

What Is Cancel Culture? Getting Beyond the Partisan Talking Points

Eighty percent of Americans say that "political correctness is a problem in our country."

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Unless you've been living under a rock for the past five years, you've probably heard of cancel culture.

But what is it? Why do people on the right and left—and libertarians—disagree so vehemently on everything from whether or not it's a problem, to whether or not it even exists?

This article takes a deep dive into the question of "what is cancel culture?" We'll go beyond the talking points of both sides and look at:

- Does cancel culture exist...or is it just 'consequence culture' as many on the left claim?

- If it exists, who does it? Is it just one political party, or does every political tribe try to cancel people who disagree with them?
- What does cancel culture (or 'consequence culture') look like in practice?
- Why is trying to silence dissent bad?
- Is this just about giving disadvantaged people a voice, and holding the powerful accountable when they abuse their power?

Is Cancel Culture 'Consequence Culture'?

Some on the left have said that cancel culture doesn't really exist as a phenomenon. Instead, it would be better to call it "consequence culture." Actor and TV personality LeVar Burton, for instance, [says](#), "In terms of cancel culture, I think it's misnamed, that's a misnomer. I think we have a consequence culture and that consequences are finally encompassing everybody in the society."

Writing for Vox, Aja Romano [argues](#) that cancel culture has its roots in historically marginalized groups seeking justice against powerful people who abuse their power. In this sense, it's a tool for social justice.

Anne Charity Hudley, the chair of linguistics of African America at the University of California Santa Barbara, [elaborates](#) on this claim: "for black culture and cultures of people who are lower income and disenfranchised, this is the first time you do have a voice in those types of conversation."

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For defenders, canceling is just a new form of boycott. Hudley [argues](#), "When you see people canceling Kanye, canceling other people, it's a collective way of saying, 'We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we're not going to pay attention to you in the way that we once did. ... 'I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you.'"

Lisa Nakamura, PhD, Professor and Director of the Digital Studies Institute at the University of Michigan, [echoes](#) Hudley. She argues that cancel culture is, "a cultural boycott. It's an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to."

Under this definition, cancel culture is simply about holding powerful people accountable. For defenders of this new cultural phenomenon, it's essentially taking the #MeToo movement and applying it on a broader scale. Indeed, when Romano lists celebrities who have been canceled, she cites Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, and Louis C.K., suggesting that she sees the #MeToo movement as a core component of cancel culture.

In this formulation, cancel culture (or consequence culture) has three core components:

- 1) It's about accountability, and holding powerful figures like Weinstein accountable for abusing their power
- 2) It's primarily exercised by people who have been historically marginalized.
- 3) A primary consequence is a lack of attention given to the person, which amounts to canceling them.

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Framed like that, it doesn't seem so bad. After all, not a lot of folks of any political ideology opposed locking up Harvey Weinstein. And the right to not to pay attention to people you don't like is fundamental to our ideal of free expression and a free society.

But when we examine what cancel culture actually looks like in practice, we find some aspects that are deeply troubling.

What Does Cancel Culture Actually Look Like?

When we dig below the rhetoric and look at actual cases, we see five broad trends that, together, seem to define almost all of cancel culture:

#1: Online Mobs

In practice, cancel culture often manifests as online mobs. Someone decides that someone else did something they don't like, and whips people into a frenzy to go after the offender. The mobs can then take on a life of their own, doxxing people or destroying folks' lives for minor offenses.

A lot of times, the victims of cancel culture are among the most vulnerable people in society.

In 2019, members of the trans community tried to cancel Dave Chappelle (admittedly not a vulnerable person at this point in his life). A young up-and-coming trans comedian named Daphne Dorman defended Chappelle, and the mob turned on her.

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As Chappelle recounts the story in his Netflix special *The Closer*, "It took a lot of heart to defend me like that. And when she did that the trans community dragged that b**** all over Twitter. For days they were going in on her...."

