

Still the Party of Business? How the Diploma Divide and the Culture War Have Complicated Republicans' Alliance with Corporate America

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Abstract

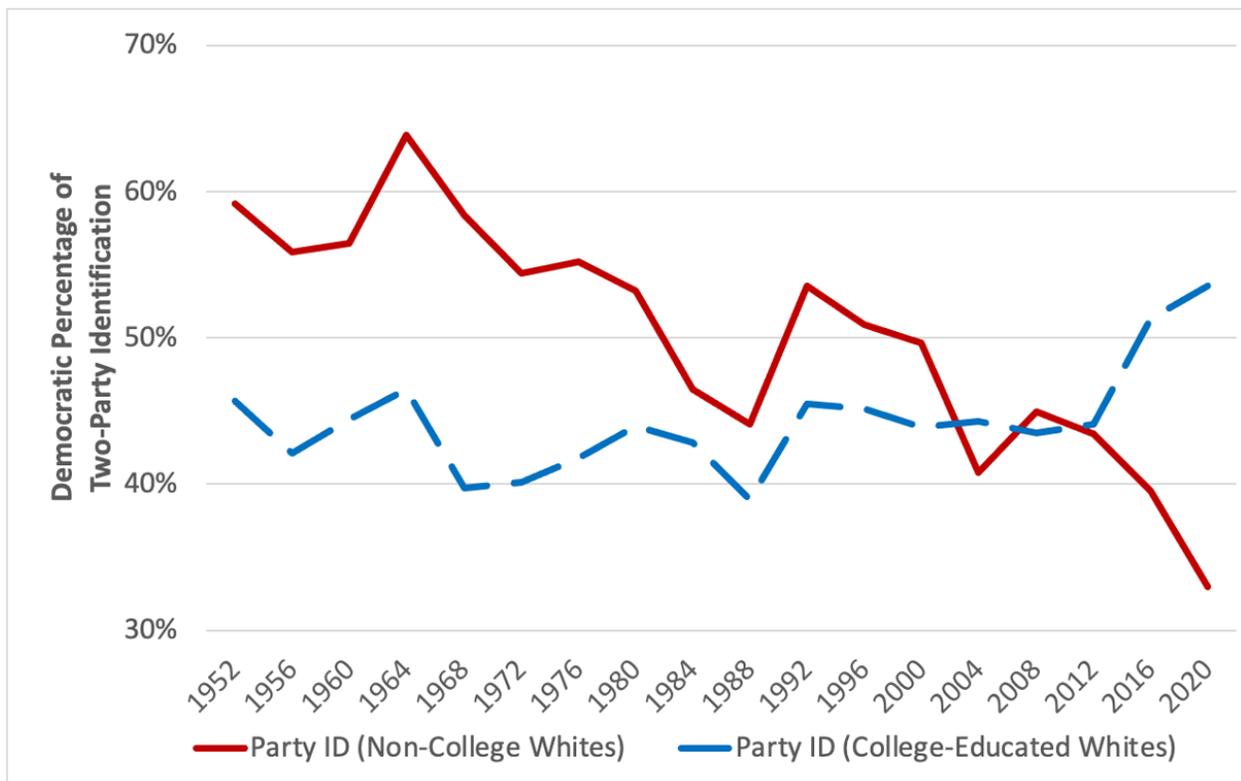
The two major parties have become polarized by educational attainment over the past two decades, with college-educated voters becoming more likely to identify as Democrats and whites without college degrees increasingly supporting the Republican Party. Over the same time, major corporations and other private-sector institutions have increasingly adopted the social norms favored by most well-educated professionals—especially deference to the policy-making authority of credentialed experts and left-of-center positions on cultural subjects like race and gender. The intersection of these trends has complicated corporate America's relationship with a stylistically populist Republican Party that remains supportive of the economic policies favored by big business but remains firmly on the conservative side of the contemporary culture war, openly criticizing “woke capitalism” and even entertaining its increased legal regulation.

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Introduction: The New Diploma Divide

Until recently, white Americans who earned a four-year college degree were more likely to be Republicans and white Americans who did not earn a degree were more likely to be Democrats. But the association between partisanship and formal educational attainment in the mass public has reversed over the past several national elections. For the first time in American history, most college-educated whites voted Democratic for president in 2016 and 2020. At the same time, the Republican margin over Democrats in party identification among non-college whites has grown into a 2-to-1 advantage (see Figure 1).

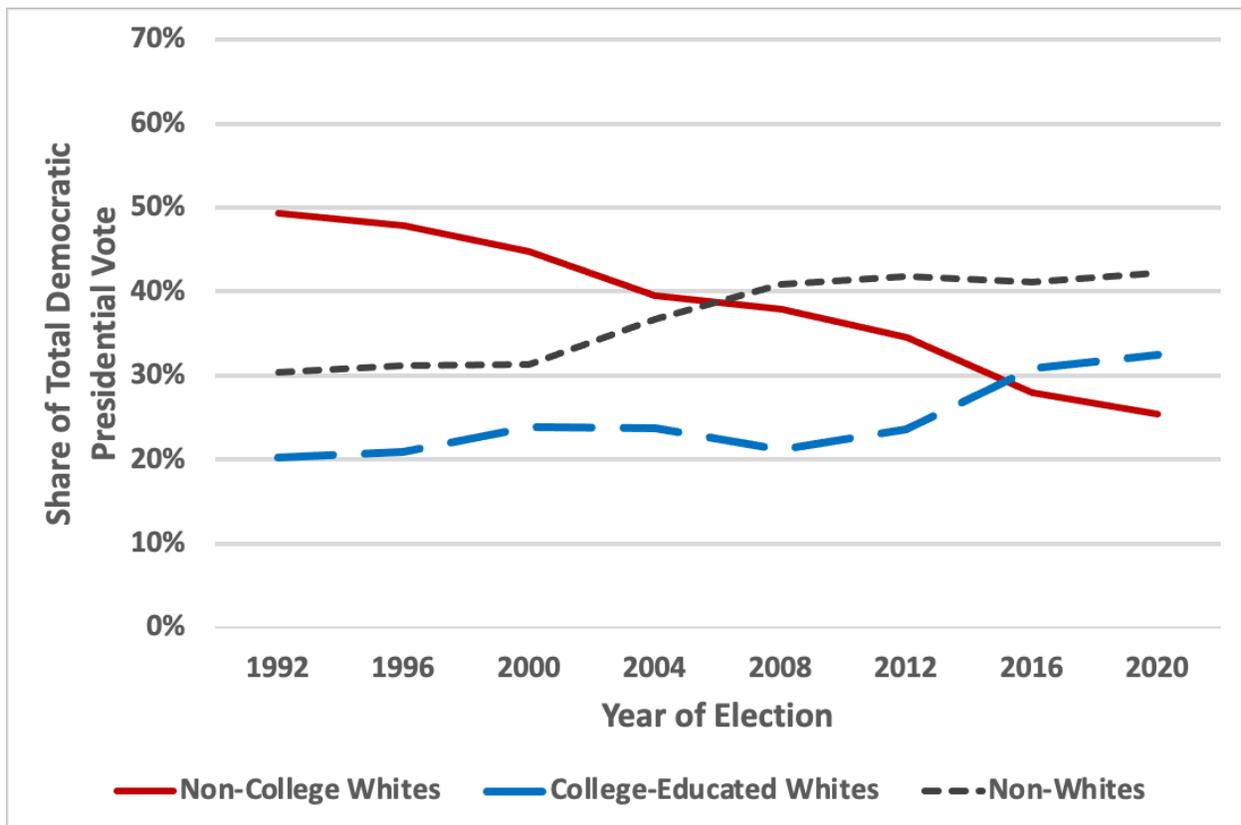
Figure 1: Party Identification Among Non-College and College-Educated Whites, 1952–2020



