

Opposition to Woke Progressivism Energizes Trump Coalition

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In January, Republicans will gain undivided control of the federal government's political branches. Yet President-elect Donald Trump's comfortable 312-226 electoral-college victory over Vice President Kamala Harris and his narrow margin in the popular vote – 49.9% to 48.4% – do not constitute a landslide. Considering also Republicans' razor-thin House majority and several vulnerable seats the 53-47 Republican Senate majority must defend in 2026, it is early to speak of a national political realignment. Whether the GOP expands and establishes firmly the impressive multi-racial and multi-ethnic working-class coalition that Trump built over the last nine years turns on the coalition's composition and the forces that unified it around the most unlikely of two-term presidents.

In 2024, Trump enjoyed stunning, nearly across-the-board improvements over his 2020 performance. The president-elect increased his numbers in 2,764 of America's 3,112 counties – including those that tend Democratic – while all 50 states shifted right. Trump achieved “unprecedented” levels of support for a Republican presidential candidate among black, Latino, and Asian peoples. Although female voters went 53% to 46% to Harris, Trump bettered his results with women. And, in a mid-November CBS news poll, 57% of adults in the United States under 30 were happy or satisfied with Trump's victory and 58% of those 30-44 years of age. Harris surpassed President Joe Biden's 2020 results only among white, college-educated voters.

Several factors propelled citizens of different groups to vote for Trump. As Fareed Zakaria observes, Trump “celebrated risk-taking and spoke the language of disruption and radical reform,” which attracted men, entrepreneurs, and technologists. Moreover, the GOP nominee faced a weak opponent who, until three months before the election, conspired with her party and the press to pretend that the unpopular president was as sharp as ever. The perception that Biden presided over lawless migration, high inflation, and indulgence of crime fomented discontent, especially among the working class. In addition, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs and transgender activism, which flourished under the Biden administration, angered Trump voters. DEI impelled the federal bureaucracy, big business, major media, and universities to disparage merit as a bigoted standard and to provide preferential treatment to non-Jewish and non-Asian minorities and women. Transgender activism denied the public relevance of biological differences between men and women.

Many Trump voters view the Democratic Party as “woke.” So do some Trump critics, prominent among them New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, who maintained shortly after the election that “woke is broke.” The term originally emerged in the 1940s among

African Americans who described as woke those acquiring awareness of injustice in society. In today's national conversation about politics woke refers to fashionable progressive opinions about society, morality, and politics contrived in universities and spread by elites to government, corporations, the mainstream media, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley.

Woke progressivism is not a fixed creed or settled doctrine but embraces a mix of recognizable and interrelated attitudes, ideas, and goals. Typically, woke progressives maintain that society is divided into oppressors and oppressed. They equate virtue with victimhood. They teach that white supremacy and male supremacy gave birth to the United States and that systemic racism and sexism permeate America's unwritten norms, founding principles, and basic political institutions. They insist that social justice requires government and private organizations to discriminate against white men to ensure that the minorities and women whom they oppress acquire positions of wealth, status, and power at least equal to their proportion in society. They reject civility, toleration, and colorblindness as hopelessly compromised by their association with America's corrupt constitutional heritage. And they despise dissent from their axioms and aims, which they interpret as dispositive evidence of dissenters' racism and sexism.

Woke progressivism promotes the social, political, and economic attainment of minorities with privileged status on the hierarchy of grievance – especially those already moving in elite circles. And it advances careers of highly credentialed white people by signaling their rectitude to fellow initiates while giving the pleasure of lording their moral refinement over the clueless rabble.

Yet woke progressivism's appeal is limited. It is an ideology that is poorly designed to win over white men or, for that matter, their wives, mothers, and daughters who in many cases take umbrage at the vilification of their husbands, sons, and fathers. It also rankles men and women of all races and ethnicities who believe that America, for all its shortcomings, remains a land of hope and opportunity. And it appears illiberal and antidemocratic to the inspiring diversity of persons who hold that inherent human dignity requires equal respect for the rights of all. The combination of vilified white men, the females who love them, and nonwhite citizens who feel gratitude for American freedom and opportunity seems to embrace a majority of citizens.

