memory models containing linkages of cognitive nodes (Fiske and Taylor 2017). These cognitive, associative networks help audiences mentally organize clusters of information. Research indicates that repeated activation of cognitive schema during media exposure makes them chronically accessible or more easily recalled from memory (Shrum 2009). People draw upon the most accessible schema when making evaluations (Higgins, Bargh, and Lombardi 1985), increasing the likelihood that accessible attitudes will guide relevant judgments (Domke, McCoy, and Torres 1999; Ramasubramanian 2010). Research has applied this theoretical lens to examine the impact of crime representations on out-group racial attitudes (Entman and Rojecki 2001). Frequent exposure to distorted crime narratives constructs cognitive associations between Black Americans and crime, influencing judgments of African Americans and attitudes toward punitive measures (Dixon 2006). Similar relationships may arise from Fox News' framing of CRT.

The origin of conservative discourse surrounding CRT is attributed to white political provocateurs like Christopher Rufo. As Rufo (2021) boasted on Twitter: "We have successfully frozen their brand – 'critical race theory' – into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category." Stuart Hall's (2000) encoding/decoding model explains the cognitive implications of the efforts to effectively *recode* Critical Race Theory into "CRT," using the acronym as a label to signal a threat to white audiences (Clark 2024). Hall contends that media texts are imbued with values throughout their development, distribution, and reception.

However, while producers – in this case, the legal scholars who developed CRT – may have intended one meaning, audiences can read and interpret texts in different ways. This is particularly true in the era of hyper-fragmented and hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2017), where messages are strategically encoded to emotionally resonate with target audiences (Serazio 2014), tactics which can influence audiences’ interpretation of future messages (see Entman 1993). Conservative media activism, first modeled by publications such as the National Review during the golden eras of print and broadcast, laid a foundation of mainstream media distrust during the golden eras of print and broadcast news, validating alternative interpretations of established arguments from outside normative media channels (J. B. Lane 2020). Now, influential right-wing media actors have successfully arranged themselves into defensive publics and, in this case, employed multimedia communication strategies to redefine – and thus recode – concepts like CRT, intentionally imbuing them with nefarious meanings that activate white grievances (Jackson and Kreiss 2023; see Safarpour et al. 2024).

Conservative media introduced CRT, a topic obscure in politics and unfamiliar to most audiences (Polikoff et al. 2022; Safarpour et al. 2024), with biased terms capable of evoking white identity, particularly fear of anti-white discrimination – *white, racist, racism* (M. A. Smith et al. 2025). While the conservative media ecosystem disproportionately discussed CRT, especially compared to liberal-leaning and mainstream media, Fox News was at the forefront of these narratives (Deshpande et al. 2024). The incorporation of these rhetorical strategies invokes a prevailing cultural schema among white Americans: shared imaginaries of being ignored and abandoned by liberal policies that favor other racial groups (Cabañas 2020; Hochschild 2016).

Research indicates that when audiences are unfamiliar with a topic, contextual cues provided by the frame activate relevant cognitive structures, aiding in information processing and the formation of new attitudes (Ettema 2005; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Although CRT may be unfamiliar, connecting it to concerns of anti-white discrimination, a burgeoning sentiment among white Americans (Hochschild 2016), encourages audiences to *decode* the meaning provided within the frame, ultimately shaping attitudes about CRT based on the cues provided by the media framing (Entman 1993). Frequent exposure to these representations of CRT strengthens these cognitive associations, making CRT-related schemas more accessible and shaping attitudes that align with Fox News’ *recoding* of CRT (see Price and Tewksbury 1997).

In addition to directly impacting viewers’ attitudes toward CRT, Fox News’ representation of CRT may also prompt audiences to evaluate CRT based on the attitudes made accessible by its framing (Domke, Shah, and Wackman 1998; Ramasubramanian 2010; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Discourse linking CRT to racism against white Americans strategically works to legitimize white grievances, particularly feelings that white Americans are disadvantaged (Hochschild 2016; R. M. Smith and King 2021b), a sentiment that underpins racial consciousness (Miller et al. 1981; Sanchez and Vargas 2016). Continued exposure to such anti-CRT narratives may heighten racial consciousness among white Americans, including increasing white identity, amplifying perceptions of anti-white discrimination, and bolstering the rationale for race-based political mobilization. Once accessible, racial consciousness would influence attitudes toward CRT-related policy more generally, such that racially conscious white Americans would oppose diversity or equity-based education in K-12 schools to protect their group from the threats portrayed within the media.

### Partisan selective exposure

Political ideology may also factor into the relationship between news exposure and CRT-related schema. Research indicates that audiences prefer political news aligned with their preexisting attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011, 2009), with partisanship (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009; Stroud 2010) and ideology (Cardenal et al. 2019; Stroud 2008) influencing news selection behavior. Motivated news selection occurs across modalities: conservatives are more likely to consume conservative cable news, such as Fox News (Stroud 2008; 2010), and other conservative media, including online news, blogs, and radio (Edgerly 2015; Stroud 2008).

