Research Article

What's woke? Ordinary Americans' understandings of wokeness

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Abstract

The term "woke" has evolved from its roots in the 1960s civil rights movement to a mainstream political term, most frequently used disparagingly by Republicans. Despite its frequent use, it's unclear precisely what Americans perceive of as woke. This study investigates perceptions of woke using a conjoint survey experiment. Respondents in the conjoint are tasked with selecting the more woke list. The lists contain various attributes, identities, and policies that have, over the past few years, been branded as woke. Our findings indicate that there's generally broad agreement among Democrats and Republicans about what is woke. However, Democratic respondents are more likely associate lower salience racially progressive and gender-progressive items as woke, while Republican respondents identify higher salience items clearly aligned with the Democratic Party as woke. Independents, as a whole, have much less consistent views, tracking more closely with Democrats when it comes to some considerations while more closely with Republicans on others.

Keywords

Woke, conjoint, partisanship, racism, sexism

Woke entered the mainstream political lexicon around 2014 (Romano 2020). Originating with Black civil rights activists in the 1960s, woke signified awareness of the systemic oppression marginalized groups face, coupled with a desire to dismantle relevant hierarchies. Woke or, more specifically, the phrase "stay woke" reemerged in the 2010s as a new wave of civil rights protests were set off by police killings of unarmed Black men.[1] The phrase was rarely used from 1950 to 2005, but started to appear in popular media between 2005 and 2010, and then its use skyrocketed afterward. What started as a term used primarily by the social justice left was eventually co-opted by the right and used to mock and deride the language and behaviors of social justice groups (Nataraj 2023). Right-wing Fox News began consistently talking about woke at markedly higher rates than their competitors beginning in October 2020.[2]

The co-optation of woke by the right is evident in recent Republican campaigns. Republican presidential candidates Ron Desantis and Vivek Ramaswamy, running for their party's 2024 nomination, made opposition to wokeness central to their messages. Upon winning reelection—and just before declaring his presidential bid—DeSantis declared, "Florida is where woke goes to die." Desantis's presidential campaign website boasts of his many anti-woke accomplishments, such as, "holding woke corporations and school unions accountable," and "waging war on woke power-grabs like ESG and central bank digital currency."[3]

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Similarly, businessman Vivek Ramaswamy released a book titled *Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam* shortly before announcing he would seek the Republican nomination. Although the message failed for both candidates as a broad electoral strategy, the effectiveness of these messages with an electoral minority is clear. In e-newsletters used by politicians to gin up donations from their most dedicated supporters, Republican congresspeople employ the phrase woke with much greater frequency, presumably because they believe it is popular among their base.[4]

How ordinary people conceive of woke, however, is unclear. Conceptual stretching coincided with (or was potentially caused by) Republican co-optation of the term. While woke initially referred to the specific act of staying vigilant to systemic oppression, the concept appears to have stretched to be inclusive of anything deemed politically correct, liberal, or anti-American by the political right (Zavattaro and Domonic, 2022). An emerging literature investigates wokeness (Fan 2019) and backlash to it (Davies and MacRae 2023). However, while this work engages with what counts as woke conceptually, it does not consult how ordinary citizens view the term. Furthermore, it remains unclear from this work whether the conception of woke differs along partisan lines.

One possibility is that woke is simply the latest in a long line of terms used to disparage behaviors, practices, or identities considered deviant by the cultural majority. Previous terms used as pejoratives by the right include politically correct, identity politics, and social justice. Woke supersedes these earlier terms by being broader and more vague—thus, it can be used more like the word 'liberal,' which Republicans successfully weaponized to make Democratic identifiers and candidates incur costs from identifying as liberal and staking out a more liberal agenda (Neiheisel 2016; Schiffer 2000). Still, it's possible that the weaponization of the term woke may serve to mock efforts at inclusion especially.