Note: Independent “leaners” are classified as partisans. Source: American National Election Studies.

But the partisan realignment of these educational groups is not occurring in a demographically stable national electorate. Instead, the American public is collectively becoming both better-educated and more racially diverse. For Democrats, the combination of these developments has resulted in a party that now draws most of its popular support from racial minorities and college-educated whites, with a declining proportion of votes received from white citizens without college degrees (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Share of Democratic Presidential Votes Cast by Social Group, 1992–2020

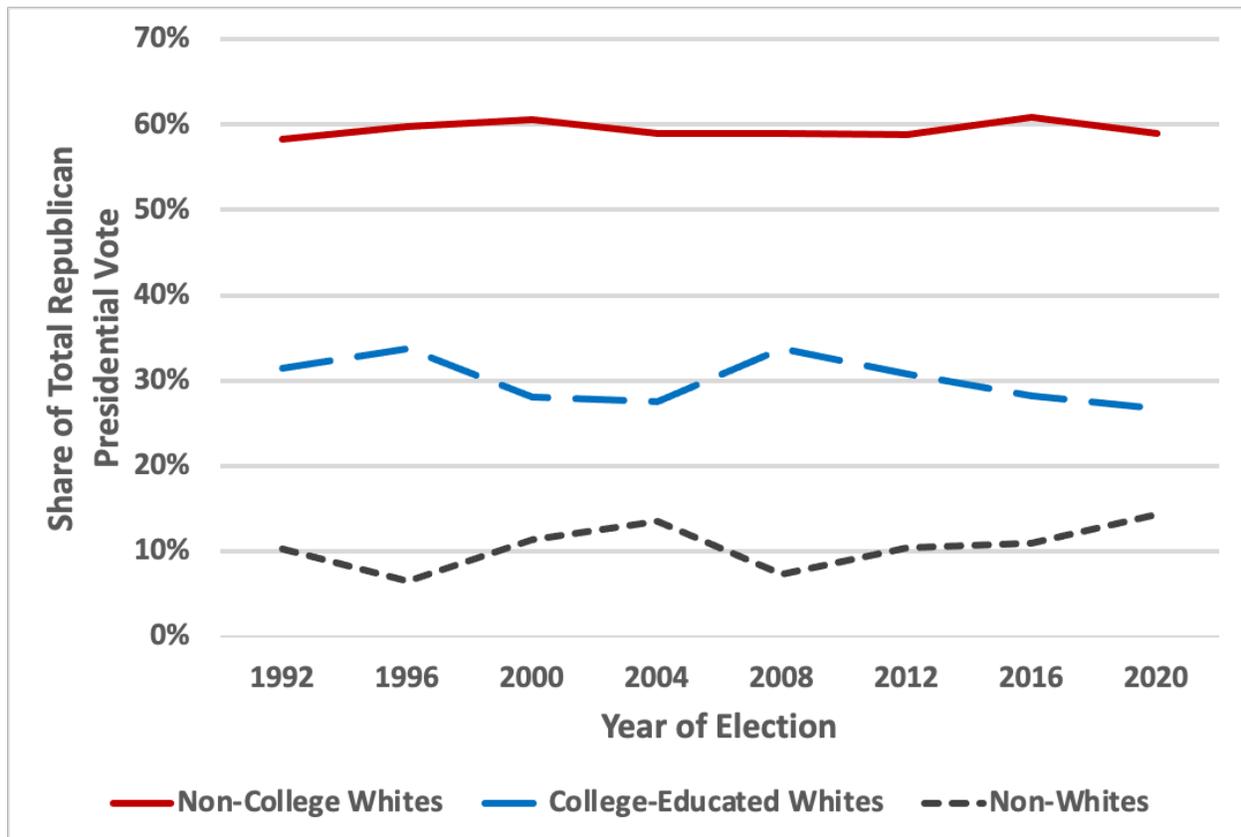


Source: American National Election Studies.

The Republican Party has not experienced the same degree of demographic transformation. While whites without college degrees are declining as a share of the national electorate, they have

also moved into the GOP at a steady rate. As a result, a stable majority of the Republican vote continues to be cast by non-college whites even in an increasingly educated and diversifying nation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Share of Republican Presidential Votes Cast by Social Group, 1992–2020



Source: American National Election Studies.

Aggregate educational attainment in the United States has grown steadily since the 1970s, producing political consequences that stretch far beyond the increased demographic gap between the two parties' electoral bases. A burgeoning stratum of well-educated professionals has achieved leadership over most major social institutions, bringing its distinctive values and preferences to the management of both the public and private sectors. This trend has profoundly influenced corporate

America, where increasing deference to the worldview of the educated classes not only reflects the sincere beliefs of rising generations of top executives but also represents a strategic response to the prevailing sensibilities of key actors both inside and outside the organization itself: managers, legal advisors, consultants, media figures, business partners, potential employees, and customers.

But there is a downside risk to embracing the values and priorities of the educated. The Republican Party, historically the primary champion of corporate interests in the political arena, has increasingly defined itself in opposition to the philosophies and demands of this rising cadre of educated professionals. Dependent on popular support from older, less-educated whites whose voting power exceeds their cultural influence, Republican leaders have adopted a populist style since the presidency of George W. Bush that emphasizes resentment against the rule of liberal elites and the “radical” social agenda they wish to “impose” on the nation. As a result, corporate America has found itself in an awkward political position. While they continue to rely on the conservative movement to advocate and administer economic policies that advance their financial interests, business leaders have also sought to accommodate important trends towards greater credentialism, professionalization, complexification, bureaucratization, and “conscious” or “enlightened” thinking on issues of social identity. As a result, they can no longer count on protection from rhetorical and even legislative attacks at the hands of their traditional allies in the Republican Party.

