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Is Wokeness 'Kryptonite for Democrats'?

Nadine Strossen

GUEST ESSAY

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By **Thomas B. Edsall**

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C., on politics, demographics and inequality.

As Republicans well know, Democrats are divided on a host of volatile racial, cultural and sexual issues.

Take a look at the polls.

In 2019, the [Democracy Fund Voter Study Group](#) commissioned a survey asking for agreement or disagreement with the statement: "There are only two genders, male and female."

In the full sample, a decisive majority, 59 percent agreed, including 43 percent who "strongly agreed," 32 percent disagreed and 9 percent who said they weren't sure. Among Republicans, it was no contest, 78 percent agreed and 16 percent disagreed. Independents mirrored the whole sample.

Democrats were split: a plurality, 48 percent, disagreed, and 44 percent agreed.

The survey itself arguably embodied what critics might call "[transphobic framing](#)" — transgender issues are among the most polarizing in contemporary politics and much contemporary [cultural conflict](#) in fact stems from [framing disputes](#).

An [August-September 2017 Pew Research](#) survey asked respondents to choose between two statements: "whether a person is a man or a woman is determined at birth" and "whether a person is a man or a woman can be different from the sex at birth."

A 54 percent majority of all those surveyed said sex "is determined at birth" and 44 percent said it "can be different from the sex at birth." Republican voters and those who lean Republican chose "at birth" 80 to 19. Democratic voters and those who lean Democratic said sex can be different from the sex at birth 64 to 34.

Or take the public's view of the "defund the police" movement that gained momentum after the murder of George Floyd a year ago.

OPINION DEBATE

Will the Democrats face a midterm wipeout?

- **EZRA KLEIN** writes that "midterms typically raze the governing party" and [explores just how tough a road the Democrats have ahead](#).
- **JAMELLE BOUIE** wonders whether voters will accept a party "that promises quite a bit but won't [work to make any of it a reality](#)."
- **MAUREEN DOWD** writes that Biden has "a very narrow window to do great things" and shouldn't squander it [appeasing Republican opponents](#).
- **THOMAS B. EDSALL** explores new research on whether the Democratic Party could find more success [focusing on race or on class](#) when trying to build support.

A [March 1-2 USA Today/Ipsos Poll](#) found that voters were opposed to defunding the police 58-18, with the strongest opposition among whites (67 percent to 13 percent support, the rest undecided) and Republicans (84 to 4 percent), while a plurality of Democrats were opposed (at 39 to 34), which was also true among African Americans (37 to 28).

These surveys are complemented by others that measure the fear that our public dialogue is too constricted. A [Harvard/Harris](#) survey in February asked, "Do you think there is a growing cancel culture that is a threat to our freedom or not?" By 64-36, a majority of voters said they thought there was. Republicans see a threat by 80-20; independents by 64-34, but Democrats were split, with a slight majority, 52-48, saying they do not see a threat. This basic pattern is observable across a number of issues.

Although centrist Democrats make up a majority of the party in the polls I cited above, the fact that a substantial minority of Democrats takes the more extreme stance allows Republicans to portray the Democratic Party as very much in thrall to its more "radical" wing.

The past 12 months have seen a centrist countermobilization designed to strengthen a mainstream image of the Democratic Party and to block the power of the more radical left to set policy. New groups and digital publications include [Persuasion](#), [Counterweight](#), [American Purpose](#), [Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism](#) and the [Academic Freedom Alliance](#).

[Nadine Strossen](#), professor emerita at New York Law School and former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote by email that she considers herself

a "bleeding-heart liberal" but even more important to me are the classic liberal values that are under siege from all sectors of the political spectrum, left to right, including: freedom of speech, thought and association; academic freedom; due process; and personal privacy.

Strossen cites "the proliferation of new organizations that seek to counter the illiberal trends in academia and beyond."

There are of course plenty of people who sharply defend the progressive wing of the Democratic coalition.

[Elizabeth Rose](#), a law student, argued, for example, in "[In Defense of Cancel Culture](#)" last year that "for all the condemnations on cancel culture as an un-American speech suppressing monster, I would argue that cancel culture is incredibly American."

Cancel culture, she continued,

is essentially a boycott. It's refusing to participate or support those that promote racist, homophobic, sexist, transphobic, or otherwise ignorant behavior. Protest is at the heart of this country and it shouldn't be limited in the name of making already powerful people feel safer to spew ideas that are not tolerable in today's society. Because exposure by millions is so easy now with social media, celebrities, rich, powerful, connected, and beautiful, can no longer get away with disrespecting human dignity. They are not being held to a higher standard for being a public figure, they are being held to the bare minimum.

In a *New Republic* essay in 2019, "[The Strange Liberal Backlash to Woke Culture](#)," [Ryu Spaeth](#) makes an interesting argument that aligns with Rose's:

The foot-stamping insistence on individual rights obliterates what should be a tension between those rights and the well-being of the community as a whole. This is all the more relevant at a time when the political implications of unbridled individualism, represented by capitalism's self-made man, have never been clearer.