Six days after the dragging started, Dorman killed herself. To be clear, Dorman suffered from psychological issues including severe PTSD, and it's unlikely [according to her family](#) that the Twitter mob was why she died. But as Chappelle [said](#), "I don't know if it was them dragging or I don't know what was going on in her life but I bet dragging her didn't help."

Author Lauren Hough became another victim of cancel culture. Her debut novel [Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing](#) was a brutally honest story about her growing up in the "Children of God" sex cult. A critic on Goodreads gave the book 4 out of 5 stars. Hough responded [snarkily](#): "Glad to see most of the Goodreads *sshholes still giving 4-star reviews to show they're super tough reviewers who need to, like, fall in love, you know? Anyway, no one likes you."

After Hough's response, the sky fell down on her.

The public backlash was brutal. People flooded to Hough's Goodreads page and started leaving 1-star ratings and reviews of her book out of spite. As of this writing, the book [has](#) 7,922 ratings with an average of 3.19 stars. 32 percent of her ratings are 1 star, many from people who left reviews like, "id [sic] not finish at 0%." And "its always the white women" (a reaction, it seems, to Hough criticizing her 4-star review).

Here we can see the stark difference between how defenders describe cancel culture (or consequence culture) and how it often looks in real life. First, Hough wasn't a powerful figure. She was a debut novelist, not Harvey

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Weinstein. She was a gay woman who dealt with sexual abuse, homelessness, and addiction; who put her experience on the page in novelized form; and then got raked over the coals for a single rude response to a single critic.

There's another difference, too. Hudley defends cancel culture as simply depriving someone of your attention: "I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you." But the Hough example goes much farther. These reviewers weren't just giving her book a pass, they were actively trying to prevent other people from reading her work. They were working to sabotage her career.

Trans writer Isabel Fall [provides](#) another useful example. She wrote a short story in 2020 that depicted gender dysphoria. Fall published under a pseudonym, and critics of the story took the story as transphobic. They harassed her, doxxed her, forcibly outed her, and ultimately drove her offline.

This isn't about going after powerful people to hold them accountable. Too often, what cancel culture looks like in practice is people from marginalized communities getting dragged and publicly shamed for saying something the online mob doesn't like.

#2: Getting People Fired For Speaking Out

A second big thrust of cancel culture is getting people fired when they speak out against the far-left orthodoxy.

In 2020, bestselling children's author Gillian Philip was [fired](#) by her publisher. Her crime? She changed her Twitter handle to include the hashtag

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#IStandWithJKRowling (the hashtag is a reference to Rowling's [controversial stance on transgender issues](#)).

As another example, Nick Buckley was [fired](#) from Mancunian Way, a charity that he directed and founded. The charity helped disadvantaged youth in Manchester, including thousands of black and minority children. His crime? He wrote a blog post criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement. Days later, he was removed from the charity.

These cases (and there are [many more like them](#)) illustrate another key difference between cancel culture and accountability movements like the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement held powerful people accountable for actual sins. Weinstein sexually assaulted dozens of women. Buckley and Philip, on the other hand, simply expressed mainstream political views or made benign social media posts. To say that these firings are about holding people “accountable” is to turn making non-left statements into a crime that requires punishment.

To be fair, there are cases where cancel culture looks exactly like what its supporters envision: a groundswell of people holding the powerful accountable for abusing their power. Michael Richards is a good example of this: the star of the popular sitcom "Seinfeld" went on [an objectively racist tirade](#) in 2006. His career subsequently cratered.

#3: Disinviting Speakers

One area where cancel culture manifests offline is on college campuses where students (and sometimes faculty) will hear that someone has been invited to their university to speak, and then mobilize to try to get them

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uninvited. In [extreme](#) (albeit disturbingly frequent) cases, students will even violently protest and shut down the campus to prevent speakers from speaking.