On the surface, it is tempting to liken wokeness to a more longstanding term, 'political correctness.' Some definitions explicitly liken political correctness to an acknowledgment of and desire to remedy inequality (Shafer 2017), which is similar to wokeness. More commonly, however, scholar-supplied definitions (Lueke 2023), measurement treatments (Strauts and Hart, 2015), and citizen-supplied definitions (Rosenblum et al., 2020) converge on dislike of and desire to censor insensitive *statements* about disadvantaged groups. This definition renders political correctness a potential special case of a more general phenomenon of wokeness that is specifically about language. However, it is unclear, a priori, whether Americans' perspectives on wokeness resemble political correctness.

And what about partisanship? On the one hand, Democrats and Republicans could share a substantive understanding of woke, but differ regarding its merit. For example, Democrats, who are warmer towards transgender people (Castle 2019), might view listing one's pronouns as an acceptable woke alteration of behavior to promote inclusion. By contrast, Republicans might agree that such an action is woke, but see it as a personal imposition. However, it could also be the case that Democrats and Republicans perceive woke differently, qualitatively. An Ipsos poll from March 5, 2023 reveals that a majority (56%) of Americans and (78%) Democrats think woke means, "to be informed, educated on, and aware of social justices" (Newall et al. 2023). However, a majority (56%) of Republicans say woke means, "to be overly politically correct and police others' words." Therefore, we test the following research questions: What do Americans associate with woke? How do these associations differ between Democrats and Republicans?

To answer our questions, we conduct a conjoint survey experiment. Participants are presented two lists of attributes, characteristics, identities, etc. and forced to say which list is more woke. We test several hypotheses as to which types of stimuli encompass wokeness, and, in the end, we find that the American public's conceptualization of woke appears to encompass partisan, racial, and gender considerations. However, there is important partisan heterogeneity. While both Republicans and Democrats identify high-salience racial and gender items (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Planned Parenthood, Pro Choice) as woke, Democrats categorize a broader range of both salient and less salient (or more obscure) racial and gender objects as woke, reflecting a more detailed categorization based on progressivism on race and gender issues. These results suggest that the concept has indeed stretched to include a number of dimensions of left-right political contestation, and, despite some differences, there is wide agreement between Republicans and Democrats.

Expectations

Following the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election, which saw a Republican triumph in the Old Dominion for only the second time in the 21st century, James Carville blamed "stupid wokeness," explaining, "this 'defund the police' lunacy, this take Abraham Lincoln's name off of schools… really has a suppressive effect all across the country on Democrats" (Kornick 2021). Carville's criticisms were similar to those made by angry, moderate House Democrats a year earlier. In an infamous phone call, Representative Abigail Spanberger railed against the progressive wing of the Democratic Party following House Democrats' underperformance in 2020 (Cillizza 2020). Like their efforts to co-opt the term liberal some decades before (Neiheisel 2016), Republican Party (and party allies') efforts to rebrand woke as negative and subsequently wield it as an electoral weapon appears to have been successful enough to cause concern among Democratic elites. Resultingly, woke may simply represent, to voters, a broad negatively

valenced label for the Democratic Party conveying that the party is out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Americans. If woke simply refers to stimuli associated with liberals and Democrats, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 1. Items associated with the Democratic Party are considered more woke than items associated with the Republican Party.

Another possibility, not mutually exclusive with the first, is that wokeness is characterized by the social progressivism of its origin. In other words, it might characterize attempts at instilling norms that favor inclusion. However, while establishing more inclusive norms may be laudable, the process is not without friction. An aversion to wokeness may be the simple manifestation of prejudice toward marginalized groups understood to be systemically opressed within woke ideology. Baird et al. (2023), for example, find that racially resentful people are more opposed to political correctness. In contrast, those with white guilt are less opposed to the importance of political correctness since political correctness can be thought of as one tool/strategy for challenging the hierarchies central to woke thought.

Another related concept to wokeness is identity politics. A content analysis of news coverage shows 60% of references to identity politics, were "unambiguously negative" (Amira and Abraham 2022). Media outlets often describe identity politics as a phenomenon of the left in general, but also of the Democratic Party that has championed racial progressivism since the 1960s, and portray it as a political loser. Amira and Abraham (2022) find mentions of identity politics have recently declined. We suspect this is likely due to the replacement of the more specific phrase with the broader term, woke. If woke conveys (un)favorability towards marginalized groups and actions that benefit them, then it would likely serve as a trigger for, amongst other things, racial resentment and gender traditionalism. Further, for this to be the case, progressive notions regarding race, gender, and sexuality would need to associated with the term woke. As such, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 2. Items that are racially progressive will be considered more woke than items that are racially conservative.
Hypothesis 3. Items that are more progressive on gender and sexuality (e.g., feminist, pro-LGBT) will be considered more woke than items that are conservative on gender.