In this contest, Spaeth continues:

There must be a way to express oneself while also ensuring that others aren't silenced, oppressed, and forgotten. There must be a way to protect the individual while addressing dire problems that can only be fixed collectively, from environmental collapse to systemic racism and sexism. To err on the side of solidarity, even against one's strongest emotions, is not to sacrifice our individual humanity. It is to accept what Elizabeth Bennet (in "Pride and Prejudice") finally learned: that the truth will set you free.

Or take this defense of the call to "defund the police" by Rushi Shah, a graduate student in computer science at Princeton's Center for Information Technology Policy. Shah [wrote an op-ed](#) in the Jan. 21 *Daily Princetonian*:

The police determine when to escalate a situation through violence based on their own discretion of what counts as a crime and who is culpable. The past year has shown how that discretion is racist to this day: rubber-bullet rifles for Black Lives Matters protesters and red carpets for white supremacists.

Given this reality, Shah continued,

We should conclude that the police must be defunded, because they overwhelmingly use their budget to harm people of color and to stoke white supremacist movements. With that conclusion in mind, and in the service of humanity, we as Princeton students, staff, professors, administrators, and trustees can contribute to the ongoing effort to defund the police. You may be wondering what exactly people mean when they say, “defund the police.” Yes, we mean literally [abolish the police](#).

In some respects, this movement is the counter to right-wing populism in that the two share “an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property, breeding and culture,” in the words of [Edward Shils](#), a sociologist at the University of Chicago who died in 1995.

[Frances E. Lee](#), a political scientist at Princeton, argued in her 2019 article “[Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints](#),” that

Today’s major U.S. parties may be more vulnerable to populist internal challenge than they were at earlier points, given (1) developments in communications technology, (2) the unpopularity of mainstream parties and party leaders, and (3) representation gaps created by an increasingly racialized party system.

Populism from the left and right, Lee continued,

is a moralistic discourse that turns on a Manichean dichotomy between a corrupt governing elite and a virtuous, homogeneous people. The emphasis on the homogeneity of the people makes populism fundamentally anti-pluralist. Populism’s harsh rhetoric around the corrupt elite scorns the legitimacy of political opposition: no institutional procedures or constraints should stand in the way of the people’s will. Populist conceptions of the general will thus typically envision “majority rule without minority rights.”

The conflict within the Democratic Party and among progressives gets played out on at least two levels.

At one level, it is a dispute over ground rules. Can a professor quote literature or historic documents that use [taboo words](#)? What rights should be granted to a person accused of sexual harassment? Are there issues or subjects that should not be explored in an academic setting?

On another level, though, it is a conflict over practical politics. Do specific policies governing speech and sexual behavior win or lose voter support? Are there policies that attract criticism from the opposition party that will stick? Are certain policies so controversial that they divert attention from the opposition’s liabilities?

In [an article](#) in March, “Why Attacking ‘Cancel Culture’ And ‘Woke’ People Is Becoming the G.O.P.’s New Political Strategy,” [Perry Bacon Jr.](#), formerly a senior writer at FiveThirtyEight and now a Washington Post columnist, described the ways that policies the Democratic left argued for provided political opportunities to the Republican Party:

First and perhaps most important, focusing on cancel culture and woke people is a fairly easy strategy for the G.O.P. to execute, because in many ways it’s just a repackaging of the party’s long-standing backlash approach. For decades, Republicans have used somewhat vague terms (“dog whistles”) to tap into and foment resentment against traditionally marginalized groups like Black Americans who are pushing for more rights and freedoms. This resentment is then used to woo voters (mostly white) wary of cultural, demographic and racial change.

Among the reasons Republicans will continue to adopt an “anti-woke posture,” Bacon writes, is that it

gives conservative activists and Republican officials a way to excuse extreme behavior in the past and potentially rationalize such behavior in the future. Republicans are trying to recast the removal of Trump’s accounts [from Facebook and Twitter](#) as a narrative of [liberal tech companies silencing](#) a prominent conservative, instead of those platforms punishing Trump for using them to “[incite violence and encourage overturning the election results](#).”

Insofar as Republicans suppress Democratic votes, Bacon continued,

or try to overturn election results in future elections, as seems entirely possible, the party is likely to justify that behavior in part by suggesting the Democrats are just too extreme and woke to be allowed to control the government. The argument would be that Democrats would eliminate police departments and allow crime to surge if they have more power, so they must be stopped at all costs. Polls suggest a huge bloc of G.O.P. voters is [already open to such apocalyptic rhetoric](#).

Bacon's views are widely shared among Democratic Party strategists, whether or not they will say so publicly. And Bacon is hardly alone.

In [a piece](#) in New York magazine, "Is 'Anti-Wokeness' the New Ideology of the Republican Party?" [Ed Kilgore](#) makes the case that for Republicans

Casting a really wide range of ideas and policies as too woke and anyone who is critical of them as being canceled by out-of-control liberals is becoming an important strategy and tool on the right — in fact, this cancel culture/woke discourse could become the organizing idea of the post-Trump-presidency Republican Party.