In this paper (part of a book project in development), we address the rising power of expertise and cultural progressivism in American society and the ways in which this trend has transformed corporate governance and policymaking. We argue that the growing social influence of well-educated professionals has produced a series of important changes in both the internal operations and public-facing activities of corporate America, leading to the adoption of a guiding spirit of progressive technocracy that combines deference to social scientific experts with the increasing endorsement of left-of-center cultural values. The paper first describes and analyzes these developments in detail from the perspective of corporate leaders and managers, placing their evolving behavior in the context of long-running social and political changes. We then conclude by shifting our focus to the Republican Party’s hostile response to this rise of progressive technocracy,

which has introduced significant tensions into the traditional alliance between corporate interests and Republican politicians.

The Private Expansion of Progressive Technocracy

The ethos of the well-educated professional has two main characteristics. First, these citizens have faith in technocratic procedures and governance. They approach problem-solving with formalization and specialization, seeing policymaking as the domain of formally credentialed experts in particular issue areas or procedures. This philosophy is not limited to government but also influences non-profit and private sector analogs to policy and process, especially in the areas of human resources, operational analysis, and consumer engagement. Even though its advocates may view themselves as free-thinking members of the creative class, this liberal mentality tends to promote routinization and bureaucratization. If improvement requires constant attention to metrics and management of time, people, and money, organizations will formalize both procedures and work roles while attempting to train, credential, and evaluate experts in each aspect of organization and decision-making.

Second, educated professionals increasingly see themselves as culturally progressive. They present themselves as leading a necessary set of social changes intended to increase acceptance of marginalized groups and to eradicate the old hierarchies and prejudices to which their less enlightened fellow citizens continue to cling. Although they may insufficiently acknowledge their own self-interested impulses and biases—and their adherence to liberal cultural norms may simply reflect their distinct social circles, political alignments, and secular or metropolitan worldviews rather than core values—cultural progressives view allegiance to "social justice" as a marker of status and intellectual development.

Technocratic procedures have been increasingly adopted by the private and non-profit sectors as well as governmental institutions, but change has been most profound in industries and professions with the closest relationships to the political sphere. Compliance professionals justify revision of internal governance mechanisms by warning against litigation and policy risk but go

beyond citing immediate threats to expand and codify rules emanating from regulators and policy advocates. Public relations, formerly subordinate to marketing and dependent on external journalism, has—in the era of social media and cultural branding—become an all-encompassing corporate interest that is expected to promote the company’s adherence to trendy cultural values while simultaneously preventing it from becoming ensnared in damaging controversies.

Corporate connections to the American political system have expanded in multiple respects. Lobbying expenditures have increased over time, as have the number of lobbyists. When lobbying activity appears to decline momentarily, it is due to the re-categorizing of some staff as public relations and public policy managers, rather than a true decline in the political influence industry.¹ Of course, when money is available, lobbying booms—as it did during the COVID-19 pandemic.² Lobbying is growing especially at federal agencies and among top companies. Lobbyists can easily convince their clients of looming dangers or opportunities that require their services, and the difficulty of tracing the source of political wins and losses makes it hard to retrospectively evaluate whether their claims were justified.³

The compliance industry is also now growing at a fast clip of about 11 percent per year.⁴ That means that companies hear from their lobbyists about new threats while their legal team argues for investment in new processes to avoid legal risk for current laws. In areas like environmental sustainability, race relations, and sexual harassment, this can provide justifications for internal initiatives that are aligned with the priorities of highly-educated employees and activists.

The public relations industry is also growing at 7 percent per year, with growth in areas that combine public political activities with traditional media outreach.⁵ Demands for official corporate reaction to social and political trends can increase due to advice from executives in multiple public-facing departments. Social media and communications professionals hear and transmit early signs of public pressure and seek authorization to respond.

Between government and industry stands a large non-profit workforce. It is now growing faster than the for-profit workforce and exceeds the size of the manufacturing sector.⁶ At its height, 3 million people were employed by associations and the number of non-profit association

establishments rose from 139,000 in 2011 to 157,000 in 2021.⁷ Public relations specialists constitute the largest employment category in the non-profit world. In addition to magnifying social and political calls for change, this left-leaning sector is thus well-connected with trends in traditional and social media and equipped to help attract coverage and promote new cultural norms.

The organizational subsets of corporations most connected to the public, the government, and the non-profit world have transformed internal governance, creating institutions and procedures for hiring, evaluation, and promotion; communications; and management that emulate those of policymaking and advocacy organizations. Nowhere has this been more prominent than in the elevation of sensitivity to social identities and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives associated with race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. This is not only the central concern of modern cultural progressivism, but a necessary priority of any contemporary institution wishing to avoid bad publicity or an internal crisis. It emphasizes not only representation and diversity within organizations but the importance of tolerating social differences and active allyship in promoting associated objectives. This agenda is self-reinforcing not only because organizations' social connections, reputational goals, and metropolitan geographic contexts reinforce demands for action from employees and human resources departments, but also because any failures (or insufficient progress) can be interpreted as evidence of insufficient devotion to the cause of social consciousness—requiring redoubled efforts and the sidelining of dissenters.

Previous generations of American liberals, such as the 1970s-era anti-corporate activists personified by Ralph Nader and reviewed by historian Paul Sabin, were skeptical of the approach favored by today's left. These liberals believed that organizations became less responsive to public interest concerns as they became specialized arenas for policymaking; they distrusted large institutions to implement social change, including government agencies and private companies.⁸ They certainly did not view large media organizations like NBC and the *New York Times*, universities like Harvard or Stanford, or major corporations of any kind as potential allies in a struggle to politically persuade or out-leverage a less enlightened mass public. But today's liberal activists are both more comfortable working within "establishment" networks and more likely to prioritize

cultural over economic objectives. The power of elite institutions to develop and enforce new cultural norms is thus especially attractive to the contemporary liberal project.

Contemporary social entrepreneurship appeals to the same values. Technology entrepreneurs are heavily involved in philanthropy, but they seek to act in the world today rather than secure a legacy in staid institutions. Rather than building libraries or donating to existing charities, they seek innovative models and calculations of investment return, even while framing their efforts as help for the disadvantaged. They promote their personal success and wealth as a sign of managerial and operational skill, promising to apply their unique talents to bettering society.

These trends combine in visible ways among the educated classes, apparent well beyond explicitly political domains like elections or congressional policymaking. Expanded internal human resources departments are empowered to enforce liberal values. New cultural norms, such as transgender restroom access and pronoun identification, can be established and enforced within a few years. Anti-corporate critics from the left or minority group members who are the ostensible beneficiaries of cultural change may perceive little tangible benefit to the implementation of policy reforms by bureaucratic means. But the largely symbolic nature of these changes can itself be a benefit from the perspective of their enforcers. It prizes visibility and emphasizes outward signs of commitment and adherence—easier demands to satisfy than a more complicated institutional restructuring or costly imposition of state regulation.