News selection motivated by political ideology impacts political perceptions: selective exposure to partisan news promotes attitudes consistent with the bias of the source, including policy attitudes (Levendusky 2013) and political misperceptions (Garrett, Long, and Jeong 2019; Weeks et al. 2023). Moreover, selective exposure can impact attitude accessibility (Knobloch-Westerwick 2012). The tendency to view attitude-consistent news means conservatives attuned to Fox News' recoding of CRT are more frequently exposed to these messages, making related schema – negative CRT attitudes and white racial consciousness – more accessible. Research examining attitudes toward CRT supports these contentions: republicans report greater familiarity with CRT and express stronger opposition to its instruction (Safarpour et al. 2024). This study examines the relationships between Fox News consumption and opposition to CRT-related policies, particularly the potential activation of schema related to the recoding of CRT: white racial consciousness. Accordingly, we expect the following:

**H1:** Fox News use is positively related to (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness.

**H2:** The relationship between Fox News use and (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness is moderated by political ideology.

**H3:** Fox News use is positively related to opposition to CRT policies via white racial consciousness.

To better understand relationships between Fox News usage, opposition to CRT policies, and white racial consciousness, we consider whether frequent exposure to negative representations of CRT can make CRT-related schema chronically accessible. If this is the case, we would anticipate *stronger* positive relationships between Fox News use and opposition to CRT-related policies, as well as white racial consciousness, when these perspectives are most accessible – i.e., following increased coverage of CRT.

**RQ1:** Does the strength of relationships between Fox News use and (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness vary based on the degree of coverage?

## Method

### Data and participants

We test the hypotheses using data from the 2020 Collaborative Multi-racial Post-election Survey (CMPS) (Frasure et al. 2024). The 2020 CMPS is a national sample of registered and non-registered voters fielded from April 2, 2021, to August 24, 2021. Although the

survey is cross-sectional, it was fielded during the same period in which Fox News, and news media in general, increased coverage of CRT (Deshpande et al. 2024). This allows for an analysis that examines relationships between the predictor and criterion variables of interest, as well as additional statistical tests to assess changes in the strength of these relationships over time. Consequently, we can more accurately infer attitude accessibility stemming from news habits, as reflected in the changing strength of the relationship between Fox News use, racial consciousness, and opposition to CRT-related policies. Analysis was limited to non-Hispanic, white respondents ( $N = 2917$ ), with an average age of 50.30 years ( $SD = 17.59$ ), and consisted of 51.60% women. All analyses are weighted.

## **Measures**

### **Fox News use**

Participants were asked, “How often do you watch or get news from Fox News?” on a four-point Likert scale: (4) Very often, (3) Occasionally, but not often, (2) Rarely, maybe once in a while, (1) Almost never ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ).

### **Political ideology**

Ideological identification was measured by asking participants, “When it comes to politics, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?” on a scale ranging from (5) Very conservative to (1) Very liberal, with the midpoint being moderate. Categories were collapsed to represent conservative (45.05%), moderate (31.41%), and liberal (23.55%) ideology.

### **White racial consciousness**

To account for the multi-dimensionality of white racial consciousness, we include three measures: white identity, perceptions of anti-white discrimination, and white racial mobilization (see Sanchez and Vargas 2016). White identity measurement utilized the question “How important is being White to your identity?” measured on a five-point scale: (5) Extremely important, (4) Very important, (3) Moderately important, (2) Slightly important, (1) Not at all important ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ). Perceptions of anti-white discrimination were measured by asking participants, “Discrimination against Whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against racial minorities” on a four-point scale: (4) Strongly agree, (3) Agree, (2) Disagree, (1) Strongly disagree ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = .99$ ). For white racial mobilization, we utilized the question “When you go to vote for an election, how important are the following to you in a candidate: Their racial background is the same as yours?” which was measured on a five-point scale, (1) Very unimportant, (2) Somewhat unimportant, (3) Neither important/unimportant, (4) Somewhat important, (5) Very important ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

### **Opposition to CRT policies**

Participants indicated their level of opposition to the following statements: “Developing a federal standard in education, ensuring that kindergarten through high school students learn more about racial inequality and racism” ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) and “Developing a federal standard in education, ensuring that kindergarten through high school students