A peaceful disinvitation isn't as damaging as getting someone fired, because the speaker will simply go on to their next speaking gig. But the core elements of cancel culture are still here: X says something that some people disagree with, so they band together to prevent anyone from hearing from X and attempt to hurt X's career.

In the past 10 years (2013-2022), 125 [disinvitations](#) have been issued to public figures who were invited to speak on campuses. These included Ben Carson, Condoleezza Rice, Ilya Shapiro, George Will, Ben Shapiro, and other mainstream figures.

#4: Self-Censorship

Unsurprisingly, given the consequences for even mild dissent, this new online culture has led many people to preemptively silence themselves.

Heterodox Academy [surveyed](#) 445 academics about the state of free inquiry on campus, asking them, "Imagine expressing your views about a controversial issue while at work, at a time when faculty, staff, and/or other colleagues were present. To what extent would you worry about the following consequences?"

One of the hypothetical consequences Heterodox Academy listed was, "my career would be hurt." How many academics said they would be "very concerned" or "extremely concerned" about this consequence? 53.43 percent.

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To put it another way: over half of academics on campus worried that expressing non-orthodox opinions on controversial topics could be dangerous to their careers.

We see the same self-censoring phenomenon among college students. In 2021, College Pulse [surveyed](#) 37,000 students at 159 colleges. They found that 80 percent of students self-censor to at least some degree, while 48 percent of undergraduates reported feeling "somewhat uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" expressing their views on a controversial topic in the classroom.

In a panel on free speech and cancel culture, former ACLU president Nadine Strossen [said](#), "I constantly encounter students who are so fearful of being subjected to the Twitter mob that they are engaging in self-censorship."

If cancel culture is just about holding powerful people accountable, why is it that young people are so scared of saying something that might put them in the crosshairs?

#5: Governmental Pressure

Unfortunately, legislators and public officials are realizing that they can leverage a version of cancel culture to punish corporations who don't toe the right line.

In 2022, Florida passed a law revoking the Walt Disney Company's special tax status. Revoking special government privileges can be good, but the [reasoning](#) in this case was disturbing: Florida Republicans are explicitly

punishing Disney for opposing Republican-backed Florida House Bill 1557 ([the "Don't Say Gay" bill](#)).

Daily Wire cofounder Ben Shapiro [tweeted](#), "Corporations have an interest in lobbying on issues that directly impact their business. If they choose to engage in politics outside their purview, they will be treated with all the aggression inherent to the political sphere, and they will deserve it."

In other words, governments can and will target specific companies for speaking out on cultural and political issues.

In 2021, Major League Baseball [announced](#) that it would move the 2021 All-Star Game and the MLB draft out of Atlanta in order to protest a voting-ID law that Georgia had passed. Many Republicans were furious, and some sought to punish MLB's act of dissent. Representative Jeff Duncan said he would work to end baseball's federal antitrust exception. Former President Donald Trump urged supporters to, "boycott baseball and all of the woke companies."

Trying to use societal pressure to silence or punish dissenters is almost never a good thing...but it's even worse when legislators use governmental power to do the punishing.

Why Is Silencing Dissent Bad?

Okay, so cancel culture is real and the consequences can be brutal. On an individual level, it's obvious why this isn't a good thing: it would be awful to lose your job and your ability to provide for your family because you changed your Twitter bio.

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But on a societal level, why is this bad?

First, we don't want a society in which people feel like they have to walk on eggshells around each other. That creates a culture of fear and loneliness. It's inimical to the idea of building genuine connection, which we as humans need.

The second reason that we want to avoid a culture where peoples' livelihoods can be destroyed for wrongthink is that if dissenters live in fear and don't speak up, we'll never learn and grow as a society. None of us has all the answers, because life is complex and as humans we're inherently flawed. We need to listen to people who disagree with us so that we can all move closer to the truth.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt puts it eloquently in an Atlantic article titled, "[Why The Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.](#)" He points out that, "People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain."

By contrast, "People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider, almost as if they are shooting darts into their own brain."