Method

To test our hypotheses and answer our research questions, we fielded a conjoint survey experiment via Lucid/Cint. In total, we recruited 1126 participants who resided in the United States on November 21st, 2023. Lucid/Cint uses a compositionally representative (on age, gender, race, etc.) convenience sample. While researchers should be careful to make generalizations about American public opinion using Lucid/Cint surveys, they provides a reliable sample of respondents for the purpose of conducting a survey experiment (Coppock and Oliver, 2019).

In the conjoint task, participants were given two lists of objects, and asked to indicate which list was more woke. More explicitly, the prompt read:

"These days, there is a lot of talk in America about "wokeness" in politics. Below, we present you with two different lists. Please study each list in their entirety. Once you have carefully studied each list, please indicate, if you had to choose, which list you would say is the most "woke" list overall according to your own understanding of "woke" or "wokeness." We will ask you to do this 5 total times."

Each list contained one political party, one racial/ethnic group, one sexual orientation group, one gender group, one religious group, one commercial product/business, one political figure,[5] one historical event, one profession, one higher educational institution, one political movement, and one political policy. Each attribute type is one that media pundits have branded woke in recent years, and within those attribute types we include a mix of attribute levels that have either been explicitly deemed (anti)woke, are adjacent to the aforementioned, or are less clearly related in order to get a clearer picture about what the public at large views as (anti)woke. A similar method is used by Goggin et al. (2020) to determine which issues, groups, and other attributes are associated with the Republican versus Democratic Party. This method allows us to discern which items are (strongly) considered woke, neither woke nor anti-woke, or (strongly) anti-woke. The full list of attributes that we use in our conjoint can be found in Table 1. Participants filled out 5 of these trials in total. Since each of these trials contained 2 profiles, we have 10 responses per participant, or 11,260 in total.

Leveraging a conjoint design for this task is particularly useful for a few key reasons. First, it minimizes respondent burden in that we are able to get respondents to compare a large number of objects in a fairly short period of time. Second, it steers respondents away from evaluating the objects explicitly and towards evaluating objects based on how well they line up with their idea of woke. Third, while we do not anticipate social desirability bias to be an issue (as we are not asking for respondents' attitudes), to the extent there is such bias, conjoints reduce their effects (Horiuchi et al. 2022).

Results

Full-sample results

Marginal means from our conjoint experiment are displayed by topic in Figure 1. With reference to the

Table 1. Conjoint attribute levels.

Attribute	Levels
Political party	Republican; independent; democrat
Race/ethnicity	Whites; Native Americans; Hispanics; Blacks; Asians
Sexual orientation	Straight; bisexual; gay; lesbian; pansexual; questioning
Gender	Trans; woman; man
Religion	Muslims; Jews; Hindus; Christians; Buddhists; Atheists; Agnostics
Product/business	YouTube; WalMart; Twitter; Target; Tampax; Starbucks; NFL; NBA; iPhone; First-Person Shooter Games; Fox News; Facebook; Exxon Mobil; Craft Beer; CNN; Bud Light; Barbie; Android; Amazon
Political figure	Donald Trump; Chuck Schumer; Nancy Pelosi; Mitch McConnell; Matt Gaetz; Ron DeSantis; Biden; Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez
Historical discussion	The great depression; slavery; Sep 11th; Pearl Harbor; Jan 6th; holocaust; civil rights movement, 2008 housing crisis
Profession	Trucker; therapist; surgeon; software developer; research scientist; plumber; lawyer; high school teacher; financial analyst; factory worker; electrician; construction worker
HE institution	Yale; University of Texas-Austin; Texas Christian University; Southern Methodist University; University of Notre Dame; Harvard University; University of California-Berkeley; Brigham Young University; University of Alabama
Political group	Sierra Club; Proud Boys; Planned Parenthood; NRA; Neo-Nazis; Moms for Liberty; Moms Demand Action; KKK; Black Lives Matter; Antifa
Policy	Universal healthcare; raising the minimum wage; pro-life; pro-choice; book bans; aid for Ukraine; aid for Israel; affirmative action; admitting more immigrants; admitting fewer immigrants

