

Back to sleep

## America is becoming less “woke”

Our statistical analysis finds that woke opinions and practices are on the decline



Illustration: Juanjo Gasull

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Regina Jackson and Saira Rao achieved a degree of fame at the height of the backlash in 2020 after police killed George Floyd, an unarmed black American accused of buying cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 note. For a hefty fee, rich white women would hire the pair to help them confront unconscious biases at dinner parties that featured such ice-breakers as, “Raise your hand if you’re a racist.” Guests may often have broken down in tears when told that their claims to be colour-blind were simply another brick in the edifice of white supremacy, but there was lots of interest. The two women were featured in many news reports and made a film about their dinners, “Deconstructing Karen”, in which a guilt-stricken participant confesses, “I am a liberal white woman. We are absolutely the most dangerous women.”

The media scrum has since subsided. The last “Race2Dinner” event took place a year ago. The pair now host screenings of the film instead. The problem, says Ms Rao, is not just that they are fed up with having to “sit across from a white person to tell them why they can’t use...the N-word”. It is also that public interest in matters of racial injustice has cooled. “The pulse of anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-genocide, is dead. There is no pulse,” Ms Rao laments.

### Woke me up

Republicans love to blame everything they consider wrong with America on an epidemic of “wokeness”, by which they tend to mean anything that smacks of virtue-signalling or political correctness. Thus a bridge over Baltimore harbour collapsed earlier this year not, as it might have seemed, because it was hit by a wayward cargo ship, but because one of the nearby port’s six commissioners is a black woman whose human-resources firm helps companies assess how diverse their workforces are, among other things—or so a Republican candidate for governor of Utah asserted. Donald Trump, when accepting the Republican nomination for president in July, blamed “woke” leadership for the failings of America’s armed forces. The party’s official platform this year complains of “woke...government” spurring politically motivated prosecutions. The implication is that woke attitudes are proliferating, and that only Republicans can stem their rise.

In fact, discussion and espousal of woke views peaked in America in the early 2020s and have declined markedly since. *The Economist* has attempted to quantify the prominence of woke ideas in four domains: public opinion, the media, higher education and business. Almost everywhere we looked a similar trend emerged: wokeness grew sharply in 2015, as Donald Trump appeared on the political scene, continued to spread during the subsequent efflorescence of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, peaked in 2021-22 and has been declining

ever since (see charts). The only exception is corporate wokeness, which took off only after Mr Floyd's murder, but has also retreated in the past year or two.

The term woke was originally used on the left to describe people who are alert to racism. Later it came to encompass those eager to fight any form of prejudice. By that definition, it is obviously a good thing. But Democrats seldom use the word any more, because it has become associated with the most strident activists, who tend to divide the world into victims and oppressors. This outlook elevates group identity over the individual sort and sees unequal outcomes for different groups as proof of systemic discrimination. That logic is then used to justify illiberal means to correct entrenched injustices, such as reverse discrimination and the policing of speech. It is this sort of "woke warrior" that Republicans love to lambast.

### **Wide awake**

Our analysis subsumes both the advocates and the denigrators of woke thinking, by looking at ideas and actions associated with this sort of activism, for good or for ill. It measures, for example, talk of "diversity, equity and inclusion" (DEI) in the corporate world, regardless of whether it is being invoked as a way to correct the under-representation of women and racial minorities or as an example of pious window-dressing. Some of the yardsticks we use apply only to the more doctrinaire form of woke activism, such as the number of drives to censure academics for views deemed offensive. Others capture only the more positive aspects of the movement, such as polling data on the proportion of Americans who worry about racial injustice. Either way, the results are consistent: America has passed "peak woke".

The simplest way to measure the spread of woke views is through polling. We examined responses over the past 25 years to polls conducted by Gallup, General Social Survey (GSS), Pew and YouGov. Woke opinions on racial discrimination began to grow around 2015 and peaked around 2021. In the most recent Gallup data, from earlier this year, 35% of people said they worried "a great deal" about race relations, down from a peak of 48% in 2021 but up from 17% in 2014. According to Pew, the share of Americans who agree that white people enjoy advantages in life that black people do not ("white privilege", in the jargon) peaked in 2020. In GSS's data the view that discrimination is the main reason for differences in outcomes between races peaked in 2021 and fell in the most recent version of the survey, in 2022. Some of the biggest leaps and subsequent declines in woke thinking have been among young people and those on the left.

