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### Current Use & Implications

We begin our discussion of current use and implication of the term *woke* from the year 2014. In order to capture *woke*'s broad usage, we have ordered our description along categories of social media contexts, political contexts, and international contexts. In each section, relevant appropriative uses are underscored.

With the rise of social media came also the advent of hashtags: terms used to describe and classify social media posts. As *woke* has become increasingly mainstream in social media contexts, so too have hashtags featuring the term, most notably #StayWoke and #wokeAF.

The 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, incited outrage and activism against anti-Black police brutality. During this time, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #StayWoke began trending. The phrase “stay woke” in this context referred to maintaining consciousness of systemic racism that endangered the lives of Black people (Allen, 2023), as well as being involved in activism to combat the injustices that occur under such a system. Social media platforms such as Twitter enabled activists to connect with people with shared interests and goals, organize protests, and warn one another of potential police presence at certain sites (Collins, 2017). In this sense, hashtags were an invaluable tool for uniting communities against institutionalized racism, with #StayWoke serving as a constant reminder for activists to not forget what systemic oppression they were fighting against.

However, if we analyze the usage of the hashtag #wokeAF – with “AF” meaning “as fuck”, an indicator of emphasis – we can see a deviation in the contexts in which *woke* is used. #wokeAF primarily gained popularity on Twitter, where Claude, Anderson, and Trye's (2023) data analysis showed that the usage of the hashtag first began with about 175 tweets in 2012. It then lost popularity

for a few years before a resurgence of the hashtag starting in 2016 and peaking in 2020 with roughly 12,000 tweets. They identify several such meanings of the hashtag: first, referencing some sort of product being sold or media (a comedy show, a podcast, a clothing line, being used as clickbait, etc.); second, spirituality or conspiracy (i.e., being aware of external forces at play); third, being used in a more literal sense to mean “awake”; fourth, referencing some sort of political indication, whether that be criticising people who are left-leaning and *woke* or criticising those who are not left-leaning and *woke*. The authors found that the majority of uses of the hashtag were criticizing the concept of wokeness itself and showed anti-woke sentiment, showing a “collective critical judgement” (Claude et al., 2023) of those that are woke. As *woke* continuously gained popularity through social media, the term became appropriated by white progressives to refer to possessing a general awareness of social issues, then subjected to further bastardization when it entered the lexicon of right-wing reactionaries (Allen, 2023).

The use of *woke* in the pejorative sense is particularly notable in the context of GamerGate, a harassment campaign in which certain game developers and journalists were targeted for allegedly forcing “woke culture”, that is, feminism, diversity, and progressive ideas in general into their games. Discussion threads on the gaming platform Steam reveal the perspective of the majority white male GamerGaters on the inclusion of such concepts in their games. An update to *Total War: Rome II* that allowed women to be played as central figures, such as generals and leaders, sparked major backlash, with many users arguing that the inclusion of women in games ruined the historical immersion aspect and “clogged up [the games] with woke SJW [censored curse word]” (P. Gareis, 2023). *SJW* (which stands for “Social Justice Warrior”) is yet another pejorative that was commonly used by GamerGaters and right-wing reactionaries to refer to anyone that advocated for what they perceived to be progressive ideals. The slogan “get woke, go broke”, was also frequently used among this demographic, (P. Gareis, 2023), a threat to content creators such as game developers and movie producers that their products would not be profitable if they pushed the “woke agenda” within their content. In the context of GamerGate and other alt-right forums, the meaning of *woke* has been warped into one that is used to critique any perceived concern for or interest in social justice issues– a significant shift from its original

meaning as a reminder to be conscious of institutionalized violence against Black communities. This pejorative use of *woke* can be further explored in the context of American politics, particularly in media.

In recent political discourse, the term *woke* has lost much of its nuance and has been weaponized, often by people on the right side of the political spectrum. The term is now grossly simplified by the political right to describe anything perceived as overly politically correct, with the label applied even to ideas or actions that are only mildly progressive or inclusive. That is, things do not even need to be radical to be labeled by the Right as woke.

Take, for example, the somewhat famous “woke M&Ms” stories that Fox News heavily covered in response to M&M’s rebrand of its mascots in 2022. The mascots were redesigned to be more inclusive, and some of the changes included the Green M&M wearing sneakers instead of stilettos and the Brown M&M having her heels lowered. What was a relatively harmless and ultimately superficial redesign was framed by Fox News as overt political correctness, and the new mascot designs were labeled as “woke spokescandies” and presented as an example of companies caving to progressive activism and ruining designs that Tucker Carlson described as being “attractive.” (Carlson, 2022) & (Failla, 2022). In this instance, *woke*, as used by Fox News, does not mean being politically aware; instead, it is used as a catch-all criticism for anything perceived as progressive.