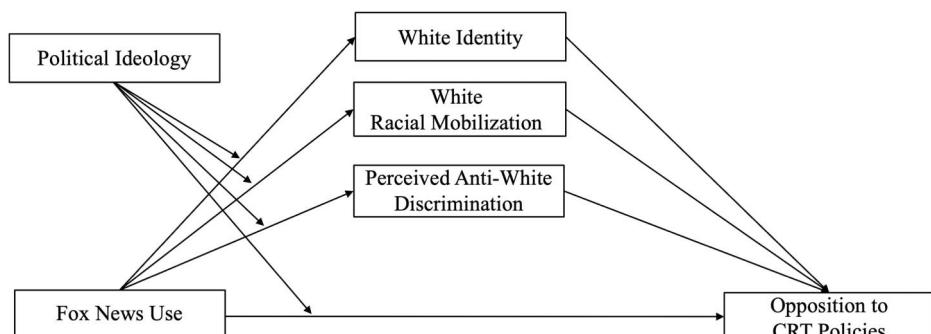
learn more about racial diversity and fairness" ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) on a six-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly support, (2) Support, (3) Somewhat support, (4) Somewhat oppose, (5) Oppose, (6) Strongly oppose.<sup>1</sup> We recognize the limitations of this operationalization, particularly because the items do not explicitly mention CRT, and research shows that partisans report higher support for teaching about racism than CRT specifically (Safarpour et al. 2024). Nevertheless, questions regarding racial inequality and diversity are consistent with the political discourse concerning CRT, particularly mandates regulating instruction in K-12 education (Johnson, Gold, and Zhao 2022). Appendix A reports the question wording, coding, and correlations between variables.

## Results

### Hypothesis testing

We test the proposed moderated mediation using a series of weighted least squares regressions (WLS), which examined the relationship between the predicting variable of Fox News use and the parallel mediating variables – white identity, perceived anti-white discrimination, and white racial mobilization, and probit regressions, which measured relationships between the mediating variables and the criterion variables: opposition to inequality and racism education, and opposition to racial diversity and fairness, respectively.<sup>2</sup> The conditional indirect effects were tested using the *R* package *mediation*, which estimated the moderated mediation at the differing levels of the moderator using 10,000 quasi-Bayesian simulations (Tingley et al. 2014). The conceptual model for the proposed moderated mediation is depicted in Figure 1. Results are reported in Tables 1 and 2. Each model controls for age, gender, education, and income. Additionally, considering the role of racial resentment in opposition to teaching discrimination or white privilege in schools (see Carbone, Harell, and Soroka 2024), each model also controls for racial resentment ( $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

First, we examine the relationships between Fox News use and opposition to CRT policies (H1a), and white racial consciousness (H1b). The probit regression demonstrated a significant, positive relationship between Fox News use and opposition to inequality and racism education. Respondents reporting more Fox News consumption opposed federal standards for inequality and racism education ( $b = .105$ ,  $SE = .047$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was no



**Figure 1.** Proposed moderated mediation for Fox News use on opposition to CRT.

**Table 1.** Moderated mediation of Fox News use on opposition to federal inequality and racism education standard.

	Perceived anti-white discrimination (WLS)	White identity (WLS)	White racial mobilization (WLS)	Opposition to inequality and racism education (Probit)
(Intercept)	1.330*** (.164)	1.800*** (.292)	2.385*** (.237)	-2.121*** (.334)
Fox news use	.074** (.026)	.083# (.047)	.069# (.038)	.105* (.047)
<i>Mediators</i>				
Perceived anti-white discrimination	-	-	-	.084# (.049)
White identity	-	-	-	-.042 (.030)
White racial mobilization	-	-	-	-.038 (.037)
<i>Moderators</i>				
(ref = Conservative)				
Liberal	-.739*** (.122)	-.668** (.217)	-.749*** (.176)	-.754** (.274)
Moderate	-.395*** (.111)	-.141 (.197)	-.237 (.160)	-.411* (.200)
<i>Interactions</i>				
Fox news use × Liberal	.290*** (.049)	.477*** (.086)	.440*** (.070)	-.080 (.108)
Fox news use × Moderate	.125** (.042)	.133# (.075)	.132* (.061)	-.007 (.076)
<i>Controls</i>				
(ref = Male)				
Gender	-.018 (.043)	-.010 (.076)	-.151* (.062)	-.111 (.082)
Age	-.003* (.001)	.004# (.002)	.001 (.002)	.000 (.002)
Education	-.001 (.016)	-.023 (.029)	.018 (.023)	-.009 (.030)
Income	-.013# (.007)	.022# (.012)	-.031** (.010)	.016 (.013)
Racial resentment	.398*** (.023)	.099* (.041)	-.023 (.033)	.565*** (.050)
R <sup>2</sup>	.37	.07	.07	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.37	.06	.07	
BIC	3591.30	5253.60	4655.80	1487.00
Log.Lik.	-1751.99	-2583.17	-2284.26	-692.59

Note: N = 1443. Unstandardized regression coefficients reported with standard errors in parentheses. #p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

WLS = Weighted Least Squares.

significant relationship between Fox News use and opposition to diversity and fairness education ( $b = .073$ ,  $SE = .048$ ,  $p = .13$ ). H1a was partially supported. For H1b, Fox News use was only associated with one dimension of white racial consciousness: perceptions of anti-white discrimination. There was a significant, positive relationship between Fox News use and perceived anti-white discrimination in both WLS models, partially supporting H1b.