midpoint of the scale (0.5), participants considered a number of items woke. This includes Democrats, transgender folks, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Black Americans, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, lesbians, and being pro-choice. By contrast, Republicans, cis men, former president Donald Trump, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Southern Methodist University, the Proud Boys, the Ku Klux Klan, straight people, book bans, aid to Israel, and admitting fewer immigrants were seen as anti-woke.

A number of attitudinal objects were not statistically distinguishable from the midpoint. People were no more or less likely to select a list as woke when it included any religion, product (with the exception of Barbie), or career. There were also some striking departures from conventional expectations. Despite sharing similar politics as other Democrats, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and President Joe Biden were not statistically distinguishable from the midpoint on wokeness. Similarly, despite defining their political brands as anti-woke, neither Congressman Matt Gaetz nor Governor Ron DeSantis deviated from the midpoint on wokeness. Despite having incredibly clear ideological leanings, neonazis, Moms for Liberty, and Antifa did not differ from the midpoint.

These findings give some preliminary indication that some Democratic Party signifiers, items associated with Black civil rights, and women—or policies largely benefiting women—are considered 'woke.' In the next section, we turn to a more systematic test of our expectations.

Dimensions of woke

To test our hypotheses formally, two authors, blind to the data/results, coded each feature level on three dimensions. The first, Democratic-Republican, captured whether objects were associated with the Democratic Party, Republican Party, or neither. The second, racial progressivism, captured whether objects were associated with support for advancing the rights of people of color in the United States (racially progressive), support for maintaining or extending white supremacy (racially conservative), or neither. The third, gender progressivism, captured whether objects were associated with support for advancing the rights of women and sexual/gender minorities (gender progressive), associated with support for maintaining or entrenching male dominance and heterosexism (gender conservative), or neither.