The third reason we should oppose this kind of culture is...it's just vicious. We shouldn't embrace a culture where online mobs can destroy peoples' livelihoods for small sins or expressing non-orthodox political views.

Is Cancel Culture a Partisan Phenomenon?

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Cancel culture is unfortunately not a partisan phenomenon; both the left and the right do it. However, they cancel in very different ways and to different degrees.

So who cancels more? Let's take a look at the data:

1) Social Media Canceling: Left-Wing (Anecdotally)

Writing for *Quillette*, Richard Hanania [argues](#) that Twitter is far more likely to censor right-wing voices than left-wing voices. He notes, "Of 22 prominent, politically active individuals who are known to have been suspended (from Twitter) since 2005 and who expressed a preference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, 21 supported Donald Trump."

Now maybe all 21 right-leaning individuals deserved to be removed from Twitter. Maybe they said awful things that violated Twitter's terms of service. But as Hanania points out, liberals who say awful things generally get a pass from the social media giant. Sarah Jeong, former editorial writer for the New York Times, [posted](#) lots of Tweets expressing contempt for white people. Sample Tweets include, "Are white people genetically predisposed to burn faster in the sun, thus logically being only fit to live underground like groveling goblins," and, "oh man it's kind of sick how much joy I get out of being cruel to old white men."

Kathy Griffin demanded that her followers doxx students at Covington High School who were accused of harassing a Native American activist. (For those unfamiliar, doxxing is when you publish private or identifying information about someone, generally with the intent to harm them.)

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Neither Griffin nor Jeong were punished by Twitter.

When it comes to silencing people for their political views, social media giants like Twitter seem to prioritize canceling non-liberals.

2) Getting People Fired for Their Political Views: Left-Wing (Data)

A big part of cancel culture seems to be this push to punish people who dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy, and in this case liberals are also leading the charge.

The libertarian Cato Institute, together with YouGov, surveyed 2,300 American adults for its [2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey](#). One of the categories of questions they asked respondents was if a business executive should be fired for expressing certain political views. In every instance, Democrats were more likely than Republicans (and often much more likely) to answer in the affirmative.

(Source: [The State of Free Speech and Tolerance in America | Cato Institute](#))

Some of these beliefs are horrendous, but others are simply heterodox. For instance, over a third of Democratic responders said a business executive should be fired if they, "believe psychological differences explain why there are more male engineers." But the psychological differences between men and women, and to what extent these differences affect career selection, is a topic of open debate [among psychologists](#).

3) Disinviting (Or Forcibly Shutting Down) Controversial Speakers: Left-Wing (Data)

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The nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has been tracking disinvitations to speakers on campus for decades, and they have a [robust database](#) that includes who the speaker was, the controversy, and whether the calls to disinvite came from the left of the speaker or the right of the speaker.

In the past 10 years (2013-2022), 125 disinvitations have been issued based on political pressure. Only 28 (22.4%) of these came from the right. The remaining 97 (77.6%) came from the left.

The Cato Institute's 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey also asked Democrats and Republicans whether a speaker should be allowed to speak at their university if they held certain political opinions (for example, saying that police are justified in stopping blacks at higher rates). In every single hypothetical, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to say that the speaker should be disinvited, often by double digits.

Democrats are also much more likely than Republicans to support students who forcibly shut down campus speakers. When Cato asked, "How should colleges handle students who disrupt invited speakers and prevent them from speaking? (Select all that should apply)" Republicans were much more likely to give responses such as, "Require the students pay a fine" or, "Suspend the student for 30 days." By contrast, 64 percent of Democrats said that the college should, "Listen and address students' concerns." (36 percent of Republicans said the same).

When it comes to offline attempts to cancel an invited speaker, Democrats are far more eager than Republicans. And, disturbingly, many Democrats are

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more willing than Republicans to turn a blind eye to forcible attempts to silence speakers on campus.

