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OPINION

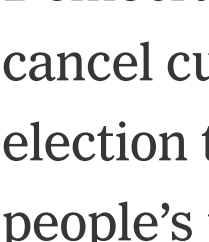
# The Greatest Cancel Culture Warrior in America Is Donald Trump

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Illustration by George Douglas; source photograph by Bettmann/Getty Images

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By **David French**  
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There is something I want to get off my chest.

In the days since the election, I've read thousands of words of Democratic introspection. This was the election that repudiated cancel culture, campus protests and identity politics. This was the election that transformed the debate about everything from trans people's participation in sports to the use of niche ideological words like "Latinx."

According to this commentary, the lesson is clear: Democratic identity politics and the [Democratic Party's move to the left](#) cost the party working-class voters and alienated the great American middle. If Democrats want to win again, they have to shed their ideological baggage, meet American voters where they are and stop scolding them when they're puzzled by the ever-shifting ideological demands (and language policing) of the very online left.

I agree with much of this. Cancel culture ([properly defined](#)) is toxic. White Democrats, in particular, veered [to the left](#) of Black Democrats. There has been an intense amount of intolerance in far-left spaces, and not just on campuses. There is a need for a reckoning.

But let's be very clear about the course of this election. One candidate leaned away from the extremism of her base, and she lost. The other candidate leaned into the worst excesses of his movement, and he won.

Kamala Harris spent her short campaign running away from the excesses of the left. She abandoned her most left-wing positions. She wasn't using left-wing buzzwords, and rather than cancel ideological opposition, she tried to create the largest possible tent, stretching from Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger.

Donald Trump's campaign, by contrast, reveled in its most vicious language. It's not necessary to recount every outrage, but we can't forget that Trump and his allies spent days falsely accusing Haitian migrants of eating ducks and pets. My news colleagues accurately described Trump's election-closing Madison Square Garden rally as a "[carnival of grievances, misogyny and racism](#)."

MAGA's problems extend well beyond the campaign. In fact, every dysfunction you've seen on the far left has emerged on the far right, and the far right hasn't been repudiated; it's been empowered. Dissenting Americans should brace themselves for an assault on free speech, extreme intolerance and a vicious form of cancel culture that includes an avalanche of threats and intimidation.

And make no mistake, the most intolerant campus activists in America could take notes from MAGA. In the past eight years, we've seen MAGA threaten and intimidate [election workers](#) and [school board members](#). We've seen MAGA engage in its [own forms of cancel culture](#). It targets critics for termination and public humiliation, and when red America became Trumpified, it embarked on crackdown after crackdown on free speech.

In Florida, for example, Ron DeSantis's administration enacted unconstitutional limitations on the [free speech of social media companies, university professors and private corporations](#). Across the United States, activists initiated a wave of efforts to [remove books from school libraries](#). So-called anti-critical-race-theory bills — which often seek to ban instruction in a set of purportedly divisive concepts regarding race — [proliferated in red states](#), with some so poorly written that teachers would even quote Martin Luther King Jr. [at their own risk](#).

In my home county in Tennessee, Moms for Liberty activists even used the state's anti-critical-race-theory law as a pretext for (unsuccessfully) attempting to [ban the book "Ruby Bridges Goes to School"](#) from the elementary school curriculum. Bridges was the 6-year-old Black girl who desegregated New Orleans public schools, and her courage is memorialized in Norman Rockwell's famous painting "[The Problem We All Live With](#)," which shows her walking to school, flanked by U.S. marshals, with a racial slur scrawled across a wall.

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MAGA hostility to L.G.B.T.Q. expression culminated in a series of bills aimed at [drag queens](#) and [L.G.B.T.Q.-related speech in public schools](#).

At the height of the pandemic, even speech in support of Covid vaccines could carry a cost. My friend Dan Darling was [fired from a senior position at National Religious Broadcasters](#), a powerful advocacy group for Christian media, after he went on "Morning Joe" and respectfully urged Christians to get vaccinated against Covid.

That's not all. If you're alarmed by social media mobs and vicious online rhetoric, MAGA perfected the art of calling critics of its speech codes [groomers](#) and implying they're [pro-pedophile](#).

And while MAGA mocked the term "Latinx" as a silly and offensive virtue signal, it cheered as Trump declared that the Biden administration's acceptance of immigrants was "[poisoning the blood](#)" of our country. I dislike the term "Latinx," as do a vast majority of Latinos, but it's far less offensive or empirically disgusting than the idea that people entering the country seeking a better life were somehow poisoning our blood.

There are strange, bespoke ideologies within the left, but the right more than holds its own in that category, too. From Tucker Carlson's documentary on masculinity that featured heroic images of [testicle tanning](#) to the bizarre Christian nationalists who want to [repeal the 19th Amendment](#) (which granted women the right to vote) to the junk science of [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) and [Dr. Oz](#), the right has become the home for multiple strands of conspiracy quackery.