Furthermore, Sean Hannity called the Biden administration “a group of woke idiots” on his show Hannity on March 8, 2023 (Hannity, 2023). The context for this comment was his criticism of the administration’s initiative to raise taxes on corporations, which he argued would ultimately lead to higher prices for goods and services because “corporations don’t pay taxes.” In this instance, the term woke seems to be used simply as a stand-in for “Democrat” or “leftist”.

Whether *woke* is positive or negative depends on who uses it and who takes it. Newall et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative survey regarding the notion of *woke* among United States adults. In one of the questions, they offered two definitions of *woke* and made the participants choose one which suited their views more. One of the two definitions was “To be informed, educated on, and aware of social injustices,” with the other one being “To be overly politically correct and police others’ words”

(para. 1). Their results showed that about 80 percent of Democrats chose the former meaning whereas about 60 percent of Republicans preferred the latter meaning. For another question, participants were asked whether they would take *woke* as a compliment or an insult if they were described using the term. 25 percent of Democrats said that they would consider it to be an insult and 46 percent of them answered it to be a compliment. From the results they offered, we can see that Democrats usually associate *woke* with a positive connotation. Furthermore, the results for the first question about the definition of *woke* did not show much difference when it was divided based on age. The age group that had the most inclination towards choosing the former definition was the youngest group, aged between 18-34, and the age group which had the opposite inclination was the second oldest (50-64). 64 percent of the youngest group chose the former meaning whereas 47 percent of the second oldest group chose it. However, it does not look as though the percentage significantly decreases as the participants become older since 52 percent of the oldest group picked the former meaning, which is a higher percentage compared to the second oldest group. In addition to that, all percentages are around 50 and the differences are insignificant compared to the differences among two political parties. For the example of actual usage, in Hayes (2022), *woke* takes on a positive meaning in the discussion of “white liberals” (p.1521). The author points out that “white liberals” do not do enough in terms of activism, and they actually continue to contribute to white supremacy although they regard themselves to be “woke”. However, Allsides (n.d.) explains that the people farther on the left can also use the word as a pejorative to talk about liberals who appear to be contributing to social change, though in reality, they do not deliver results. Therefore, *woke* does not necessarily correlate to a positive meaning on the left.

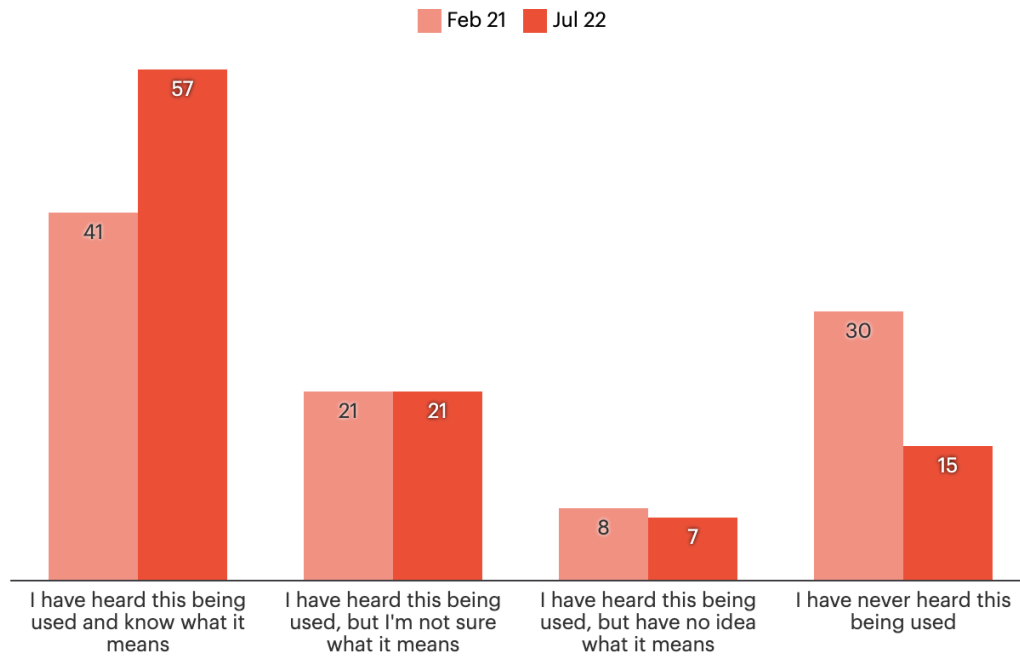
Though the term *woke* typically refers to those on the American political spectrum, the term has also spread to international contexts. *Woke*, or *wokisme*, as it is called in French, is a term first reported in French politics in 2021. Its meaning analogues that which we’ve described for American politics—referring as a noun and adjective to any number of socially aligned causes of reform. In most cases, *wokisme* is used as a pejorative to refer to proponents of associated movements. Contrary to American use, French politicians associated with the moderate left are notably cited in using *wokisme* in the pejorative.