This approach is particularly attractive to conservative politicians and strategists, Kilgore continued, because

It allows them and their supporters to pose as innocent victims of persecution rather than as aggressive culture warriors seeking to defend their privileges and reverse social change.

[Jonathan Haidt](#), a social psychologist at N.Y.U., argued in an email that the policies the Democratic Party's left wing is pushing are an anchor weighing down the party's prospects:

Wokeness is kryptonite for the Democrats. Most people hate it, other than the progressive activists. If you just look at Americans' policy preferences, Dems should be winning big majorities. But we have strong negative partisanship, and when people are faced with a party that seems to want to defund the police and rename schools, rather than open them, all while crime is rising and kids' welfare is falling, the left flank of the party is just so easy for Republicans to run against.

In much gentler terms, Barack Obama has voiced analogous concerns. "This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically woke and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly," Obama famously [declared in October 2019](#):

The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids and share certain things with you.

[James Carville](#), the top strategist for Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, was succinct in his assessment. He [recently told Sean Illing](#), a writer at Vox:

Wokeness is a problem and everyone knows it. It's hard to talk to anybody today — and I talk to lots of people in the Democratic Party — who doesn't say this. But they don't want to say it out loud.

"Why not?" Illing asked.

"Because they'll get clobbered."

Carville's answer provides insight into the question of whether, if the left wing of the Democratic Party is backing many policies that are unacceptable to a majority of voters and if some of those policies appear to violate constitutional protections of free speech and the rights of the accused, why hasn't there been more pushback in both politics and academia?

I asked [Jonathan Rauch](#), a senior fellow at Brookings and the author of the new book "[The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth](#)," about the lack of pushback, and he suggested a series of factors:

- "The younger generation (wrongly) perceives free speech as hazardous to minority rights."
- "The purist side has had more passion, focus and organization than the pluralist side."

- “Universities are consumeristic these days and very image-conscious, and so they have trouble withstanding pressure from their ‘customers,’ e.g., activist students.”
- “The use of social pressure to manipulate opinion is a powerful and sophisticated form of information warfare. Anyone can be dogpiled in minutes for any reason, or no reason.”
- “Activists have figured out that they can have disproportionate influence by claiming to be physically endangered and psychologically traumatized by speech that offends them.”

[Randall Kennedy](#), a law professor at Harvard and the author of the forthcoming book “Say It Loud! On Race, Law, History and Culture,” cited in an email a similar set “of reasons for the deficient response to threats against freedom of thought, expression and learning emanating from the left.”

His list:

“Woke” folk making wrongful demands march under the banner of “EQUALITY” which is a powerful and attractive emblem, especially in this George Floyd/Covid-19 moment when the scandalous inequities of our society are so heartbreakingly evident. On the campuses, many of the most vocal woke folk are students whom teachers and administrators want to mollify, comfort and impress. Many teachers and administrators seek desperately to be liked by students.

At the same time, Kennedy continued, many of the people demanding the diminution of what he sees as essential freedoms have learned how to package their insistence in effective ways. They have learned, Kennedy wrote, to deploy skillfully the language of “hurt” — as in “I don’t care what the speaker’s intentions were, what the speaker said has hurt my feelings and ought therefore to be prohibited.”

Because of this, Kennedy argued,

Authorities, particularly those at educational institutions, need to become much more skeptical and tough-minded when encountering the language of “hurt.” Otherwise, they will continue to offer incentives to those who deploy the specters of bigotry, privilege and trauma to further diminish vital academic, intellectual and aesthetic freedoms.

For a political party on the front line of change, the centrists-versus-insurgents conflicts that currently plague the Democratic Party are inherent to a party that has chosen in general to take the liberal side on the racial and cultural issues that now play such a large role in politics. The questions of going too fast or too slow, of getting ahead of the voters, of responsibly engaging the obligations of leadership, are inescapable.

[Diane Halpern](#), professor emerita of psychology at Claremont McKenna College, and no stranger to politicized controversy as a result of her work on differences in [learning skills](#), wrote in an email:

All social movements are a series of actions and reactions. For example, we can all agree that charges of sexual assault should be fair to all parties involved. But how does “fairness” get operationalized. The swing from policies that seem to favor the person being accused, then the reverse, then back again, and so on is mirrored in many other topics where people disagree. Action in one direction is followed by reaction in the other direction.

The difficulty, Halpern continued,

is to get people to find what they can agree upon and continue from that point. For example, most people will agree that they want humane treatment of migrants who are fleeing almost certain death in their home country, and we can agree that the United States cannot admit everyone who wants to live here. If conversations began with a shared set of goals, there will still be strong disagreements, but the tone will reduce some of the hostility both sides feel toward each other.

In theory, Halpern is eminently reasonable. But the real question today is how amenable to reconciliation our politics actually are, given that there is profound conflict not only between the two parties but embedded within them.

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Correction: May 26, 2021

An earlier version of this column misstated the academic affiliation of Nadine Strossen. She is a professor emerita at New York Law School, not N.Y.U. Law School.