Next, we examine the conditional relationships between Fox News use and (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness. H2 predicted that political ideology would moderate the relationship between Fox News use and (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness, such that exposure to like-minded media would be associated with increased opposition to CRT-related policies and white racial consciousness. There was no significant interaction between Fox News use and political ideology for opposition to inequality and racism education, as well as diversity and fairness education. H2a was not supported.

For H2b, weighted least squares regressions demonstrate a significant and positive interaction between Fox News use and liberal ideology for all three dimensions of white racial consciousness: perceived anti-white discrimination, white identity, and white racial mobilization. Liberals who often consumed Fox News reported higher levels of perceived anti-white discrimination ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SE = .07$ ), white identity ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),

**Table 2.** Moderated mediation of Fox News use on opposition to federal diversity and fairness education standard.

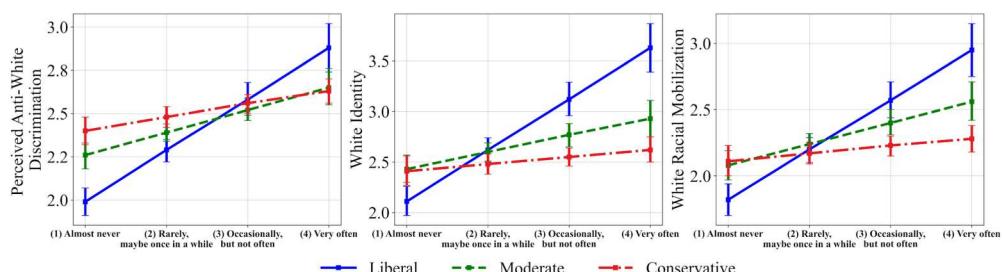
	Perceived anti-white discrimination (WLS)	White identity (WLS)	White racial mobilization (WLS)	Opposition to diversity and fairness education (Probit)
(Intercept)	1.382*** (.172)	2.092*** (.295)	1.881*** (.241)	-2.431*** (.332)
Fox news use	.082** (.029)	.051 (.049)	.046 (.040)	.073 (.048)
<i>Mediators</i>				
Perceived anti-white discrimination	-	-	-	.164*** (.047)
White identity	-	-	-	.004 (.030)
White racial mobilization	-	-	-	.004 (.036)
<i>Moderators</i>				
(ref = Conservative)				
Liberal	-.534*** (.130)	-.818*** (.223)	-.493** (.182)	-.639* (.264)
Moderate	.015 (.125)	-.023 (.214)	-.017 (.175)	-.382# (.218)
<i>Interactions</i>				
Fox news use $\times$ Liberal	.153** (.050)	.405*** (.085)	.207** (.069)	-.070 (.101)
Fox news use $\times$ Moderate	-.022 (.046)	.065 (.079)	.067 (.064)	-.059 (.080)
<i>Controls</i>				
(ref = Male)				
Gender	.012 (.043)	.128# (.074)	.130* (.061)	-.110 (.080)
Age	-.003* (.001)	.006** (.002)	.000 (.002)	-.002 (.002)
Education	-.030# (.016)	-.065* (.027)	.005 (.022)	.037 (.029)
Income	-.007 (.007)	-.001 (.012)	-.019# (.010)	.001 (.013)
Racial resentment	.392*** (.024)	.034 (.040)	.024 (.033)	.540*** (.048)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.35	.05	.03	
Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.34	.05	.03	
BIC	3765.70	5347.80	4759.60	1554.30
Log. Lik.	-1839.10	-2630.11	-2336.05	-726.10

Note:  $N = 1474$ . Unstandardized regression coefficients reported with standard errors in parentheses.  $\#p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

WLS = Weighted Least Squares.

and white racial mobilization ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SE = .10$ ), compared to conservatives with the same viewing frequency ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SE = .04$ ;  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SE = .06$ ;  $M = 2.28$ ,  $SE = .05$ , respectively) (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> When Fox News consumption was infrequent, this pattern reversed – liberals reported lower levels of perceived anti-white discrimination ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SE = .04$ ), white identity ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SE = .07$ ), and white racial mobilization ( $M =$

**Figure 2.** Interaction plots of Fox News use and political ideology on white racial consciousness.

**Table 3.** Conditional effect of Fox News use through perceived anti-white discrimination.

Ideology	Opposition to diversity & fairness education	
	Effect	95% CI [LL, UL]
Liberal	.004**	.00, .01
Moderate	.004**	.00, .01
Conservative	.004**	.00, .01

95% Quasi-Bayesian confidence intervals.

