

Biden will bring woke to the White House

Joe Biden is as committed to wokeness as any Democrat. He has no inclination to resist its rise.

-Sean Collins, 2020



In the past few days, a number of liberal commentators known for their opposition to woke culture have called for a vote for Joe Biden. As the headline in an Atlantic piece written by Yascha Mounk puts it: ‘Hate woke? Vote Biden.’ Many of these writers acknowledge that Biden’s Democratic Party is associated with woke, and that Donald Trump has been a vocal antagonist of it. But they see two positive arguments, specifically related to woke culture, for voting Biden.

First, these writers argue that woke is largely a response to Trump. Thus if Trump loses, wokeness will lessen in intensity. As Mounk argues, Trump ‘does more than anyone else to lend apparent credibility to extreme forms of protest as well as an unremittingly negative appraisal of America’. In a long Twitter thread, Thomas Chatterton Williams says, ‘The worst woke excesses are a gift to Trump, just as a vote for Trump is a vote to strengthen and in some ways legitimate the worst woke excesses’.

Secondly, they claim that Biden is a moderate, and not supportive of woke; if Biden wins, there will be space for reasonable anti-woke liberals to emerge. Helen Pluckrose, author of *Cynical Theories*, writes: ‘Biden is a moderate liberal, not a radical social-justice activist.’ Cathy Young argues that ‘Biden’s victory as a moderate can give the saner and more sensible people a chance to regain ground in both major parties’.

I commend many of these writers' efforts in recent years to oppose and interrogate 'social justice', 'Critical Race Theory', 'cancel culture' and the other expressions of the new woke ideology. However, their attempts to spin a vote for Biden into a blow against woke are plainly wrong. Most of all, they fail to appreciate how deeply these views are already entrenched within the American liberal elite, including the Democratic Party and Biden himself.

For a start, these writers seem to forget that woke began under the presidency of Barack Obama, well before Trump. Many cite 2014, the year of the Ferguson riots and the formation of Black Lives Matter, as the start of the 'Great Awakening'.

As researcher Zach Goldberg has documented, terms such as 'micro-aggression' and 'white privilege' skyrocketed in use in the pages of the New York Times and Washington Post before spreading across elite society. 'This racial ideology first began to take hold at leading liberal media institutions years before the arrival of Donald Trump and, in fact, heavily influenced the journalistic response to the protest movements of recent years and their critique of American society', writes Goldberg.

The origins of wokeness can be traced even further back in time, before 2014. In many ways, woke is an outgrowth of identity politics and 'political correctness' – phenomena that began in earnest in the 1990s. Though the fundamental concepts underlying woke were established decades ago, what makes woke different from its earlier manifestations is its coercive and punitive character. We have gone from 'you can't say that' to 'you must say this – or suffer the consequences'.

Chatterton Williams and others write about the 'worst excesses' of woke. But what about woke isn't excessive? That is in its DNA. Pluckrose and others refer to 'radical' or 'extreme' social-justice activists. But the entire ideology is radical and extreme in the way it corrodes social solidarity. Woke ideology is built on identity politics, which is the antithesis of the civil-rights movement and other past movements against social oppression. There is no 'non-extreme' version of woke that can be salvaged.

With respect to Trump, these writers get the causality the wrong way around. As I and others argued in 2016, the emergence of Trump was in many respects a response to the elite embrace of political correctness and woke. The vote for Trump was energised, in particular, by Hillary Clinton's use of the word 'deplorables', through which she dismissed vast swathes of the working class for being insufficiently woke. Trump's election and time in office has not stopped the rise of woke and its endorsement by the liberal elite. But there is no evidence that Trump caused this increase or that he somehow is to blame for its intensification. The protests and riots this summer were not generated by Trump. Yes, Trump's public appearances in Washington DC were occasioned by counter-protests, but the street demonstrations in cities across the country were as much, if not more, about police brutality, denouncing US history and sheer lawlessness than Trump himself.

The second part of the ‘vote Biden to stop woke’ case doesn’t hold up, either. Biden certainly comes from a more moderate, centrist section of the Democrats. It’s also true that he has not been as outspoken in support of woke ideas as, say, Kamala Harris or Elizabeth Warren. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t committed to the ideas that his party and its backers have embraced.

A common view is that the threat that Biden represents is that, once in office, he will not be strong enough to withstand pressure from his left. There is an element of truth in this. A vice-president Harris and others will most likely push this agenda. Over his 47 years in politics, Biden has proven to be unprincipled and politically malleable, and he knows which way the wind blows today. More to the point, a vote for Biden is a vote for a huge administrative bureaucracy that will be filled with Democratic appointees infused with this outlook. But this argument misses the more central truth: that Biden himself is fully on-board with these woke ideas. His track record demonstrates that.