Even organizations in fields that traditionally attract liberal condemnation, like finance or natural resource extraction, can commit themselves to activities like anti-racism efforts, sexual harassment crackdowns, or the creation of diversity offices without any grand re-evaluation of their purpose. Hiring specialized consultants, mandating employee retraining, and releasing public statements are all core components of normal business processes and more easily accomplished than potential alternative measures. But those same efforts, often viewed as valuable assets for a company's recruitment or retention of female, non-white, and LGBT employees, can also become highly visible public behavior intended to appeal to well-educated observers. The procedures that generate consensus are those imbued with both technocratic and progressive values, demonstrating

corporate adherence to liberal principles while framing them as efforts to efficiently and uniformly achieve “social responsibility.”

We should expect these changes to be especially apparent in the industries that are most heavily dominated by well-educated professionals and cultural liberals, such as technology, media, and non-profits. These industries now require considerable education (with bachelor’s degrees ubiquitous and graduate degrees common) and have been thoroughly engaged by change-makers seeking to transform institutions in the service of both technocratic processes and liberal cultural values. But media and tech companies and non-profits also exert disproportionate social power. They are designed to influence other organizations through information generation, allied social movements, advertising, and professional associations, and they are more oriented toward public relations and advocacy. Even if liberal cultural changes are not fully accepted across the corporate sphere, they still are likely to be perceived as newly dominant because of their prevalence within the industries that attract the most attention from both other corporate actors and the general public. This has implications within and beyond American politics.

The technocratic approaches and liberal values favored by Democrats have moved from government to the internal governance of large institutions, as political industries such as compliance, lobbying, and public relations have expanded. Policies—those adopted by government and outside of it—are increasingly complicated and technical, requiring knowledge of many previous rounds of institution-building and policymaking. New social problems require the application of complex policy tools, often led by research and experts. Addressing climate change and public health crises, for example, require professionalized expert workforces and technical analyses. Even seemingly value-based areas of policymaking such as economic development and racial discrimination increasingly require subject-matter experts and formalized training. In policy debates, this often takes the form of complex proposals from liberals drawing conservative suspicion of expert-led governance. Policy knowledge and evaluation capacity have become increasingly tethered to the Democratic Party, with credibly non-partisan expertise now in short supply. Social movements have also come to reflect the increased incorporation of college graduates into the

liberal coalition by increasingly choosing well-credentialed leadership; justifying their causes by citing intellectual concepts, authorities, and research; and prizing representation in high-status institutions.

In contemporary politics, each political side has developed what Morgan Marietta and David Barker call “dueling facts” or competing perceptions, with neither easy to classify as misinformation.⁹ But only one side looks to intellectual authorities in universities, media, and government to justify its fact base, while the other regards that information infrastructure as a tool of liberal elites. Republicans and Democrats now hold dramatically different views on the role of scientists in public affairs, if not dramatic differences in attitudes toward science itself. There is now a 30-point partisan gap in confidence in the scientific community, up from no difference at all as recently as 2006.¹⁰

But the cultural liberalism of educated Democrats is part of a more general transformation. A study of opinions among professionals and managers versus blue-collar workers finds large liberalization among the former. On almost all survey questions, professionals and managers have become more liberal and have done so more quickly than blue-collar workers. That means they are now more liberal across a variety of indicators. The higher education levels of professionals and managers have helped drive these trends alongside their lower levels of authoritarian parenting values and relative lack of adherence to fundamentalist religious views.¹¹

Across Western democracies, the increasing education divide among voters has been accompanied by increasing educational attainment and an associated class of institutions dominated by the well-educated. That has meant a large increase in non-profits, charities, and professional associations, with a large education gap in civic engagement and organizational memberships.¹² These organizations in turn became more dominated by their well-educated professional communications staff, managers, and consultants.¹³ Even the normally conservative American corporate culture has been transformed by the changing worldview of its leadership ranks.

Progressive Technocracy and Corporate “Responsibility”

Among the most visible changes, the mainstream news media now embodies the ethos of the educated. A community of journalists that share the prevailing cultural attitudes of the well-educated professional class has increasingly applied their concerns about social identity and representation to coverage of politics, society, and the arts, increasingly interpreting ostensibly non-political subjects through an ideological lens.¹⁴ Accusations of bias are countered by citing the authority of academics, writers, and other experts who provide intellectual justification for culturally liberal views.

This trend is most visible in the new breed of online news sites, such as Vox.com. Vox began as a new form of “explainer” journalism, self-consciously seeking an intellectually curious audience and proudly deferential to expert knowledge. It presented more empirical data than other news outlets, but increasingly became overtly ideological on cultural issues. With cultural liberalism in ascendance, Vox (like many other digital ventures appealing to young, educated metropolitans) frequently publishes cultural criticism based in the identity politics of the contemporary left.¹⁵ Some observers have argued that this is part of a broader trend: increasing educational requirements in the media industry have made professional journalists aloof from the viewpoints and backgrounds of larger sections of the mass public.¹⁶

There has also been an increase in media share targeted at lobbyists and political insiders in Washington, state capitals, and online. Because fewer citizens are willing to pay for news but the business and political communities remain hungry for information, more journalists are headed to news organizations that rely on lobbyists, financial leaders, and professionals for revenue. At the major news organizations, meanwhile, the most loyal audience comes from the most politically interested subset of the population. This disproportionate audience and consumer share is bound to impact the content of journalism, the behavior of politicians, and the views of insiders. It likely increases elite bubbles and causes elites to misperceive the relative salience of different political, social, and economic concerns—increasing the voice and perceived importance of the educated and politically interested.¹⁷

Changes in audience and internal composition have especially changed the language used by media organizations around race and social justice concerns. A study of 27 million news articles found that the early 2010s saw a huge rise in the use of nearly all words about prejudice and discrimination.¹⁸ Words like racist, xenophobia, patriarchy, and transphobic all rapidly increased in use. These trends pre-dated Trump, occurred across outlets, and were driven by internal reporter concerns as well as those of the audience.¹⁹

The ascendance of the technology industry in media has accelerated these trends. Although technocracy is somewhat linked with the ethos of Silicon Valley, there are tensions that sometimes make it seem as though they are poles in a conflict. Technology entrepreneurs have a unique political profile: they support liberal redistributive, social, and foreign policies but tend to agree with conservative views on regulation.²⁰ This usually fits well with their economic interests: they support progressive political goals but prefer private sector autonomy. Tech leaders thus dissent from traditional liberal approaches to pursuing economic equality, but they share the vision of a transformed global future brought about by social tolerance and the application of expert analysis.