After reconciling coding disagreements (see the Appendix for further details), we used these ratings to establish a count of the number of objects in a profile that were coded on partisan, racial, and gender lines. We then used these counts as predictors of whether a given profile was declared more woke than the other in a multilevel model with profiles nested within respondents. In one specification (Figure 2(a)), we used the net number of Democratic/gender-progressive/racially-progressive items (subtracting conservative items from
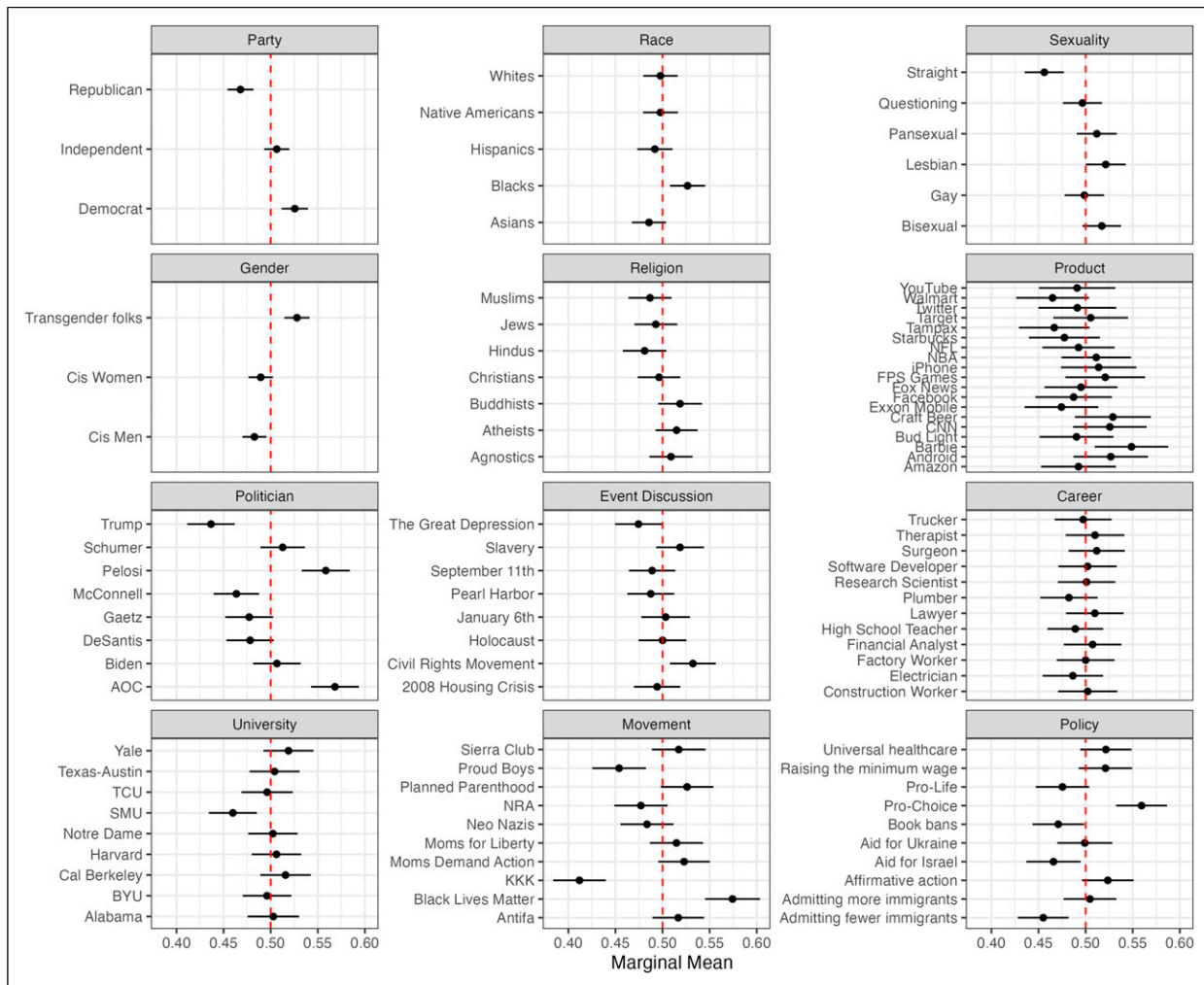
Figure 1. Raw marginal means.

progressive items). In the other (Figure 2(b)), we entered each type of designation as a separate predictor. All predictors are scaled from 0 to 1 to compare effect sizes. Full results are presented in Tables A3 and A4 of the Appendix.

All of our hypotheses about woke associations receive support in at least one of the subsamples. Despite similarity in these designations, different factors are important for each partisan subgroup in predicting how profiles are designated. For Republicans, the main indicator is partisanship. Democratic objects in terms of net presence (p <.001) and raw count (p = .006) are associated with a higher likelihood of Republicans declaring a profile woke, while the presence of Republican objects is associated with a lower likelihood of declaring a profile woke (p = .002). Gender and racial progressivism fail to have a discernible effect (ps > .066).

For Democrats, however, net gender and racial progressivism are predictive of viewing a profile as woke (ps = .001), but not partisanship coding (p = .523). More specifically, Democrats are less likely to label profiles with gender-conservative (p = .004) and racially conservative (p < .001) items as woke, but the effects of the presence of racially and gender-progressive items had no discernible effect (ps > .288). Disaggregating by type of partisan coding, the lack of net effect is because Democrats, unexpectedly, rate lists containing *both* more Democratic and more Republican objects as more woke (ps < .040). These findings indicate that Democrats and Republicans take different factors into account in declaring objects woke.