Unstandardized regression coefficients reported with standard errors in parentheses. # $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

1.82,  $SE = .06$ ), compared to conservatives with the same low viewing frequency ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SE = .04$ ;  $M = 2.41$ ,  $SE = .07$ ;  $M = 2.11$ ,  $SE = .06$ , respectively).

With respect to moderate ideology, there was a significant and positive interaction between Fox News use and moderate ideology on white racial mobilization and perceived anti-white discrimination in the model predicting opposition to inequality and racism education. For moderates consuming Fox News often, viewership was associated with greater white racial mobilization ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SE = .07$ ) compared to their conservative counterparts ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SE = .05$ ). Additionally, greater Fox News consumption among moderates is associated with perceptions of anti-white discrimination comparable to those of conservatives with the same viewing frequency. However, moderates reporting the lowest frequency of Fox News consumption reported less perceptions of anti-white discrimination ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SE = .04$ ) than their conservative counterparts ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SE = .04$ ). Overall, while Fox News exposure is associated with increased perceptions of anti-white discrimination, this relationship was more pronounced among liberals. Like-minded media exposure was not associated with greater white racial consciousness among conservatives. H2b was not supported.

Next, we address H3, which predicted that there would be a positive relationship between Fox News use and opposition to CRT policies via white racial consciousness. Mediation analysis demonstrates a significant mediation for one dimension of white racial consciousness: perceptions of anti-white discrimination. Fox News consumption was indirectly related to opposition to diversity and fairness education through perceptions of anti-white discrimination (Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) = .004,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [.00, .01]). Greater Fox News consumption is associated with perceptions of anti-white discrimination, which, in turn, is related to greater opposition to education about diversity and fairness for K-12 students. This mediation was significant across all ideological groups (see Table 3). There was no indirect relationship between Fox News use and opposition to inequality and racism education through perceived anti-white discrimination. H3 was partially supported.

### ***Summary of moderated mediation relationships***

Next, we consider the full proposed moderated mediation relationships in cases where there is a significant mediation. Analysis demonstrates that the indirect relationship between Fox News use and opposition to diversity and fairness education through perceptions of anti-white discrimination is not significantly moderated by political ideology. This indirect relationship among liberals did not significantly differ from conservatives,

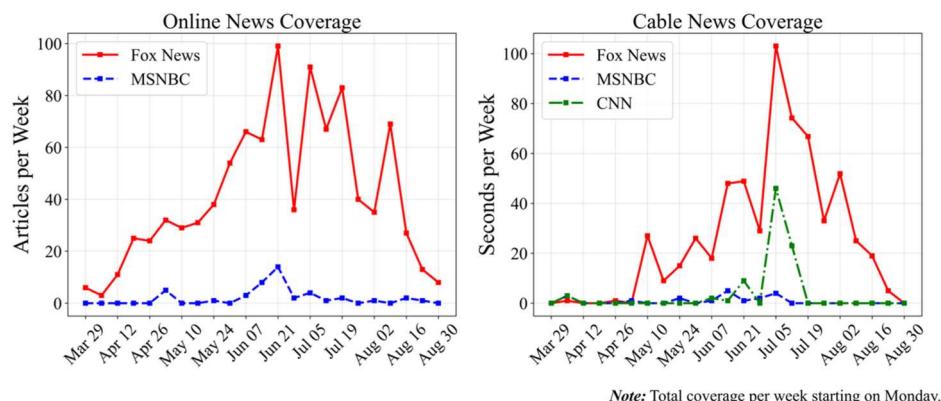
$p = .22$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .00]$ . Similarly, the indirect relationship among moderates and conservatives was not significantly different,  $p = .60$ , 95% CI  $[-.00, .01]$ . Fox News use is associated with increased opposition to diversity and fairness education through perceived anti-white discrimination irrespective of the viewers' ideology.

### **Dynamic relationship between Fox News coverage and anti-CRT attitudes**

Lastly, we address RQ1, which asked whether the relationship between Fox News use and (a) opposition to CRT policies and (b) white racial consciousness vary based on the degree of coverage. By answering this question, we can better examine whether the relationships found within the moderated mediation models are consistent with the proposed theoretical framework. That is, can continuous exposure to *recoded* representations of CRT render racial consciousness and anti-CRT schema chronically accessible? Fox News' coverage of CRT peaked in June and July 2021, outpacing that of both MSNBC and CNN (Deshpande et al. 2024; M. A. Smith et al. 2025).