Companies use "social responsibility" initiatives to proclaim that their objectives extend beyond their own bottom lines to making the world better while also suggesting that this goal can be achieved without direct government intervention. There has been a significant increase in companies claiming to address greater social and environmental needs, issuing guidelines and promotional materials and even making themselves accountable to shareholders on that basis. One study using data on large firms from 1980–2015 found that although CEOs used to be penalized for their financial performance unless they downsized, since the 2000s they have been protected if they pursue social responsibility goals. Researchers say it "provides evidence of the evolution of U.S. firms' governance practices from a shareholder toward stakeholder orientation."²¹

These trends are increasingly visible in many arenas. Corporate public relations and branding initiatives seek credibility from the left side of the political debate. The younger affluent market is the most financially desirable demographic for customers and employees and the most active in holding institutions accountable. In addition to the internal mechanisms of corporate organization

driving these trends, companies are increasingly targeted by social movement activists and even liberal investors from the outside seeking change in private behavior with many of the same strategies and tactics traditionally used to influence government decisions. To the activists, changing corporate behavior can be more direct than trying to win public policy changes.²²

Debates around LGBT rights have increasingly combined corporate and government influence. During Mike Pence's tenure as governor, Indiana sought to allow businesses to deny services for gay marriages. Later in North Carolina, the legislature tried to regulate the use of restrooms by transgender people. In both cases, major companies and universities (including their NCAA sports apparatus) were pressured to intervene by both employees and activists. They threatened to move operations or new developments to other states and forced modification of the applicable laws.

Social movements targeting companies have a long pre-history. Nike is among the most important examples and the pressure began at universities. The company was accused of using sweatshop labor and not monitoring its suppliers. College students occupied university offices, arguing that the university was responsible for the worst conditions because the university partnered with the company to make athletic apparel for university sports teams. Nike eventually became a leader in the industry in supplier monitoring and reporting.

Another route to influence is through the schools that corporate managers attend. In the latter half of the 20th century, business schools were transformed via philanthropic foundation and internal efforts from homes of retired executives to paragons of social science.²³ Most business school professors, especially at the lead institutions from which corporate executives mostly come, are now trained by social science doctorates or business doctorates. Elite law schools have also been transformed into more academic enterprises, with increasing influence from social science and university culture.

Corporations' employees and potential recruits are often elite college graduates if they do not already possess graduate degrees in these fields. Prospective employees have been trained to ask questions about policies, procedures, affinity groups, and social responsibility goals. That provides

more pressure for routinization of formal procedures and rules to respond to calls for social change. The experts, of course, are happy to comply with corporate needs; they see big problems, want to enact rules and start programs to achieve them, and are available as outside consultants for implementation.

Skeptics often question whether proclaimed commitments to social causes truly change corporate decision-making and behavior. But even critics who suspect that social responsibility initiatives are merely window dressing concede that the consultants and corporate officials responsible for creating them are increasingly powerful. If companies think that appearing to serve liberal social goals—whether they actually do or not—improves their public reputation and relationship with employees, it represents a meaningful signal about the changing relationship between corporate America and the world of politics.

These dynamics were front in center following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020. Non-profits and foundations have since become even more strongly engaged in issues of racial equity, not just incorporating them as goals but making them required parts of communications and reporting across previously disparate goal areas. Since Floyd's murder, non-profits have made 53,208 grants totaling \$12.9 billion and 176 pledges totaling \$11.5 billion.²⁴ The wording of non-profit and foundation documents and public statements—which potential grantees read closely and emulate—relies heavily on academic language, even if the trendy newspeak favored by activists and intellectuals does not resemble the speech of the citizens whom they claim to represent.²⁵ A report reviewing racial equity grants found that the grant-making was focused on educational initiatives, rather than power-building.²⁶

America's 50 largest companies and their foundations also committed almost \$50 billion to addressing racial equity following George Floyd's murder, but most of the funding was for loans and investments rather than grants.²⁷ Even though the figures were likely inflated for public impact, the grant pledges to organizations such as the Urban League, the Equal Justice Initiative, the NAACP, and Black Lives Matter groups still represent a large share of corporate foundation investments. The

focus was on public commitment; it did lead to resource expenditures but did not make a large difference to the companies' bottom lines.

The Private Transformation of Civil Rights

This is not a new story. In the long history of racial equality efforts at companies, personnel managers have visibly changed processes but not necessarily reformed their organizations. Firms were willing to acknowledge biases within their own management, implementing diversity training and grievance processes and mandating more compliance paperwork in hiring, promoting, and firing. Courts largely accepted and enforced the new standards, leading other firms to copy the most visible indicators that required the least dramatic restructuring.²⁸

Sociologist Frank Dobbin traced this history in his book *Inventing Equal Opportunity*.²⁹ He finds that personnel experts at major corporations were mainly responsible for putting programs together. Worried about losing contracts and being subject to regulation, they developed plans to keep companies compliant. They worked through professional associations, including the Society for Human Resource Management, and business associations, including the Conference Board. The potential threats emanating from the courts and government regulators became opportunities for personnel professionals to become equal opportunity consultants; each corporate innovation could be justified by theories and evidence from interest groups and academic research. The profession boomed as a result, doubling in size in the 1970s and then doubling again in subsequent decades.

Personnel specialists kept finding new ways to justify their roles as consistent with evolving best practices and responsiveness to regulatory and political threats. The 1960s saw waves of internal discrimination rulemaking and building minority recruitment and training programs. The 1970s saw innovation in performance evaluations and salary scales, which moved decision-making from managers to human resource departments. The 1980s brought a backlash to explicit affirmative action, but it mainly led to a redefinition of programs as “human resources management” and “diversity management.”³⁰ A new focus on gender emerged in the 1990s, including the rise in sexual harassment prevention programs and work-family balance initiatives.

According to Dobbin, later efforts relied less on economists and more on psychological and sociological research, including mentoring programs and networking opportunities targeted at each minority group with internal task forces and committees proliferating. Corporate management became less focused on avoiding government regulation or lawsuits and more concerned with changing employees' internal beliefs and representations. Once each of these programs were set up, they became ends in themselves: each was a sign that a company took the issue seriously, with new offices, roles, and training requirements each coming with defenders who sought to increase their status and resources.

Even critics of corporate implementations of culturally liberal values find that they are mostly rationally responding to a combination of regulatory and legal pressures.³¹ But the sociology and history of business efforts suggest that top-down threats were not the only incentive. Organizations also responded to internal pressures from increasingly educated and professionalized staff, especially those in employee-facing or public-facing components of large companies. These internal changes then led the legal system to pressure other organizations to follow the newly codified mold.