In "Academe's Divorce From Reality," recently published by the Chronicle of Higher Education, William Deresiewicz indicates that Trump voters rightly associated woke progressivism with the Biden administration. An essayist, scholar, and longtime critic of universities' betrayal of liberal education, Deresiewicz argues that the election represented a referendum on "the politics of the academy." That politics converges with woke progressivism. "Its ideas, its assumptions, its opinions and positions – as expressed in official statements, embodied in policies and practices, established in centers and offices, and espoused and taught by large and leading portions of the professoriate – have been rejected," he maintains.

“Over the last 10 years or so” – as Americans’ confidence in higher education plummeted – “a cultural revolution has been imposed on this country from the top down,” according to Deresiewicz. “Its ideas originated in the academy, and it’s been carried out of the academy by elite-educated activists and journalists and academics.”

Overlapping in many respects with Biden-administration sympathies and objectives, this university-driven cultural revolution aims at “decriminalization or nonprosecution of property and drug crimes and, ultimately, the abolition of police and prisons; open borders, effectively if not explicitly; the suppression of speech that is judged to be harmful to disadvantaged groups; ‘affirmative’ care for gender-dysphoric youth (puberty blockers followed by cross-sex hormones followed, in some cases, by mastectomies) and the inclusion of natal males in girls’ and women’s sports; and the replacement of equality by equity – of equal opportunity for individuals by equal outcomes for designated demographic groups – as the goal of social policy.”

The university-driven cultural revolution anathematizes fundamental institutions and rejects nature, “insist[ing] that the state is evil, that the nuclear family is evil, that something called ‘whiteness’ is evil, that the sex binary, which is core to human biology, is a social construct.”

It mobilizes the federal government, higher education, and the private sector to establish and manage “the DEI regimes, the training and minders and guidelines, that have blighted American workplaces, including academic ones.”

It commandeers language to compel obedience to its dictates, “promulgat[ing] an ever-shifting array of rebarbative neologisms whose purpose often seems to be no more than its own enforcement: POC (now BIPOC), AAPI (now AANHPI), LGBTQ (now LGBTQIA2S+), ‘pregnant people,’ ‘menstruators,’ ‘front hole,’ ‘chest feeding,’ and, yes, ‘Latinx.’”

And it seeks not merely acquiescence to its policies but solemn allegiance – outward and inward – to its imperatives: “It is joyless, vengeful, and tyrannical. It is purist and totalistic. It demands affirmative, continuous, and enthusiastic consent.”

A recent report of the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University, “INSTRUCTING ANIMOSITY: How DEI Pedagogy Produces the Hostile Attribution Bias,” lends social-science support to the observation that woke progressivism, contrary to its promise to advance social justice, fosters distrust and enmity among citizens. For example, researchers asked one group to read representative statements contending that America is rife with systemic racism and the other to read nonpolitical materials. Researchers then presented to both groups a hypothetical involving a college applicant who, following an interview, is denied admission. While the hypothetical mentioned neither the applicant’s nor the interviewer’s race, those who read the DEI materials were significantly more likely to see bigotry at play.

NCRI researchers' several studies consistently found that "ideas and rhetoric foundational to many DEI trainings," contrary to DEI claims, neither "foster pluralistic inclusiveness" nor "increase empathy and understanding." Rather, "[a]cross all groupings, instead of reducing bias, they engendered a hostile attribution bias...amplifying perceptions of prejudicial hostility where none was present, and punitive responses to the imaginary prejudice" (footnote omitted).

The NCRI findings reinforce common sense. If, in the spirit of woke progressivism, elite universities teach that American institutions are hateful, students will learn to despise their country and scorn the patriots among their fellow citizens. If elite universities teach that Americans are either oppressors or oppressed, the best and the brightest will view politics as war and education as propaganda. If elite universities teach that group identity takes precedence over the dignity of the person, graduates will regard themselves as duty bound to trample over individual rights in pursuit of social justice.

And if our elite universities – and the graduates they annually launch into the world – keep it up, they will increase the Trump coalition's chances of landslide election victories and enhance the prospects of a national political realignment built around working-class men and women joined by individuals of all colors and classes who cherish freedom and democracy in America.

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