Figure 3 depicts the online news coverage (articles per week) and cable news coverage (seconds per week) for mentions of Critical Race Theory or CRT from April 2021 to August 2021.<sup>4</sup> As demonstrated in Figure 3, coverage peaked for online news coverage the week of June 21, followed by a peak for both online and cable news the week of July 5. Accordingly, if CRT news coverage within Fox News renders anti-CRT schema chronically accessible, we would expect a strengthening of relationships between Fox News use and opposition to CRT policies or white racial consciousness following this influx of coverage.

We address this question using a series of generalized additive models (GAM) with integrated smoothness estimations to examine whether the relationship between Fox News use and the criterion variables changes over time (see Wood 2017). The first model estimated the relationship between Fox News use and perceived anti-white discrimination over time, while the remaining models examined the relationship between Fox News use and opposition to inequality and racism, and diversity and fairness education, respectively.<sup>5</sup> All models were estimated with the weights.<sup>6</sup>

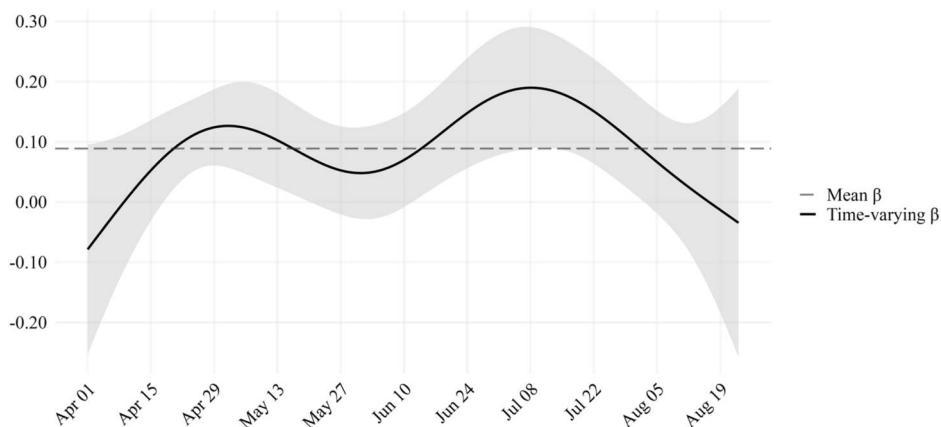


**Figure 3.** Partisan News coverage of CRT April 2021 to August 2021.

**Table 4.** Approximate significance of smooth terms predicting perceived anti-white discrimination.

Variable	EDF	Ref.df	F	p-value
Time	2.037	2.551	.91	.58
Time $\times$ Fox News Use	5.594	6.474	4.314	.00

EDF = effective degrees of freedom. Ref.df = reference degrees of freedom. The *p*-value for each smooth term is derived from an approximate *F*-test, computed using the corresponding Ref.df.

**Figure 4.** Estimated time-varying relationship between Fox News use and perceived anti-white discrimination (smooth terms estimated at biweekly intervals).

The estimated smooth term for the relationship between Fox News use and perceptions of anti-white discrimination over time indicated a significant effect,  $p < .001$  (see Table 4). As depicted in Figure 4, the association between Fox News use and perceptions of anti-white discrimination gradually increased in early April, but subsequently weakened in late April to May. However, this relationship gradually increased beginning the week of June 10, peaking in early July ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $SE = .05$ ). There was no significant change over time in the relationship between Fox News use and opposition to CRT policies, indicating that these relationships remained stable during the period of interest (see Appendix B).

Although this analysis cannot infer causal relationships arising from the coverage of CRT by Fox News, the notable intensification of the association between Fox News consumption and perceptions of anti-white discrimination in July, the month that coincides with the peak in Fox News' CRT discourse, provides support for the proposed theoretical framework. Increased exposure to narratives that characterize CRT as racist may strengthen cognitive associations between CRT and anti-white racism, thereby making attitudes concerning white racial consciousness, particularly feelings of anti-white discrimination, more easily recalled from memory. Interestingly, the relationship between Fox News use and opposition CRT policies did not fluctuate over time.

## Discussion

This research sought to understand relationships between Fox News' coverage of CRT, particularly exposure to Fox News' use of language evocative of white identity to

discuss CRT, and white racial consciousness. Additionally, we examined relationships between Fox News consumption and opposition to K-12 instruction about racial inequality and diversity, analyzing both the direct association and the association mediated by white racial consciousness. We find that greater Fox News consumption is related to increased perceptions of anti-white discrimination, with this relationship being especially pronounced among white liberals. Moreover, we find a significant mediation across all ideological groups whereby Fox News consumption is associated with opposition to education concerning diversity and fairness through increased perceptions of anti-white discrimination.