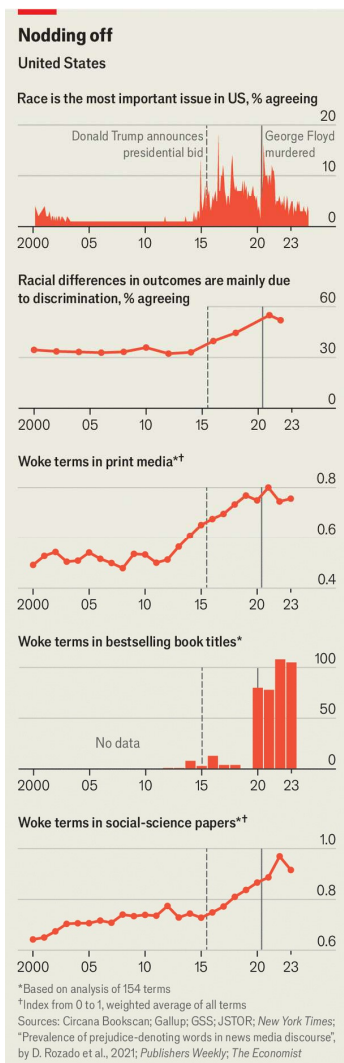


Chart: The Economist

Polling about sexual discrimination reveals a similar pattern, albeit with an earlier peak than concerns about race. The share of Americans who consider sexism a very or moderately big problem peaked at 70% in 2018, in the aftermath of #MeToo. The share believing that women face obstacles that make it hard to get ahead peaked in 2019, at 57%. Woke views on gender are also in decline. Pew finds that the share of people who believe someone can be a different sex from the one of their birth has fallen steadily since 2017, when it first asked the question. Opposition to trans students playing in sports teams that match their chosen gender rather than their biological sex has grown from 53% in 2022 to 61% in 2024, according to YouGov.

To corroborate the trend revealed by opinion polls, we measured how frequently the media have been using woke terms like “intersectionality”, “microaggression”, “oppression”, “white privilege” and “transphobia”. At our request, David Rozado, an academic based in New Zealand, counted the frequency of 154 of such words in six newspapers—the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*—between 1970 and 2023. In all but the *Los Angeles Times*, the frequency of these terms peaked between 2019 and 2021, and has fallen since. Take the term “white privilege”: in 2020 it featured roughly 2.5 times for every million words in the *New York Times*, but by 2023 had fallen to just 0.4 mentions for every million words.

We found largely the same trend in television, by applying the same word-counting method to transcripts from ABC, MSNBC and Fox News from 2010 and 2023, and in books, using the titles of the 30 bestselling books each week between 2012 and the middle of this year. Mentions of woke words in television peaked in 2021. In popular books the peak came later, in 2022, with only a small drop in 2023 followed by a much greater fall so far in 2024.

In academia, which is often thought of as a hotbed of wokeism, the trend is much the same. Calls for academics to be disciplined for their views, as documented by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression,

peaked in 2021 with a total of 222 reported incidents. (Many of these calls came from the right, not just from the left.) A similar database, compiled by the College Fix, a conservative student newspaper, finds 2020 was the peak in calls for scholars to be censored or cancelled. These findings also dovetail with polling data: the share of Americans who think that expressions of racist views should be restricted rose sharply between 2016 and 2021, reaching around 52%, and has since declined slightly, down to 49% in 2022.

Teaching and research also seem to be shifting away from wokery, at least somewhat. The use of our set of 154 woke terms began to rise sharply in 2015 in papers on the social sciences collected by JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals. By 2022 the incidence of “intersectional”, “whiteness”, “oppression” and the like were at their peak. At our request, Jacob Light, an economist at Stanford University, counted the frequency of woke words in a collection of course catalogues from American universities. Classes that invoked woke terms in their name or synopsis rose by around 20% between 2010 and 2022, but remained stable last year.

In part, academia’s retreat from wokeness has been ordained by law. The Supreme Court banned race-based affirmative action in admissions last year. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 86 bills in 28 states have aimed to curb DEI initiatives in academia over the past year; 14 have become law. For example Alabama will from October 1st prohibit state-funded universities from having any DEI offices or programmes, from promoting “divisive concepts” about “race, colour, religion, sex, ethnicity or national origin” and from allowing transgender students to use the toilets of their choice.

Nine states ban academic institutions from demanding “diversity statements” from job applicants. Critics have assailed these personal meditations on the importance of inclusivity as ideological litmus tests. Earlier this year several prominent universities, including Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, gave in to pressure from donors and alumni and dropped them. Others, such as the University of California, have faced lawsuits over their continuing use.



Chart: The Economist

Wokeness is also in retreat in corporate America, even though it appeared there only relatively recently. Mentions of DEI in earnings calls shot up almost five-fold between the first and third quarters of 2020, in the aftermath of Mr Floyd’s death. They peaked in the second quarter of 2021, by which point they were 14 times more common than in early 2020, according to data from AlphaSense, a market-research company. They have

since begun to drop sharply again. In the most recent data, from the second quarter of 2024, mentions were only around three times higher than before Mr Floyd's death.