Law professor and sociologist Lauren Edelman describes how courts and organizations responded to this trajectory, finding that courts deferred to the symbolic policies of private organizations, incentivizing more of the same without leading to solutions for discrimination.³² Ambiguous laws, she argues, led to symbolic organizational action that was incentivized by courts, what she calls the “managerialization of civil rights law,” where business values overshadowed legal intent. In sexual harassment law, business procedures similarly became affirmative defenses to avoid legal scrutiny. Both coincided with the professionalism of the human resources department workforce, the rise in management consultants, and the ever-increasing role of compliance professionals and lawyers. More organizations created equal opportunity offices, grievance procedures, and codified rules. Companies found that the presence of these measures bolstered their legal position when facing lawsuits by employees or interest groups.

The rise of business sexual harassment training and adjudication was tied to its ascendance in universities. Shep Melnick finds that the extension of Title IX coincided with a broad expansion of civil rights protection to include racial, ethnic, and language minorities, people with disabilities, women and sexual minorities.³³ According to Melnick, this eventually led to an agenda beyond anti-discrimination, “not just to punish those who engage in misconduct, but to change students’ understanding of what constitutes proper sexual behavior, the right way to think about sex, and even what it means to be male or female.” Eventually this broader agenda, both the expansion of the beneficiary groups and the mind-altering aspirations, influenced the workforce beyond universities and governments.

Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn finds that the rituals and rhetoric of corporate policies on race drew from therapy and self-help culture.³⁴ Its proponents were experts in social science theories and were focused on changing attitudes. After an initial focus on social movement coalition building among activists, experts in race came to dominate. The goals were ambitious but perhaps unachievable, focusing on cultural reeducation but usually manifesting in rituals of compliance with new attitudes. This enhanced racial etiquette, Lasch-Quinn finds, gives the uninitiated a sense that cross-racial interaction is a minefield. But by emphasizing psychological motivations, it distracts from political work designed to influence public policy. The most visible parts of this were group training requirements, initially around sensitivity based on the human potential movement and self-help recovery practices. For minorities, multicultural education was also promoted as a boost to self-esteem and consciousness-raising. By 1992, 65 percent of major companies had adopted diversity training, mostly intended to increase employee sensitivity through mandated workshops.

Sociologist Ellen Berrey finds that the transformation from civil rights and affirmative action to emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion was part of a broader shift in liberal racial politics from material to symbolic demands.³⁵ In this realm, the imagery and rhetoric of the activists and experts could be fused with the practices of public relations and human resources departments. Her case study of the Starr corporation shows that needs for inclusion were treated like other corporate responsibilities—with support groups, professional development opportunities, and visible efforts to

break the highest ceilings without accompanying efforts at the bottom of the hierarchy. Berrey finds that these changes were neither top-down nor bottom-up, but instead came from mid-level organizational change accompanied by symbolic shifts: “the most clear-cut sign of social change is the development of a new vocabulary.”³⁶

Today, the use of employers to promote and enforce progressive racial and gender norms is commonplace. A 2019 survey found that 44 percent of Americans had received diversity training in their workplace and 42 percent had undergone sexual harassment training. Most reported being happy with or indifferent to these sessions.³⁷ But conservatives remain suspicious that liberal professionals are using their institutional authority to promote or enforce cultural ideas with which they disagree—a belief that has fueled the recent efforts by Republican state legislators to ban the teaching of critical race theory and discussion of gender identity in public schools. And this populist cultural backlash is no longer limited to long-standing conservative targets of government bureaucracies and educational systems; it has expanded to aim its attacks at corporate America as well.

The Republican Backlash Arrives

On February 22, 2022, Florida senator Rick Scott, the chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, released an 11-point plan titled “Rescue America” that was intended to serve as his party’s collective platform in the fall midterm elections. “Dear fellow Americans,” Scott wrote in the plan’s introductory letter, “The militant left now controls the entire federal government, the news media, academia, Hollywood, and most corporate boardrooms—but they want more. . . . Among the things they plan to change or destroy are: American history, patriotism, border security, the nuclear family, gender, traditional morality, capitalism, fiscal responsibility, opportunity, rugged individualism, Judeo-Christian values, dissent, free speech, color blindness, law enforcement, religious liberty, parental involvement in public schools, and private ownership of firearms. Is this the beginning of the end of America? Only if we allow it to be.”³⁸

Conservatives have long attacked government, mainstream media, and the educational system for supposedly being dominated by ideological opponents insistent on using their cultural power to “change or destroy” the nation. But Scott’s letter added a new institutional threat—the corporate sector—to this list of otherwise familiar perceived enemies of the Republican Party. A Republican congressional leader framing an upcoming electoral contest as a national referendum on the unacceptable political predispositions of the nation’s top corporate executives seems to represent proof that something has changed within the traditional party of business.

But what has caused this change? The populist trend within the mass Republican Party, represented first by the rise of the Tea Party movement during the presidency of Barack Obama and then by the election of Donald Trump as Obama’s successor, initially appeared to represent an abandonment of the corporate-friendly economic approach historically favored by Republican leaders. Even after his election, Trump continued to portray himself as a hard-headed foe of corporate outsourcing, taking credit for saving American jobs at a Carrier Air Conditioning factory in Indianapolis that had previously announced plans to move some of its operations to Mexico.³⁹

However, the actual economic policies pursued by Republican officeholders during the party’s populist phase have not reflected a turn against the usual business-favored domestic agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, and restrictions on organized labor. The biggest legislative accomplishment of the Trump presidency, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, delivered most of its benefits to corporations and high-income individuals, and was strongly supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other traditional advocates of business interests. Trump’s frequent public expressions of protectionist and anti-globalization sentiment—such as his repeated vow to repeal the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—represented a notable rhetorical shift from previous Republican leaders. But Trump approved multiple international trade agreements while president, including a successor to NAFTA negotiated with Canada and Mexico that did not

substantially differ from its predecessor. And even Trump's rhetoric shifted over the course of his term in office, evolving into a more conventionally conservative message on economic issues that framed Republican support for business interests as leading to higher employment and growth rates while attacking his Democratic opponents as favoring "radical socialism and the destruction of the American dream."⁴⁰

But anti-corporate populism on the right survived Trump's gradual acceptance of conservative economic views by evolving into a rejection of the culturally progressive ethos that Republicans increasingly—and, as we have seen, with some reason—associate with big business. Media/entertainment and technology companies, representing two of the most successful and powerful industries within corporate America today, have become especially frequent targets of attack by Republican politicians and conservative opinion leaders in recent years. Republican antipathy toward Hollywood is not new, but Silicon Valley has now joined it as a magnet of consistent conservative suspicion. Critical messages from Republican leaders and party-aligned media sources have had a measurable effect on the attitudes of Republican voters toward big business in general, the tech sector in particular, and specific companies deemed hostile to the conservative cause.