When you consider Biden’s decisive role in promoting unjust sexual-assault policies on college campuses, he has a strong claim to being called the Grandfather of Woke. In 2011, Biden, along with then education secretary Arne Duncan, announced new guidance on Title IX law that removed protections for the accused in sexual-assault and harassment cases. Biden was a social-justice warrior when it came to this issue, loudly proclaiming his broader intention: ‘We need a fundamental change in our culture. And the quickest way to change culture is to change it on [the] campuses of America.’ As KC Johnson, author of *The Campus Rape Frenzy*, has put it: ‘Perhaps no major American political figure has so consistently championed the erosion of due process of those accused of sexual misconduct.’

Biden has also been at the forefront of the campaign to promote transgender ideology. In January of this year, he tweeted: ‘Let’s be clear: transgender equality is the civil-rights issue of our time. There is no room for compromise when it comes to basic human rights.’ Not only does Biden declare trans to be the civil-rights issue, but this supposed moderate also adds a characteristically woke note of stridency and menace when he states there is ‘no room for compromise’. At a recent town hall, Biden vowed to ‘flat-out change the law’ when it comes to transgender rights, even though new laws could require such things as biological men competing in women’s athletic events.

Biden is also supportive of today’s racial politics. He has rejected Black Lives Matters’ call to ‘defund the police’, but in most respects he sings from the same hymn sheet. In his first debate with Trump, he notably referred to ‘equity’ – woke-speak for reverse discrimination – as opposed to the traditional progressive call for ‘equality’. The writers with high hopes for a Biden presidency like to point out that he condemned violent rioting. What they overlook is how Biden refused to criticise BLM, Antifa and others, who have been behind the vast majority of violence and destruction, including deaths. Instead, he blamed ‘extreme right-wing militias’ who were ‘aligned with white supremacists’.

Some of Biden’s defenders say he is merely paying ‘lip service’ to the woke. But his track record shows he is totally signed up to the cause. He has implemented and promised specific actions in support of it. It is pure wishful thinking to see Biden as a ‘moderate’ bulwark against woke excesses. Moreover, this ‘anti-woke for Biden’ outlook underestimates the extent to which woke

has been incorporated by the mainstream of the American liberal elite. Think of all of the institutions that espouse woke ideas: the New York Times, the American Museum of Natural History, Harvard, Google, even Wall Street banks. Is it likely that Biden will in any way stand up to this?

And the woke rot goes far deeper than most elite American institutions. It has infiltrated our communities, in local government and our schools. The other day my son, a high-school teen, received an assignment – in health class – that required him to list his privileges, and thus express his white guilt. Will Biden have the slightest inclination to speak out against things like that?

The reality is that woke is a major cultural and social phenomenon. In some respects, it is pre-political in nature, calling into question foundational things like child-rearing, religious beliefs and personal relationships – things that were once taken for granted as arenas that allowed for personal autonomy and privacy. And it's not the government that has been doing most of the cancelling these days. It is companies and other social organisations. Woke is divisive at the local and personal level, setting neighbour against neighbour. To combat the culture war that woke represents, the battle will need to be waged beyond the White House and beyond the political sphere.

But that said, the political realm has an impact on the extent to which notions like woke may become institutionalised or not. Since 2016, there has been a balance of power: the illiberal left has dominated the cultural sphere while there has been conservative advantage in representative government. The lords of US culture pretend that the majority goes along with their identity politics on issues of race, sex and gender. But the mere existence of Trump in the White House has been a stark reminder that not everyone in the US shares their outlook.

From his bully pulpit as president, Trump has been a voice countering the otherwise dominant message from the media, Hollywood and other cultural forces. Trump's speech at Mount Rushmore in July, and his remarks at the White House conference on American history in September, were clear defences of American ideals and a direct riposte to the likes of the 1619 Project and other woke attempts to dismiss all progress to date. Trump is a far from perfect leader of the culture war. But his executive order banning Critical Race Theory in the US government is to be applauded.

If Biden and the Democrats win, this messy balance of culture and politics will end: cultural and political power will be united in one party and the predominant ideology of that party is woke. Facing less political opposition, it is easy to see how woke ideas will become institutionalised to an even greater extent. The progressives will take Biden's win as an endorsement of woke. Woke will worsen under Biden.

As I mentioned, woke culture and ideas are more than politics — they are embedded in our society. A vote for Biden or Trump, in itself, won't change that. Further, there are certainly reasonable grounds for not voting for Trump – although those grounds don't include because he's a pawn of Moscow, a would-be dictator or the greatest threat to civil liberties ever known in US history, as many of the anti-woke liberals are too eager to claim.

The attempts to put a positive spin on a vote for Biden, as if he will somehow arrest the march of illiberalism that's so central to Democratic Party politics and its elite backers, are just fantasy. It is more likely Biden will be their spokesman. Those of us who are engaged in a battle against woke culture will have our work cut out for us whoever wins in November. But don't kid yourself — that job will be harder if the party of the woke takes control of the White House and Congress.

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