The share of new job listings that mention diversity continues to grow, however, as ever more firms add boilerplate about inclusivity at the bottom of ads. But the evidence also suggests that firms are less willing to put their money where their mouth is, DEI-wise. The number of people employed in DEI has fallen in the past few years. According to Revelio, which tracks labour statistics at a group of big American firms, DEI roles as a share of overall employment doubled from the beginning of 2016 to the end of 2022 (to 0.02% of all employees, or around 12,600 roles). But in the most recent estimates, from July, these numbers were down by 11% from their peak (to 0.018% of employees, or 11,100 roles). According to Farient Advisors, a pay consultancy, the share of S&P 500 companies that tied bosses' remuneration to diversity targets peaked in 2022 (at 53%) and dropped in 2023 (to 48%).

The fall in corporate enthusiasm for DEI could have several causes. First, in any belt-tightening, support functions are the first to suffer cuts. This is how DEI consultants explain away the recent shrinkage of DEI departments at big tech firms such as Meta and Microsoft. Second, after the Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action in education, companies are scared that they may be sued for any practices that could be construed as discriminating against certain groups. A third possibility is that firms are taking note of declining public enthusiasm for corporate social activism. Gallup detected a big drop between 2022 and 2023 in the share of Americans who like companies to take a stand on matters of public debate. Less than half, for instance, think businesses should speak out on racial issues or LGBT rights. Bud Light, a popular brand of beer, suffered a big drop in sales last year after a promotional collaboration with a transgender social-media star. Its parent company's shares have only recently recovered.

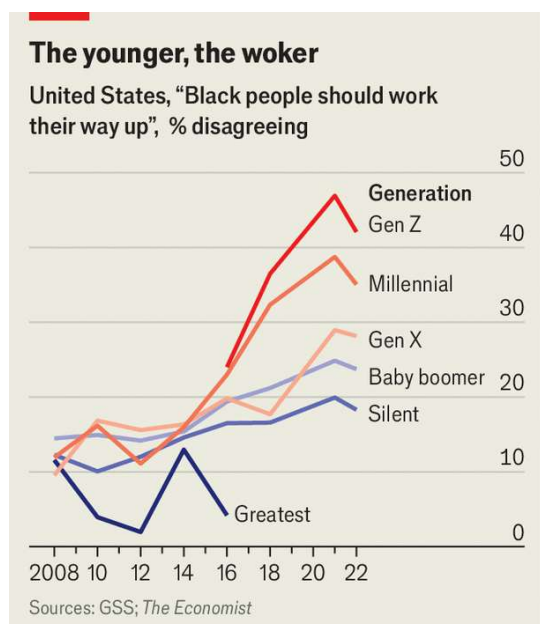


Chart: The Economist

Asked why firms that two years ago were happy to talk up their DEI credentials were now ghosting *The Economist*, Johnny Taylor, from SHRM, an association for people working in human resources, says with a laugh, "Two years ago Budweiser was the number-one-selling beer in the country." Other big brands including Disney, a media firm, and Target, a retailer, have also experienced backlashes for behaviour some customers considered too woke. Robby Starbuck, an activist who campaigns for firms with relatively conservative customers to abandon DEI, says he wants to "Make Corporate America Sane Again". Egged on by the likes of Elon Musk, a billionaire conspiracy theorist, he has won concessions and grovelling apologies from Coors, Ford, Harley Davidson, Jack Daniel's and John Deere. Mr Starbuck claims that whereas his first targets relented only after he posted castigating videos about them online, these days firms are beginning to drop DEI initiatives pre-emptively.

### The wake of woke

Although our analysis shows a clear subsidence in wokery, there are several reasons for caution. For one thing, although all our measures are below their peak, they remain well above the level of 2015 in almost every instance. What is more, in some respects, woke ideas may be less discussed simply because they have become broadly accepted. According to Gallup, 74% of Americans want businesses to promote diversity, whatever the troubles of DEI.



Illustration: Juanjo Gasull

Over time, attitudes to wokeness will doubtless change again. It's easy to see how Mr Trump might prompt a revival in woke activism on the left if he wins the presidency again. By the same token, if Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate, becomes president next year, she may spur a reaction among anti-woke activists. After all, some of the biggest differences in opinion between Democrats and Republicans concern social issues: 80% of likely Democratic voters believe the legacy of slavery still affects black people, for example, compared with only 27% of Mr Trump's supporters, according to Pew. There is also a chance that Gen Z, the most woke generation, retains this outlook as it ages, which would lead to a gradual increase in woke views among the broader population.

For now, however, advocates of woke thinking are in despair. Ms Jackson, from Race2Dinner, thinks things have got "much worse", particularly when looking at "what's going on with banning books, banning LGBTQ, banning trans folks, stopping DEI". She thinks Mr Trump has "given everybody permission to just be an asshole". Critics are exultant: Ruy Teixeira of the American Enterprise Institute, a think-tank, says, "I think people will one day look back on the 2015 to 2025 era as being a bit of a moment of madness." But even though Mr Teixeira thinks the woke wave has set social progress back, he does note that, over the long run, America has been reducing discrimination and improving opportunity for minorities of all sorts. That trend, he believes, is lasting. ■