

## [The Tilt](#)

# What's 'Woke' and Why It Matters

A marker of just how much American politics has changed over the last eight years.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/24/upshot/woke-meaning-democrats-republicans.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20230327&instance\\_id=88738&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=35314327&segment\\_id=128856&te=1&user\\_id=4fcd09713009000f5c3d6ea71ff1c3cb](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/24/upshot/woke-meaning-democrats-republicans.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20230327&instance_id=88738&nl=the-morning&regi_id=35314327&segment_id=128856&te=1&user_id=4fcd09713009000f5c3d6ea71ff1c3cb)



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Image

Gov. Ron DeSantis after signing HB7, dubbed the “stop woke” bill, during a news conference in Hialeah Gardens, Fla., last April. Credit...Daniel A. Varela/Miami Herald, via Associated Press

Believe it or not, the term woke wasn't uttered even once in the Republican debates back in 2015 and 2016. Now, I'd be surprised if we make it out of the opening statements of the first primary debate without hearing it.

Whatever you think of the word, the rise of “woke” to ubiquity is a helpful marker of just how much American politics has changed over the last eight years.

There's a new set of issues poised to loom over the coming campaign, from critical race theory and nonbinary pronouns to “cancel culture” and the fate of university courses. Fifteen

years ago, I would have said these topics could divide a small liberal arts campus, not American politics. I would have been wrong.

This change in American politics is hard to analyze. It's hard to craft clear and incisive questions on these complex and emerging topics for survey research, especially since "woke" is notoriously ill-defined. Last week, the conservative writer Bethany Mandel became the subject of considerable [ridicule](#) on social media after she was unable to concisely define the term in an interview. She's not the only one. Apparently, there's a "woke" part of the [federal budget](#). "Wokeness" was even faulted for the [Silicon Valley Bank collapse](#).

But while the definition of "woke" may be up for debate, there's no doubt that the term is trying to describe something about the politics of today's highly educated, young "new" left, especially on cultural and social issues like race, sex and gender.

As with [the original New Left](#) in the 1960s, the emergence of this new left has helped spark a reactionary moment on the right. It has split many liberals from their usual progressive allies. And it has helped power the rise of Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has done more to associate himself with fighting "woke" than any other politician. Like it or not, "woke" will shape this year's Republican primary.

## **What's woke?**

The new left emerged in the aftermath of Barack Obama's re-election in 2012. At the time, liberalism seemed utterly triumphant. Yet for young progressives, "hope" and "change" had given way to the realization that Mr. Obama's presidency hadn't cured income inequality, racial inequality or climate change. These dynamics opened a space for a new left, as young progressives started to reach for more ambitious politics, just as the triumph of the Obama coalition gave progressives the confidence to embrace ideas that would have been unimaginable in the Bush era.

A decade later, this new left is everywhere. On economic issues, there has been the Bernie Sanders campaign and calls for Medicare for all; democratic socialism; and the Green New Deal. On race, there has been the Black Lives Matter movement; kneeling in protest during the national anthem; and defund the police. On gender and sex, there has been the Me Too movement and the sharing of preferred pronouns and more.

On class and economics, it's easy to delineate the new left. Mr. Sanders helpfully embraced the democratic socialism label to distinguish himself from those who would incrementally smooth out the rough edges of capitalism. It's harder to distinguish the new left from

Obama-era liberals on race, gender and sexuality. There is no widely shared ideological term like democratic socialism to make it easy.

And yet the differences between Obama-era liberals and the new left on race, sexuality and gender are extremely significant, with big consequences for American politics.

Here are just a few of those differences:

- **The new left speaks with righteousness, urgency and moral clarity.** While liberals always held strong beliefs, their righteousness was tempered by the need to accommodate a more conservative electorate. Mr. Obama generally emphasized compromise, commonality and respect for conservatives, [“even when he disagreed.”](#) As Obama-era liberalism became dominant, a more righteous progressive discourse emerged — one that didn’t accommodate and even “called out” its opposition. This was partly a reflection of what played well on social media, but it also reflected that progressive values had become uncontested in many communities with a high percentage of college graduates.
- **The new left is very conscious of identity.** Obama-era liberals tended to emphasize the commonalities between groups and downplayed longstanding racial, religious and partisan divisions. Mr. Obama was even characterized as [“post-racial.”](#) Today’s new left consciously strives to include, protect and promote marginalized groups. In everyday life, this means prioritizing, trusting and affirming the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, encouraging people to share their pronouns, listing identities on social media profiles, and more. This extension of politics to everyday life is a difference from Obama-era liberalism in its own right. While the Obama-era liberals mostly focused on policy, the new left emphasizes the personal as political. Today’s new left is conscious of identity in policymaking as well, whether it’s arguing against race-neutral policies that entrench racial disparities or advocating race-conscious remedies. Obama-era liberals rarely implemented race-conscious policies or mentioned the racial consequences of racially neutral policies.
- **The new left sees society as a web of overlapping power structures or systems of oppression,** constituted by language and norms as much as law and policy. This view is substantially informed by modern academic scholarship that explains how power, domination and oppression persist in liberal societies. Indeed, almost everything debated recently — critical race theory, the distinction between sex and gender, we can go on — originated in academia over the last half-