The proposition that Fox News' use of narratives evocative of white identity in anti-CRT narratives fostered this sentiment is further supported by the dynamic relationship between Fox News use and perceptions of anti-white discrimination. This relationship strengthened during a period coinciding with heightened CRT discourse. We discuss these findings considering the strategic use of CRT in conservative media ecosystems and its capacity not only to motivate opposition to diversity-related education but also to reify beliefs in the existence of anti-white racism and legitimize white protectionism.

### ***From media strategy to public sentiment***

History demonstrates that discursive and policy shifts provoke strategic resistance from policymakers and defensive publics invested in maintaining the dominant racial order (Jackson and Kreiss 2023; King and Smith 2005; St Louis 2021). In this case, it was the belief that the status quo was in flux, especially amid widespread protests of anti-Black discrimination, that motivated the political weaponization of CRT (Clark 2024; Meckler and Dawsey 2021). CRT provided a convenient shortcut to vilify burgeoning racial discourse (Benson 2022) – a feat Fox News achieved by recoding CRT as “racist” toward white Americans, ultimately distorting white viewers’ perceptions of CRT and broadly framing diversity as a threat to white Americans (Safarpour et al. 2024; M. A. Smith et al. 2025).

White Americans’ feelings of political invisibility and fear of discrimination are deeply entrenched in their perceptions of the sociopolitical landscape, manifesting as shared imaginaries of a transforming America in which they perceive themselves as having been “cut in line” for the American Dream due to policies seen as preferentially benefiting African Americans and other racial groups (Hochschild 2016; Wells and Friedland 2023). Through leveraging white identity and engaging in white protectionist rhetoric – i.e., narratives that portray white Americans as unjustly victimized and disadvantaged by sociopolitical changes facilitated by liberal policies (R. M. Smith and King 2021b) – anti-CRT narratives can inculcate and bolster feelings of white racial consciousness rooted in grievance and victimhood (R. M. Smith and King 2021b; M. A. Smith et al. 2025).

Our findings demonstrate that this strategy succeeded. Fox News consumption was associated with greater perceptions of anti-white discrimination among white Americans. Additionally, liberals who frequently consumed Fox News reported higher levels of racial consciousness across all dimensions than conservatives with similar viewing habits. While research indicates that counter-attitudinal exposure can reinforce partisan perspectives (see Garrett et al. 2014), our results suggest a different dynamic may emerge

when white identity is threatened. Prior work suggests that white Americans avoid news that threatens their white identity, such as coverage of anti-Black racism, to the extent that white identity can override partisan preferences (Takahashi, Jefferson, and Earl 2023). Furthermore, when prompted to engage with discomforting but educational content, white liberals, not conservatives, increasingly select news denying racism (Takahashi, Jefferson, and Earl 2023). Although our findings are correlational and cannot provide evidence of selective exposure, they indicate that white identity can supersede ideology-aligned media effects among white liberals. In this case, identity protection, evidenced by heightened white racial consciousness, may shape responses to news counter to liberal perspectives.

Additionally, our analysis demonstrates that one dimension was especially influential: perceptions of anti-white discrimination. Irrespective of the viewers' ideology, white Americans viewing Fox News expressed the belief that discrimination against white people is as big a problem as discrimination against minoritized groups. This belief mediated the relationship between Fox News use and opposition to diversity and fairness education. Moreover, attitudes concerning anti-white discrimination seemingly became more cognitively accessible, with the relationship between Fox News and perceptions of anti-white discrimination strengthening during periods of increased CRT coverage.

### ***Understanding the impact of white racial consciousness***

Racial consciousness arises from an awareness of a relative disadvantage in society and a belief that collective action is warranted to protect the sociopolitical standing of the group (Jardina 2019b; Miller et al. 1981). While traditionally associated with marginalized groups, white Americans can develop racial consciousness in response to perceived threats to the status quo. In these instances, political behavior becomes oriented toward protecting the in-group's privileged sociopolitical standing (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2022; Schildkraut 2017). This study helps understand the role of media in this dynamic: audiences consistently exposed to Fox News' anti-CRT discourse are likely to *decode* these narratives in a manner that not only activates racial consciousness, particularly perceptions of anti-white discrimination, but also mobilizes white protectionism in the form of opposition to diversity and fairness education. While the connection between Fox News consumption and policy opposition remained stable over time, our findings regarding the heightened cognitive accessibility of anti-white discrimination have political implications.

Perceptions of anti-white discrimination are a powerful catalyst for white protectionism and racial backlash in both political decision-making and policy support (Jefferson and Ray 2022; R. M. Smith and King 2021a). Believing that white Americans are susceptible to discrimination legitimizes efforts to defend white Americans' sociopolitical status and reframes equity initiatives as threats. Under the guise of addressing grievances or the rhetorical pretense of ensuring "racial equality" by preventing perceived anti-white bias, white protectionism resists diversity-related institutions and policies, and champions the erosion of civil rights protections (R. M. Smith and King 2021b). This is exemplified in the patterns of policy support often associated with white protectionism, such as the rejection of race-conscious policies (e.g., affirmative action; R. M. Smith and King

2021b), and resistance to ostensibly race-neutral policies (e.g., welfare) when they are believed to benefit minoritized groups (Gilens 1999).