This demographic point is exemplified in Élisabeth Moreno's stating to Bloomberg magazine in May 2021, "woke culture is something very dangerous, and [shouldn't be brought] to France." Moreno was the then Minister for Gender Equality, Diversity, and Equal Opportunities for the Renaissance party of French President Emmanuel Macron, a political party generally associated with liberal, center, and center-right ideology. In similar cases, the meaning of *woke* is quite similar, however, the group using and the group associated with the term (liberal-center and progressive left, respectively) is distinct from generalizations held in American political uses of *woke* (John 2022). A similar understanding of French *wokisme* appears in French Lawmaker François Jolivet's tweet (November 2021) referring to the authors of a predominant French Dictionary as, "militants of a cause that has nothing to do with France: #wokisme." Jolivet, a member of the center Renaissance party, was responding to the dictionary's inclusion of gender-neutral pronouns (Buckley 2022).

Australian politicians of both the center-left and center-right have similarly taken on the pejorative meaning of *wokeness*— interesting to this discussion is the use of *wokeness* to politically dissociate rather than mark others as such. This distinction is seen in Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and opposition leader Anthony Albanese both declaring they are *not* woke; Morrison declared in an interview, "I am not woke", Albanese, a member of Australia's center-right party, asserted in response, "I don't have to do interviews running around telling people I am not woke, people know that is not the case and leopards don't change their spots" (Morrison 2022).

Looking to British politics, we see similar trends of bipartisan centrist opposition to wokeness, illustrated by qualitative polling data. British voters were polled at two points, February 2021 and July 2022 in regards to their understanding and level of self-identification with the term *woke* by YouGov. During these two points, *woke* and *wokeness* grew significantly in prevalence in political rhetoric and media coverage— this is confirmed by YouGov data, that a greater percentage of voters polled responded that they had heard the term *woke*.

Have you ever heard the term "woke" being used to describe someone, and do you know what it means? %



Among other questions, voters were asked if they (or, to what extent) considered themselves woke. Shown in the graph below, more labour (left/left-center) voters associated with being woke, and more labour voters also associated with being not woke over the earlier and later studies. When asked the same question, a similar percentage of conservative voters responded that they associated with *wokeness*, while 17% more respondents stated they did not associate with *wokeness*.

**As far as you understand the term, do you consider yourself to be "woke"?**

Yes I do No I do not Don't know Don't know what woke means

**Labour voters**



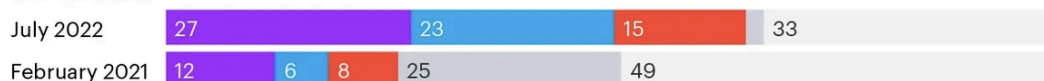
**Conservative voters**



**And do you consider being "woke" to be a good or a bad thing, or is it neither?**

A good thing Neither good nor bad A bad thing Don't know Don't know what woke means

**Labour voters**



**Conservative voters**



YouGov

Latest data: 13-14 July 2022

This suggests that amongst labour voters, those who learned the term *woke* between the two studies show similar patterns of association with *wokeness*, whereas amongst conservative voters those who learned *woke* in the same time span were much more likely to *not* associate with the term. Lacking more data, it is difficult to compare these results with other developments of *woke*— still, there is some general sense of similarity between the UK data and patterns of French and Australian use, mainly, that center-left voters to a lesser degree associate with the term and its implication.

The word *woke* has also influenced reactionary politics, specifically in Eastern Europe. *Woke* has become a catch-all slur against progressive values, specifically LGBTQ rights, feminism, and immigration/multiculturalism. The word *woke* is now weaponized by reactionary figures to impose systemic oppression. According to in-depth analyses from *Illiberalism Studies* and *The Nation*, the word *woke* has become a pejorative that right-wing political leaders such as, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, use to position and champion themselves as “defenders” of Christian heritage and

national sovereignty against the “evil” West and liberal democracies that threaten them. This phenomenon also appears in American politics, where right-wing leaders use the word *woke* as a bludgeon in debates to beat down their political opponents. One key difference seen in America as compared to Europe is that to fight this messaging, the left-wing movements have started to define themselves using the word *woke*. The word *woke* developed to point out awareness of systems of injustices, but is now used to propagate those very systems by political leaders.



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## Contributions

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