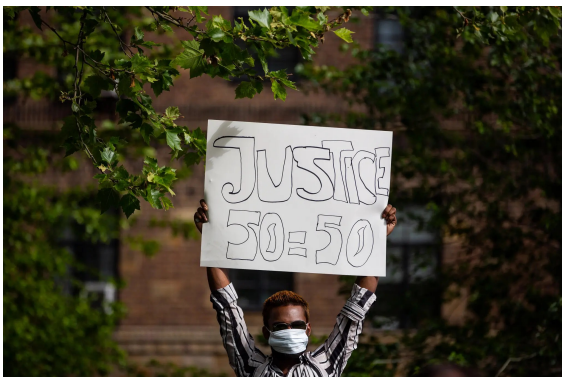
century. Academic jargon like “intersectional” has become commonplace. It can be hard to understand what’s going on if you didn’t read Judith Butler, Paulo Freire or Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in college.

Academic scholarship is also the source of the expanded, academic meanings of “trauma,” “violence,” “safety” and “erasure,” which implicitly equate the psychological harm experienced by marginalized groups with the physical harms of traditional illiberal oppression.

This does not readily lend itself to a “politics of hope,” as virtually everything about America might have to change to end systemic racism. No law will do it. No candidate can promise it. But it does imbue individual actions that subvert oppressive hierarchies with liberatory and emancipatory implications, helping explain the urgency of activists to critique language and challenge norms in everyday life.

- **The new left view that racism, sexism and other oppressive hierarchies are deeply embedded in American society all but ensures a pessimistic view of America.** This is quite different from Obama-era liberalism. Indeed, Mr. Obama himself was cast as a redeeming figure whose ascent proved American greatness.
- **When in conflict, the new left prioritizes the pursuit of a more equitable society over enlightenment-era liberal values.** Many of the academic theories, including critical race theory, critique liberalism as an obstacle to progressive change. In this view, equal rights are a veneer that conceal and justify structural inequality, while some liberal beliefs impede efforts to challenge oppression. The liberal value of equal treatment prevents identity-conscious remedies to injustice; the liberal goal of equal opportunity accepts unequal outcomes; even freedom of speech allows voices that would offend and thus could exclude marginalized communities.

Is this a definition of woke? No. But it covers much of what woke is grasping toward: a word to describe a new brand of righteous, identity-conscious, new left activists eager to tackle oppression, including in everyday life and even at the expense of some liberal values.



Image

A protester during a gathering of trans, queer and Black Lives Matter activists in New York in June 2020. Credit...Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

## Why woke matters for Republicans

The rise of the new left on race and gender is already reshuffling conservative politics.

For this year's Republican primary, one of the most important things about this rise is that it has helped bridge the usual divide between the conservative base and the establishment.

At least for now, the establishment and the base share the fight against "woke," for two reasons:

- **The new left is far enough left that there's room to side with the right while keeping one or both feet in the center.** Whether it's a MAGA fan or a Reaganite, there's a path for an enterprising politician to bash "woke" and get on Fox News without alienating donors. Anyone can be a conservative hero, even a private equity magnate who would have been seen as an establishment squish in 2015, like Gov. Glenn Youngkin.  
**Anti-woke politics seems to animate elite conservatives as much as the activist, populist base.** After all, the new left is most prevalent in liberal bastions like New York or Washington, and among the young in highly educated industries like the news media and higher education. Its rise has probably been felt most acutely by highly educated conservatives as well.

Whether this dynamic changes is an important question as the primary heats up.

Over the last few months, Donald J. Trump and Mr. DeSantis have staked out farther-right positions that might put this question to the test. Mr. Trump, for instance, [said](#) he would pass a federal law recognizing only two genders and would punish doctors who provide gender-affirming care for minors. Mr. DeSantis, for example, would [ban gender studies](#). As the campaign gets underway, they may go further. We will learn whether other candidates match their positions, and whether there's a cost if they do not.

Another big question is whether anti-woke politics can supplant older culture war fights, like abortion or immigration. Most anti-new-left conservatives still vigorously oppose the old liberals on immigration, secularism, feminism and more. It remains to be seen whether attacking [D.E.I.](#), Disney and university professors, as Mr. DeSantis did in a recent trip to Iowa, is the red meat for rank-and-file conservatives that it is for conservatives in urban centers like Manhattan who feel under siege by an increasingly assertive left.

Unfortunately, there is almost no survey data that helps answer these questions at this stage. The behavior of Fox News producers and the rise of DeSantis suggest that there's some kind of mass constituency for this politics, but whether it amounts to 30 percent or 60 percent of the Republican base and whether it's compelling enough to carry a primary bid is entirely unclear.

In the most extreme case for Democrats, the backlash against the new left could end in a repeat of how New Left politics in the 1960s facilitated the marriage of neoconservatives and the religious right in the 1970s. Back then, opposition to the counterculture helped unify Republicans against a new class of highly educated liberals, allowing Southern opponents of civil rights to join old-school liberal intellectuals who opposed Communism and grew skeptical of the Great Society. The parallels are imperfect, but striking.

On the other end of the spectrum, there's the possibility that a populist, working-class conservative base perceives little distinction between "woke" and "liberal," and would rather hear the old classics on illegal immigration, crime and coarse language about women and Mexicans than fight new battles against "[woke capital](#)," critical race theorists and transgender teenagers.

The range of possibilities for the general election are similarly wide. We'll save the general election for another time.