Taken together, white racial consciousness prompts efforts to safeguard against the perceived threat of anti-white discrimination asserted by the media and politicians. Policy evaluations molded by these perceptions, especially supposed anti-white bias, ultimately work to uphold dominant racial orders as it promotes policies aimed at restoring the group's privileged status – policies that can include actively obstructing equity initiatives or denying the existence of racism and systemic inequality (Isom, Mikell, and Boehme 2021; St Louis 2021). This is especially visible in the proliferation of policies banning CRT instruction in K-12 education (Johnson, Gold, and Zhao 2022), as well as ensuing legislation and Executive Orders shuttering programs, reversing Civil Rights policies, and stymying federal funding for education in the name of dismantling DEI (Hsu 2025; Nadworny 2025).

Furthermore, policy evaluation motivated by white racial consciousness transcends political ideology, rendering perceptions of anti-white discrimination a kind of “unifier” across partisan lines. We find that exposure to narratives invoking fears of anti-white discrimination undermines the racially liberal positions typically held among white liberals (see Jardina and Ollerenshaw 2022). Essentially, whiteness can supersede ideology, echoing previous research showing that racial threat narratives can serve as a tool by which Republicans can garner support among white Americans regardless of their ideological lean (Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018).

### ***Limitations and future research***

While this study provides insight into relationships between Fox News consumption, white racial consciousness, and opposition to CRT-related policies, it presents a few limitations. First, the use of cross-sectional data limits the ability to infer causality, particularly the proposed chronic accessibility of perceptions of anti-white discrimination due to Fox News' coverage of CRT. Nevertheless, the increasing strength of this relationship amidst the rise in Fox News' coverage implies that the anti-CRT discourse might have activated and strengthened the cognitive schema about grievances of anti-white discrimination, rendering them more easily retrievable. Since these relationships, albeit consistent with the news trends, cannot be definitively attributed to increased coverage, future research should investigate the direct effects of partisan news on racial consciousness and the capability of certain political narratives to activate feelings of white racial consciousness.

Second, while this analysis focuses on education policies, research indicates that the increased racial consciousness impacts political behavior (Jardina 2021; Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018). Racial consciousness is especially mobilizing for voting, registering to vote, making campaign contributions, and volunteering for political campaigns (Berry, Cepuran, and Garcia-Rios 2022). Moreover, grievances concerning discrimination against white Americans influence the belief that it is important to support white political candidates (Schildkraut 2017) and foster election skepticism (Filindra, Kaplan, and Manning 2024). Considering the ability of partisan media to make racial consciousness salient, future research should investigate whether media-activated consciousness influences real-world political decisions and explore potential interventions to mitigate these effects.

## Notes

1. Survey procedures employed within the CMPS presented these questions as a split measure, such that participants were randomly assigned to view one of the two questions. Considering conceptual differences in the wording of these questions, we do not collapse them into one measure.
2. Tingley et al. (2014) recommend probit regression models for mediation analysis. The measurements for Opposition to CRT Policies were each coded on a binary with (1) Strongly support, (2) Support, (3) Somewhat support coded as 0 and (4) Somewhat oppose, (5) Oppose, (6) Strongly oppose coded as 1.
3. Reported means are estimated marginal means ( $N = 2917$ ).
4. Data from Media Cloud (<https://www.mediacloud.org>) and the Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer (<https://tvnews.stanford.edu>)
5. Analysis was conducted using the *mgcv* package in R. Smooth terms were estimated using penalized regression splines with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimation (see Wood 2017), with the basis dimensions set to 10 to approximate biweekly intervals across the data collection period (April to August 2021). We limit the analysis to perceptions of anti-white discrimination, as this was the sole dimension of white racial consciousness significantly related to Fox News use (see Tables 1 and 2). To maintain consistency, the GAMs included the same set of covariates used in the moderated mediation models. Additionally, variables assessing opposition to CRT policies were treated as binary outcomes (probit link function). Each model included a smooth term for time to account for the general change in the criterion variable over time, effectively controlling for the passage of time as a potential confounding variable. All numeric values were standardized by transforming the mean to 0 and standard deviation to 1 to better interpret the coefficients.
6. Considering the cross-sectional nature of the data, we assessed whether analysis might be influenced by changes in the participant population. This would ensure that changes in variable relationships are due to shifts in audience cognition, not participant composition. Correlations between the time and the mean weighted values of participant characteristics showed no significant changes in the participant composition over time (see Table B1).

## Disclosure statement

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

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