4): Using Government to Punish Speech They Don't Like: Right-Wing (Anecdotal)

Unfortunately, Republicans are learning to embrace cancel culture, and doing it in a very dangerous way: they're employing the power of the state against companies who take political sides that they disagree with.

Both the Disney example and the Major League Baseball example cited above were Republican-led silencings.

Some liberals try to use social pressure to stop dissenters from speaking or acting in ways that don't support their agenda. Disturbingly, some Republicans are learning they can use governmental pressure to accomplish the same ends.

Who's Actually Doing the Canceling?

On the right, the perpetrators of cancel culture are the rich and powerful: governors and legislators, cheered on by well-known pundits like Ben Shapiro. This is a case of those in power working to use their power to punish corporations who don't toe the appropriate line.

But on the left, it's often also the rich and powerful who are working to punish [wrongthink](#).

This might come as a surprise to defenders of cancel culture, who tend to praise it as a power rebalance and a way for marginalized voices to be heard.

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Procon.org, a prestigious site known for making the best arguments for and against debatable positions, published three 'Pros' and 3 'Cons' of cancel culture. One of their 'Pros' [was](#) "Callout culture [in this case, a synonym for cancel culture] gives a voice to disenfranchised or less powerful people." Or recall Hudley's claim about cancel culture: "for black culture and cultures of people who are lower income and disenfranchised, this is the first time you do have a voice in those types of conversations."

This is a lofty idea...but the data tell a different story.

Almost all of the cancellations from the left come from the far left, not the middle. Moderate liberals don't consider supporting JK Rowling to be a fireable offense. Middle-of-the-line Democrats don't tend to want business executives fired for believing that men might want to be engineers more often than women do.

This isn't just anecdotal. Scholars Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres, and Tim Dixon polled 8,000 respondents for a study called, ["Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape."](#) Based on the poll responses, 30 one-hour interviews, and six focus groups, they divided Americans into seven political tribes ranging from far-left ("Progressive Activists") to far-right ("Devoted Conservatives"). Among other things, they asked members of each tribe for their views on political correctness.

Eighty percent of Americans across the board said that "political correctness is a problem in our country." Left-leaning respondents tended to say that political correctness was less of a problem than right-leaning respondents did, but even among the second-most-liberal group of Americans

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("Traditional Liberals"), 61 percent agreed with the statement that political correctness was a problem.

Only Progressive Activists truly support political correctness: a mere 30 percent of them said that political correctness was a problem.

If you think political correctness is a problem, you're unlikely to try to get someone fired for non-politically-correct statements like, "#IStandWithJKRowling." To put it another way: data on their views about what kind of speech should and should not be permissible strongly suggest that Progressive Activists are the ones driving cancel culture on the left.

So, who are Progressive Activists? Are they the, "lower income and disenfranchised" people whom Hudley imagines?

Not exactly.

- The Hidden Tribes report offers in-depth data about each political tribe, in terms of beliefs and also in terms of demographics. They find that Progressive Activists are:
- More likely to be white than the average American (80% of Progressive Activists, vs 69% of Americans) (only Devoted Conservatives are more likely to be white than are Progressive Activists)
- Twice as likely to have completed college as the average American (59% vs 29%)

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- Almost twice as likely to make \$100,000 per year or more as the average American (25% vs 13%) (Progressive Activists are more likely to be in this top income group than are members of any other political tribe)
- Less than half as likely to make under \$20,000 per year as the average American (7% vs 17%) (only Devoted Conservatives are less likely to be poor than are Progressive Activists)

And even though African Americans represent 12 percent of the US population, just 3 percent of Progressive Activists are black.

Essentially: the group most in favor of cancel culture on the left is also one of the richest, most privileged, highly educated, whitest groups in the country. In their power and privilege, they mirror the group of elected officials and pundits who have endorsed cancel culture on the right.

Maybe these aren't the two groups that should be in charge of telling the rest of Americans what we are and aren't allowed to say.