As major corporations have taken public positions on cultural issues that place them in conflict with the conservative movement, even traditional defenders of business interests within the Republican Party have expressed dissatisfaction. After Trump and many of his supporters claimed the 2020 election results in Georgia were rigged after he narrowly lost the state to Joe Biden, Georgia Republicans enacted a state law that tightened restrictions on voting practices over the well-publicized objections of liberal activists accusing them of racial discrimination. Several major Georgia-based companies like Coca-Cola and Delta Air Lines publicly opposed the law, while Major League Baseball reacted to its passage by abruptly relocating the July 2021 All-Star Game from

Atlanta to Denver. In response, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell criticized "parts of the private sector" for "behaving like a woke parallel government" by becoming involved in national debates over controversial issues.⁴¹ "My warning, if you will, to corporate America is to stay out of politics," McConnell told reporters in April 2021. "It's not what you're designed for. And don't be intimidated by the left into taking up causes that put you right in the middle of America's greatest political debates. . . . Republicans drink Coca-Cola too, and we fly . . . [and the All-Star Game relocation is] irritating one whole hell of a lot of Republican fans." McConnell suggested that corporate entities should participate politically not by taking public positions but instead by making financial contributions.⁴²

Responses by other Republican leaders have extended beyond mere verbal opposition. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida introduced the Mind Your Own Business Act in September 2021, which would give shareholders the right to sue corporate directors for breach of fiduciary duty "if a company takes an action on a primarily non-pecuniary basis in response to [a] state law, boycotts a class of persons or industry on a primarily non-pecuniary basis, or uses primarily non-pecuniary public reasoning for an action" including the need to defend the company's media image or the morale of its employees—two frequent justifications for corporate endorsements of culturally progressive causes. Rubio promoted the legislation as a way for "patriotic Americans" to "fight back against the growing tyranny of the woke elites running corporate America . . . [and] pushing socially destructive, far left policies like boycotts and cancel crusades."⁴³

This growing dissatisfaction with traditional business allies has especially affected the Republican Party's relationship with the technology industry, now one of corporate America's most powerful and successful sectors (as of early 2022, just five major tech companies—Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Facebook—collectively represented over one-fifth of the total market capitalization of the companies in the Standard & Poor 500 index).⁴⁴ The roster of Republican

grievances with “Big Tech” extends beyond the culturally liberal ethos that naturally dominates an industry led by a class of young, multicultural, well-educated creative professionals based in the metropolitan coastal West. Republicans commonly claim that tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter intentionally suppress conservative material by making it less visible on their platforms or even banning it entirely in the name of combating “disinformation,” and that these companies’ dominant market positions give their moderation decisions massive influence over the digital information universe. “Big Tech platforms like Twitter and Facebook . . . no longer operate as public squares—they do not promote the battle of ideas,” argued Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, ranking member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, at a subcommittee hearing in December 2021. “They actively work against it. They shut down free speech and censor any viewpoint that does not fit the liberal ideology.”⁴⁵

Republicans’ dissatisfaction with the tech industry, especially social media platforms accused of anti-conservative bias, further intensified after Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (a subsidiary of Google) all imposed indefinite bans on outgoing president Trump’s official accounts after the riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Republican senator Josh Hawley of Missouri, the author of a book entitled *The Tyranny of Big Tech*, argued that the federal government should use its antitrust authority to break up the tech companies with the largest market shares in response to their perceived promotion of liberal views. “I think one of the reasons that the woke mentality and the cancel culture that it helps feed . . . is so troubling is because of the power that these companies have,” Hawley told the *Washington Examiner*. “The monopoly status of these companies makes their political interventions much more salient and much more troubling.”⁴⁶

Congressional Republicans have offered other legislative responses to the tech industry’s supposedly unfair practices. A package of proposals introduced by McMorris Rodgers and her House colleagues in mid-2021 would, among other things, require social media companies to

regularly disclose their content moderation policies; report the relative frequency of liberal and conservative content removed from their platforms; and repeal legal protection for companies that ban or restrict users based on race, gender, or political affiliation.⁴⁷ Similar bills have been introduced by Republican state legislators in more than 20 states.⁴⁸

Republican voters have responded to critical messages from their party leaders by expressing more negative evaluations of corporations and the tech sector. In 2021, the Gallup Organization found that only 20 percent of Republican identifiers had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in big business, compared to 37 percent who had “very little” or “no” confidence. This net difference of –17 percentage points represented the lowest collective confidence level among Republicans since Gallup began asking the question in 1973 and approached the –23 net difference among the traditionally business-skeptical Democrats.⁴⁹

Other survey results show a similarly steep decline in Republicans’ favorability towards corporate America over the past few years. According to the Pew Research Center, the proportion of Republicans agreeing that “large corporations have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country” decreased from 54 percent to 30 percent between 2019 and 2021, falling to a level comparable with Democrats (who slightly increased their positive views of corporations over the same period, from 23 percent to 28 percent).⁵⁰

Pew also asked Americans in June 2020, amidst the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd’s killing by a Minneapolis police officer the previous month, whether “it is important for companies and organizations to make public statements about political or social issues.” Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, 71 percent of respondents agreed that such behavior was “very” or “somewhat” important, compared to 29 percent who responded that it was “not too” or “not at all” important. But 69 percent of

Republicans and Republican-leaning independents viewed these expressions of corporate position-taking as unimportant while only 31 percent considered them important.⁵¹

In a 2021 survey conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of the Public Affairs Council, Democrats were slightly more likely to report that they trusted political information they receive from businesses (51 percent to 44 percent) and to believe that major companies do a good or excellent job of supporting democracy (39 percent to 33 percent). And Democrats were much more willing than Republicans to support major companies' promotion of the COVID-19 vaccine (78 percent to 42 percent) and opposition to racism (65 percent to 28 percent).⁵²

As this last result suggests, recent public expressions of sympathy with liberal civil rights activists may contribute to corporate America's souring reputation among Republicans. Conflict over this issue has become especially acute in the world of professional sports. Views of the popular sports network ESPN became polarized by party after 2017, when several of its on-camera employees expressed public criticism of Donald Trump's racial views—a development that provoked a stream of attacks on ESPN from Fox News Channel hosts and other conservative opinion leaders.⁵³ When Nike introduced an advertising campaign in 2018 featuring Colin Kaepernick, an ex-NFL quarterback famous for protesting police violence against black citizens by kneeling during performances of the national anthem, conservative social media users filmed themselves burning or destroying the company's apparel while conservative local officials and college administrators attempted to ban Nike products from their facilities.⁵⁴ After Nike abandoned plans to release a sneaker model with the original, 13-star U.S. flag pictured on the heel, Republican governor Doug Ducey of Arizona announced plans to cancel a state economic incentive program awarded to the company while Republican senator Ted Cruz of Texas asked, "Can anyone recommend a sneaker co[mpany] that's not so woke?" and Hawley accused it of being "un-American, pure and simple."⁵⁵

The tech industry has also become a polarizing subject among the American public. A 2015 Pew survey found members of both parties to be equally likely to perceive technology companies favorably, with 74 percent of Democrats and 72 percent of Republicans viewing them as having a positive effect on the nation. But by 2021, a significant partisan gap had emerged: the share of Democrats with a favorable evaluation of tech companies had declined modestly to 63 percent, while the share of Republicans in agreement had fallen dramatically to just 38 percent.⁵⁶ That same year, 33 percent of Democrats surveyed by Gallup expressed a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in large technology companies, compared to 23 percent with “very little” or “no” confidence. For Republicans, however, views of tech companies have become quite dim: just 17 percent of Republican identifiers reported a high level of confidence and 46 percent expressed little or no confidence.⁵⁷ And as with the media industry, conservatives have attempted to compensate for perceived hostile bias among “mainstream” outlets by founding or promoting their own friendlier alternatives—such as the social media platforms Gab, Gettr, and Truth Social.