It's important to chronicle MAGA's excesses, but it's also important to understand why its intolerance and bizarre ideas weren't ballot box poison. If Americans hate intolerance and bullying, why did a critical mass of Americans vote against the party that was moving away from its extremes?

I have a few theories:

First, don't make this too complicated. This election was mainly about prices and the border. Discussions of wokeness and cancel culture are more or less beside the point. They're topics more for the engaged elite and not for the mass of Americans who voted on Nov. 5.

[I largely agree](#) with this analysis when it comes to explaining the election outcome, but not when it comes to explaining the emerging realignment of the parties. I agree with my colleague Ezra Klein, [who posted on X](#): "Friends don't let friends debate the future of the Democratic Party without being clear on whether they're debating the 2024 election or the 2016-2024 shifts in the electorate. The former you can explain with inflation. The latter you can't."

At the same time, it's been fascinating to watch Republicans gain strength even as they've driven down their own ideological and cultural cul-de-sacs.

Second, if it's not just the economy, then is it also civic ignorance? Do voters even know how strange and intolerant parts of the right have become? One of the most fascinating elements of the election was the stark information divide.

According to a poll from the left-leaning group [Data for Progress](#), Harris won among the voters who said they paid attention to the news "a great deal" or "a lot," while Trump won by decisive margins among those who paid attention "a moderate amount," "a little" or "not at all." Trump won those who don't pay attention at all by 51 to 32.

[An April NBC News poll](#) (conducted before President Biden dropped out of the race) showed that Biden was the choice for people who get their news from newspapers by 70 to 21. Trump was winning those who don't follow political news 53 to 27. You can't vote against actions or ideas that you don't know a thing about.

Third — and most ominously — Americans are turning their backs on liberty, tolerance and decency. America possesses a unique culture, but it does not possess a unique people. We're prone to the same sins and flaws as the people of any other nation, and protecting the rights and dignity of our opponents is just not something that comes naturally to us. It's a learned behavior, modeled by leaders, and when leaders stop modeling tolerance and decency, Americans are prone to backslide to fear and animosity.

The founders understood this reality clearly. That's why they kept concentrated power out of the hands of a single person and created separate branches of government. That's why they removed civil liberties from majoritarian control through the Bill of Rights. But throughout history, we've been tempted to reject their wisdom, blow through constitutional safeguards and suppress the freedoms of people we despise.

In this analysis, Trump's fury and MAGA's intolerance are assets, but only if they're targeting the right people. Americans don't hate cancel culture in the abstract; they hate being canceled. At the same time, all too many of us are more than happy to cancel others, especially if we deem their ideas dangerous or immoral.

American free speech jurisprudence and modern American free speech culture are relatively recent developments. [It wasn't until 1925](#) that the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment limited the actions of state and local governments. Modern free speech jurisprudence began to emerge only [during the civil rights movement](#) and the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s (a fact the left often forgets, to its own detriment).

In short, Americans have a long history of actually liking censorship, and it requires constant public objection to their own the value of protecting the speech of their opponents. If only one party — or neither party — takes up that mantle, we can't expect Americans to innately seek tolerance.

## Some other things I did

[My Sunday column](#) took a look at Trump's selections of Matt Gaetz for attorney general, Pete Hegseth for secretary of defense, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for secretary of health and human services and Tulsi Gabbard for director of national intelligence and asked the question: Is Trump already planting the seeds of his own failure?

The corrupt, incompetent and extremist men and women he's appointing to many of the most critical posts in his cabinet are direct threats to the well-being of the country, but they're also political threats to Trump and to his populist allies.

To understand why, it's important to remember a cardinal reality about Trump's political career. He has now won two general elections when he was the only alternative to an unsatisfactory status quo, and he lost the one when he was the unsatisfactory status quo. If he can't govern well, his populist partisan realignment will come apart before it can truly begin.

[On Friday](#), I joined my colleague Ross Douthat on "Matter of Opinion," also to discuss Trump's cabinet picks. Gaetz, in particular, puts Senate Republicans in a bind:

Ross, this is going to be a big test for Senate Republicans. The question is: How much are they going to view themselves as Team Trump versus how much are they going to adopt the role envisioned for them in the process by the founders as an independent check on Trump? And that's the question. And right now, I'm not that optimistic that they're going to act as a check, as opposed to act as team members.

And so the other thing that I want to mention about him, just real briefly: There's no indication from Matt Gaetz's career that he is just even competent enough to run an organization like this. One of the reasons the American people are so negative about American institutions is because of a sheer lack of competence that is consistently displayed in American institutions.

And the last name that I would think of to, say, right the ship on a massive, complex organization, to just make it competent and good at its job, that last name that comes to my mind is Matt Gaetz.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is "[Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation](#)." You can follow him on Threads (@[davidfrenchjag](#)).

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