For Independents, net gender progressivism is predictive of viewing a profile as woke (p = .050), but partisan coding and racial coding had no discernible effect (ps > .125). More specifically, racially conservative items were seen as more anti-woke (p = .016), and gender-progressive items were seen as marginally more woke (p = .066). No other significant effects emerged (ps > .336).
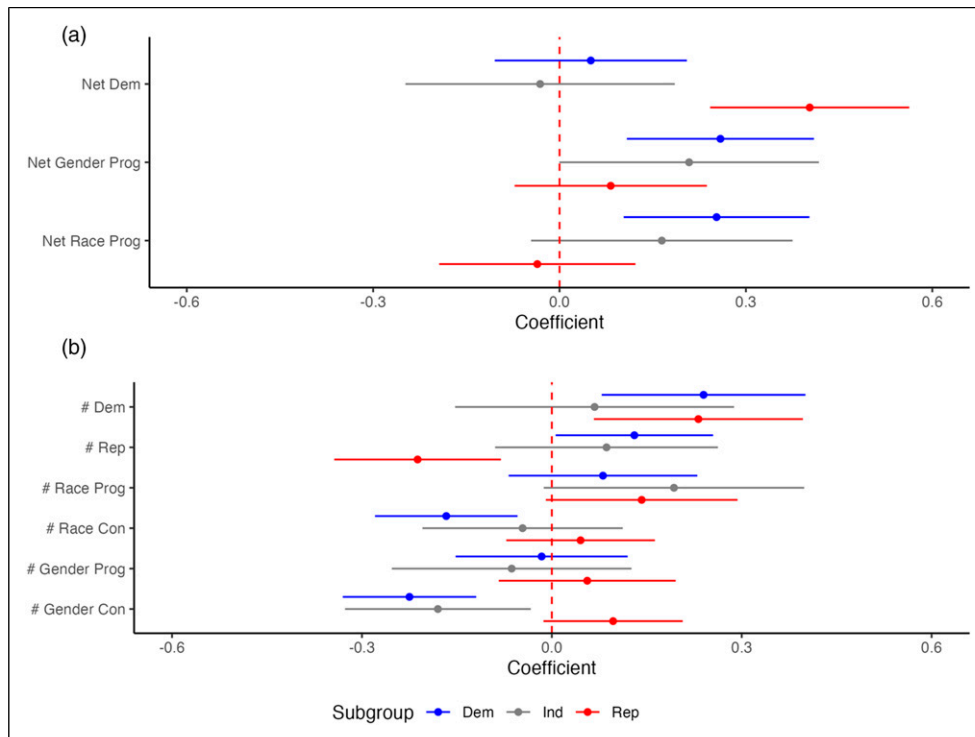
Figure 2. Effect of partisan, gender and racial coding on wokeness perceptions by party. Top plot (a) uses net ratings, bottom plot (b) disaggregates using both progressive and conservative ratings.
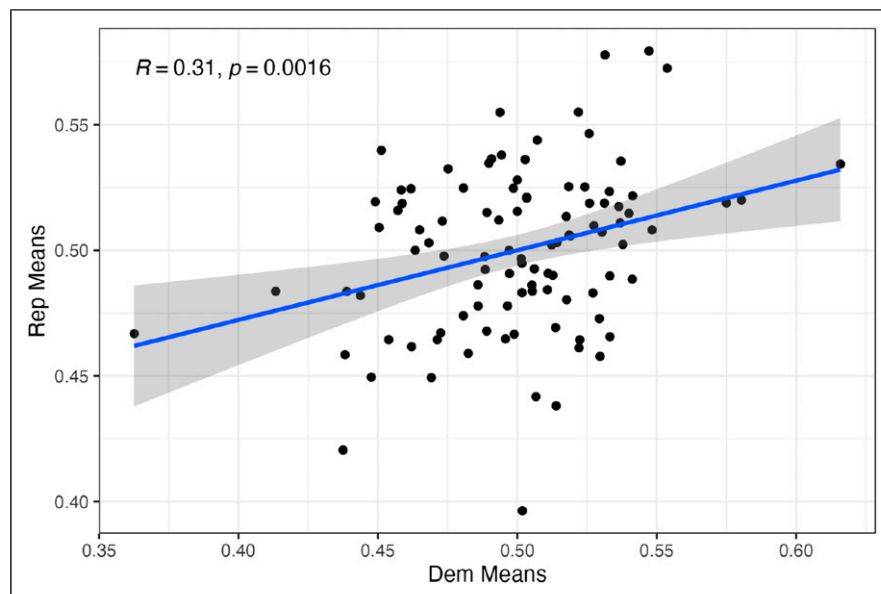

Figure 3. Correlation between democrats' and republicans' marginal means.

