

# [***What Does Woke Even Mean? How A Decades-Old Racial Justice Term Became Co-Opted By Politics***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68DG-5G81-DXVP-500G-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 1094 words

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**Highlight:** Conservative politicians and pundits have co-opted woke, a term that originally meant to stay aware of racial injustice.

**Body**

**Topline**

Woke is now best known as a negative political buzzword used to describe anything deemed too liberal or progressive like brands that support Pride Month,**TheLittle Mermaid** live-action film and teaching about race in schools but the word has a long history, originally meaning to be aware of racially motivated threats.

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis emerged as a virulent critic of woke ideology ahead of his presidential run.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

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**Key Facts**

Conservatives, including media pundits and Republican presidential candidates, have blasted a continuallygrowing listof companies as woke in recent weeks, mostly for their outreach to the LGBTQ community.

Conservative definitions for woke range from a form of cultural Marxism, accordingto Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, to a virus more dangerous than any pandemic, accordingto former Gov. Nikki Haley (R-S.C.).

Before the word was co-opted by the right wing, woke was a word used within Black communities and social justice campaigns to refer to an awareness of inequality, with some urging others to stay woke and picked up mainstream popularity as the Black Lives Matter movement grew in the early 2010s, particularly after the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

Black activists and academics have alsocriticizedwhite liberals for co-opting woke andusingit in a performative way to appear progressive, as well as using it toreferto any left-leaning position, diluting its original meaning.

The use of woke as a pejorative has extended beyond just the United States: Politicians in countries includingHungary,SwitzerlandandNew Zealandhave slammed woke ideology in recent months.

The conservative redefinition of woke has made the term more popular than ever: Googlesearchesfor woke hit an all-time high as of March 2023, according to Google Trends.

**News Peg**

The word woke has taken center stage on the 2024 campaign trail as Republican candidates use the term as a pejorative to describe everything from LGBTQ-friendly businesses to teaching about race in schools. But former President Donald Trumpsaidat a campaign stop in Des Moines last week he doesn t like the word woke because half the people can t even define it though he used the term while attacking DeSantis just two days prior for failing to stop Disney from going woke. Whenaskedwhat the term means by NBC correspondent Dasha Burns on Saturday, DeSantis defined woke as putting merit and achievement behind identity ***politics***, and it s basically a war on the truth. Haley, also asked to define the term by CNN s Jake Tapper on Sunday,definedit as a lot of things including biological boys playing in girl sports and gender pronoun classes in the military.

**Key Background**

Early versions of stay woke have been used as early as 100 years ago. In 1923, as part of a compilation of philosophical ideas written by Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, hedeclared: Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa! as a call for Black liberation. Stay woke was spoken in the outro of a 1938 song, Scottsboro Boys by Lead Belly, based on the 1931 Alabamacasein which nine Black teenagers were accused of raping two white women. Lead Bellyurgeslisteners to stay woke, keep their eyes open at the conclusion of the song. The**Oxford EnglishDictionary**creditsa 1962**New York Times** articleabout how white Americans appropriate Black slang, If You re Woke You Dig It, written by novelist William Melvin Kelley, as the first citation using the word woke. Woke has been further popularized by modern singers, including Erykah Badu, whose 2008 song Master Teacher contains the refrain, I stay woke, as well as Childish Gambino s 2016 song Redbone, which includes stay woke in the chorus.

**Surprising Fact**

University of California at Santa Barbara, linguistics scholar deandre a. miles-herculestold CNNconservatives using woke however they want, despite its historical meaning, is an example of semantic pejoration : when a word gains a negative meaning over time. The same happened to identity ***politics***, miles-hercules said, which was used as far back as 1977 to describe ending oppression against Black women but is also now used as a pejorative by conservatives.

**Chief Critics**

Some on the left and right have criticized the negative use of the word woke. In September, Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-Tex.)criticizedthe woke right as people who want to just scream at the other side. Maurice Mitchell, the national director of the Working Families Party,toldABC News conservatives use the term as a dog whistle: It's been a useful club for those who want to beat those seeking justice over the head with white grievance ***politics*** to win elections without deploying explicitly racist terms. Candis Watts Smith, associate professor of political science at Duke University and coauthor of**Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter**,toldthe **Washington Post**co-opting and weaponizing language is standard practice of undermining social movements, and in this case, a Black political movement.

**Tangent**

Use of the term has ramped up in recent weeks ascompanieshave come under fire for marketing toward the LGBTQ community and celebrating Pride Month. Bud Light sparked sputtering outrage among conservatives after it sent transgender TikTok star Dylan Mulvaney a customized can with her face on it, though the can was not commercially available. Mulvaney posted a video with the can and quickly attracted criticism from high-profile celebrities and pundits, including Kid Rock, Candace Owens and Ben Shapiro. Conservatives have since jumped on the momentum to boycott other woke companies, including Nike, which also partnered with Mulvaney. Adidas and Target came under fire for trans-inclusive clothing, with Target s boycott aided by viral misinformation that a tuck-friendly swimsuit was sold in children s sizes, when it was only made for adults. The North Face and Jack Daniels faced criticism for using drag queens, who have recently been targets of legislation threatening to restrict where they can perform, in advertisements.

**Further Reading**

The New 'Anti-Woke' Crusade Targets DEI And Chick-Fil-A?(Forbes)

Navy Removes Pride Month Posts Amid Right-Wing Backlash Nascar, Major League Baseball Also Targeted(Forbes)

Kohl s Becomes Latest Target Of LGBTQ Culture Wars: Here Are All The Others From Bud Light To Target(Forbes)

Molson Coors Slaps Anti- Woke Critics Like Joe Rogan And Ben Shapiro And Defends Miller Lite Women s History Ad(Forbes)

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