The Trump presidency put social media companies in an especially difficult political position. Trump’s own unprecedented use of his personal social media accounts to communicate with voters and make policy or personnel announcements—sometimes to the surprise of his advisors and subordinates—was a memorable attribute of his tenure in office that received substantial journalistic attention. In addition, the belief that Trump’s 2016 election had been engineered by rogue actors, including figures working on behalf of the Russian government, via the creation and promotion of manipulative social media content achieved wide acceptance among Trump’s critics in the Democratic Party and mainstream media. Tech industry executives faced constant arguments that their companies were responsible for Trump’s ascent and had become conduits for the spread of both factual misinformation and racist sentiments. Yet they knew that any

attempt to introduce new constraints on either Trump's online behavior or the propagation of pro-Trump content would invite even more accusations of bias from Republican leaders.

The Capitol riot of January 6, 2021 increased the pressure on corporate America to disavow Trumpism in the name of protecting American democracy. Major social media platforms imposed an open-ended suspension on Trump, a decision made easier by the fact that he had only two more weeks in office at the time. The executives of other prominent companies also released public statements denouncing the riot, including the CEOs of IBM, JPMorgan, Citibank, Goldman Sachs, and Johnson & Johnson.⁵⁸ At least 79 corporations pledged to withhold or re-evaluate PAC support for the Republican members of Congress who had voted against certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory, including AT&T, Comcast, Walmart, Verizon, General Electric, Visa, Intel, Coca-Cola, UPS, Walgreens, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and the major defense contractors Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Northrop Grumman.⁵⁹ But as the controversy over the riot and Republican votes against certification faded in subsequent months, many of these companies' corporate PACs quietly resumed their previous patterns of donation—to the exasperation of liberal watchdog groups like Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.⁶⁰

Both the initial public announcements condemning the events of January 6 and the subsequent resumption of financial support for the Trump-aligned politicians who, like the rioters, questioned the legitimacy of Biden's election are telling reflections of the increasingly complex relationship between corporate America and the Republican Party. From the perspective of big business, open association with culturally conservative causes and populist rebellions against the democratic electoral system has become a reputational danger even as both phenomena are growing in strength within Republican politics. At the same time, the GOP's continued advocacy of business-friendly economic policies (at a time when Democrats are moving leftward on domestic affairs) and its ongoing proximity to power in an age of persistent national parity between the parties both

strongly encourage corporate executives to maintain positive relationships with Republican officials, including financial support for incumbent officeholders and party committees. And just as big business faces an incentive to publicly distance itself from conservative populism while continuing to fund the campaigns of some of its most prominent advocates, Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell can likewise court their populist base by attacking corporate cultural progressivism even as they continue to enthusiastically solicit corporate PAC contributions.

Conclusion: A Future of Woke Capitalism?

In a February 2018 piece entitled “The Rise of Woke Capital,” *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat argued that American corporations’ increasingly prominent advocacy of socially liberal causes was a clever political maneuver designed to blunt criticism of their ruthless economic objectives. “Corporate activism on social issues . . . [exists] to justify the ways of C.E.O.s to cultural power brokers, so that those same power brokers will leave them alone . . . in realms that matter more to the corporate bottom line,” Douthat argued, describing an arrangement in which “a certain kind of virtue-signaling on progressive social causes, a certain degree of performative wokeness, is offered to liberalism and the activist left pre-emptively, in the hopes that having corporate America take their side in the culture wars will blunt efforts to tax or regulate our new monopolies too heavily.” As a committed social conservative who is also skeptical of untrammled market capitalism, Douthat took an understandably cynical view of this development. To him, “corporate interests” and the “professional classes” had engineered a “win-win scenario” in which they could count on the leaders of both parties to protect their economic advantages while becoming drawn into a much less threatening set of battles over cultural status and symbolism.⁶¹

But another plausible interpretation is that they are in a bind. Major companies have increasingly faced demands from employees and customers for a clear commitment to the values of

social liberalism that can only be satisfied by risking the alienation of their traditional Republican allies, who have begun to suggest that the regulatory power of the state should be mobilized in response to this unwelcome development. Moreover, corporate “wokeness” has not succeeded in defusing criticism from an ideological left that remains concerned about economic inequality and a Democratic Party that has moved away from its 1990s-era deference to the wisdom of the markets and the limits of governmental capacity. Culture wars are not necessarily good for business.

We suspect that the truth is more complicated than either side of this argument, and that—as is usual in American politics—there are no permanent winners. Yet amidst a proliferation of partial victories and tradeoffs, the clearest visible trend across the American institutional landscape is the growing rise of culturally progressive technocracy. Regardless of which party controls the White House or other electoral offices, the stratum of well-educated and socially “enlightened” professionals has continued to accrue increasing social power. Even as the Republican Party, in its ostensibly populist phase, continues to espouse the economically conservative policy agenda preferred by corporate America, major companies have demonstrated that they perceive considerable internal and external pressure to take public positions on behalf of progressive causes.

Some liberals may question the sincerity of investment bank executives showing their commitment to “social justice” by kneeling à la Colin Kaepernick, or may dismiss such stunts as mere empty symbolism.⁶² But many others demand these public demonstrations of adherence as valuable expressions of proper values. In an age dominated by social media, symbolic gestures are often treated as holding considerable power by supporters and opponents alike. And as Republican officeholders continue to pursue conservative policies from absentee ballot restrictions to abortion bans to anti-LGBT-education laws, corporate giants have faced intense pressure to use their platforms to register their opposition, often finding themselves enmeshed in partisan culture-war conflicts even when they wished to remain uninvolved.⁶³ The political and cultural battles that

continue to extend into nearly every corner of American life have not spared the corporate sector or any other power center in society, and an alliance between big business and the Republican Party that has previously represented one of the oldest and closest friendships in American politics must now cope with a strange new mutual distance.

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