Partisan overlap and differences

How much do partisan subgroups agree in their designations of items as woke? Figure 3 displays the correlation between an item's marginal mean among Democrats and the item's marginal mean among Republicans. The correlation between these marginal means is modest, but statistically significant ($r = 0.312$, $p < .001$). However, differences in marginal means are fairly minor (see Figure A4 in the Appendix). Only 11/100 contrasts between Democrats and Republicans are statistically significant. Democratic respondents consider Republicans, Fox News, slavery, the Proud Boys, the KKK, and book bans as less woke than Republican respondents do. By contrast, Republican respondents consider Exxon Mobil, the University of Notre Dame, the NRA, Black Lives Matter, and aid to Israel as less woke than Democrat respondents.

A common thread is that Democrats clearly link racial considerations to wokeness to a far greater extent than Republicans do, which is consistent with our theory. For example, Democrats rated BLM as unequivocally woke, whereas Republicans did not, and, similarly, Democrats rated the Proud Boys and the KKK—two being groups linked to white supremacy—as decidedly anti-woke whereas for Republicans these items were not distinguishable from the midpoint. Also consistent with theory, Republicans rated items at odds with the Democratic Party brand as anti-woke. For example, Exxon Mobil, as an energy company strongly associated with oil production, likely struck Republican respondents as being counter to the environmentalist segments of the Democratic coalition. Similarly, the NRA (guns), Israel aid (seen as counter to preferences of Democrat leaning progressive activists), and even the University of Notre Dame (religious vs secular) likely signal anti-Democrat and, thus, anti-woke positions.

Conclusion

While there are certainly virtues to our forced-choice conjoint design, one draw-back is that such designs force respondents to choose one profile as woke when, in fact, they may have viewed both as equally woke (or not woke at all), which may introduce external validity bias. Future research should study this question using either a single-profile conjoint design or another non-forced-choice alternative (Visconti and Yang 2025).

Despite its limitations, our study provides key insights into how Americans conceptualize "wokeness." First, the term woke has undergone conceptual stretching, encompassing a range of attitudes, behaviors, and identities beyond its original focus on racial awareness and activism. Despite this conceptual stretching, however, woke remains strongly linked to social justice efforts in Americans' minds.

Second, while there is a degree of overlap in how partisan subgroups perceive wokeness, partisanship does appear to shape individuals' conceptions of what is woke. Republicans are more likely to identify items on the list as "woke" if they are implicitly associated with the Democratic Party. Conversely, Democrats, and to a lesser extent Independents, tend to say items are woke if they are associated with progressivism on race and gender issues. Woke cannot be easily defined because it is used by Republicans to degrade anything Democratic. That said, our results also hint at significant *gender* undertones regarding how Republicans understand wokeness perhaps the best example of this being Republican respondents associating Nancy Pelosi and Alexadria Ocasio-Cortez with wokeness, but not their male counterparts Joe Biden and Chuck Schumer, with another poignant example being gender (especially female) oriented groups and policies being strong considered woke but *not* racial groups and policies. What's more is that Independents were in agreement with Republicans regarding most of these gendered components, which suggests that the political right has been especially successful in reframing gender progressivism as woke. Given the negative connotations that wokeness seemingly conveys to most Americans at this time, these findings shed light on important opinion dynamics likely to shape election and policy outcomes.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

The replication files are available at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/UBS9MN

Notes

1. The sharp increase in the use of this phrase in Google Books is illustrated in Figure A2 of the Appendix.
2. See Figure A1 in the Appendix.
3. For example, https://rondesantis.com/es/articles/meet-ron-desantis/ accessed by the reseachers on 06/12/2024.
4. See Figure A3 of the Appendix (Cormack 2017).
5. The politicians we included all either held elective office or were actively campaigning at the time we fielded our survey.

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