

## **Cancel Culture Today, Intolerance Tomorrow**

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The year 2020 marked a turning point in American history. Tremendous hardship stemming from a world-wide health crisis and economic disintegration came tumbling down on families, businesses, lifestyles, health, and politics across the world unlike the twenty-first century had ever seen. In the United States, the political landscape was put under a microscope as the two-party system reached extreme levels of division that our founders [warned](#) of. Since the 2020 election cycle, notions of left and right have infiltrated once apathetic and non-partisan platforms such as teenage social media accounts or large-scale corporate businesses. Relationships have been driven apart at an unprecedented rate these past few years, and the widespread merciless dissension that followed the controversial 2016 and 2020 elections has concocted a cancel culture that society exists in today.

National sentiment toward acceptance and tolerance has reached an all-time [low](#). This newly established cancel culture, "the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views or actions" ([Dictionary.com](#)), has tarnished the idea of [free speech](#) and attacked society at the levels of public discourse, social media, education, and journalism. It has turned the idea of having a differing opinion into a sin rather than an opportunity to learn. As our society continues to recover from transgressions of the past, embracing where we have come from instead of ignoring or refusing to reference the mistakes of our predecessors could be the driving force behind a more educated and sympathetic future. The narrative of "proper" attitudes and behaviors is being written from the top down by relentless political leaders without allowing for impressionable minds to stray from the norm. This is causing valuable diverse perspectives to be squashed and provocative thinking that challenges and sparks meaningful debate to be lost. Cancel culture has bred a dangerous era of groupthink and is sending our nation down an alarming trajectory of communism and intolerance.

According to [George Washington](#), political parties "may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion" (1796). While some would argue that this nation has not seen this type of extreme impropriety through the powers-that-be, the repercussions of untoward extremism by American leaders are being demonstrated through the people. Young and old, American citizens have been more vocal and adamant about their political stances due to the ongoing list of hot topics that have aggressively surfaced this decade such as government overreach, health care reform, racial disparity, gun ownership rights, and personal freedom infringements. The digital age has enabled these sentiments to take root in the forms of rapid-dispersion online petitions, forums, and posts, while still drawing on physical methods of picketing, rioting, and protesting.

Because of the Covid-19-induced isolated nature of these past two years, more and more people have been forced to take to online platforms to communicate and share thoughts or opinions. Thus, social media has skyrocketed as a ground for polarized media.

Within the media there are certain stimuli that act as repulsion or pull factors toward an attitude. According to an article published by [The Wall Street Journal](#), "as long as Americans have the freedom to choose outlets that support their own views while exposing them to alternative viewpoints in ways that primarily lead to repulsion, the result will be the polarization we see today..." Tailored and personalized feeds have allowed social media users to deem their preferences over what information they are willing to see and what information they refuse. In a modern society infused with cancel culture, it takes a simple click of a button to disregard repulsion (opposing viewpoints), nix a long-time friendship, and evade any sentiments that do not align with the user's attitudes. Through the ease in which users can choose which perspectives they want to be exposed to, people are becoming less willing to empathize with and understand conflicting beliefs

Media moguls are driving [confirmation bias](#) by easing the extent to which feeds can be tailored. Not only do they facilitate censorship, but they encourage it and take part in it themselves. As private companies, social media sites like Facebook (Instagram), Google (YouTube), and Twitter have absolute [control](#) over what political advertisements get posted, how often they show up in any given feed, what notifications are sent out, and who sees them. While these platforms are intended to be non-partisan as they are founded in the Constitutional right of freedom of speech and expression, private companies are under no obligation to the First Amendment, and dip into the political sphere by removing posts, blocking content, reporting users, and even taking unprecedented actions such as suspending a sitting president's social media account: stripping away one of the most accessible ways a president can exist as a "man of the people" and communicate most effectively and quickly with an entire nation of constituents.

As the current Administration continues to practice government overreach such as instituting vaccine [mandates](#) and introducing [legislation](#) to have easy access to bank account records, it is easy to imagine what could result if this cancel culture continues to permeate society and politics. The communist undertones of these actions are pushing a very dangerous needle as the central government is gaining increasing control over American citizens. Despite our nation being built on dissenting opinions, today, "political correctness" is more important if you want to stay within the bounds of what the government and more and more private companies will allow. Cancel culture is an emblem of the naivety of the emerging generation as it is allowing others to strip away the power of their voice and opinion. Our country would not be what it is today if our founders were "yes men and women" more concerned with being politically correct than exercising their democracy-lended liberation.

Similar to George Washington's earlier presage, [John Adams](#) spoke of what a great threat polarized parties and extremist ideas could be to the nation: "There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our constitution" (1789). As candidates in the 2020 presidential election tended to capitalize on extreme viewpoints and target polarized voters instead of moderates, Adams' concern came to light more obviously than ever. This election cycle saw the candidates heightened to the level of deities in the eyes of some respective followers. In the words of Leonard Pitts Jr., candidates over the last two elections had "not voters, but believers, receive[d] not

support, but faith" (Kelley 1). Supporters were quick to take to the pulpit to express the vital need to vote either red or blue in order to preserve essential values and ideals that are necessary, in their opinion, to save the nation and humanity as a whole. Because of this, people, especially young adults, destroyed relationships, cut off family members, removed life-long friends from their online presence, and spewed hate both out loud and online for those who dared disagree with what they believed.

With the future of the Covid-19 pandemic hanging in the balance, the sense of a life-or-death situation hung over the heads of the voters, furthering the intensity of the 2020 election. A comment that frequently surfaced through discussions, posts, and advertisements all around the nation was the plea to vote in order to effect change. Whether it was due to celebrity endorsements, non-partisan billboards, a sticker with the words "go vote," or a sense of civic responsibility, approximately 66.2% of the eligible voting population cast a ballot for either republican incumbent Donald Trump, democratic former vice-president Joe Biden, or independent write ins: a record number for this century. The absolute need to vote that was emphasized in this election can be primarily attributed to the idea that each party believed that losing the office would devastate their plans for how the nation should be run. As the election neared, "roughly eight-in-ten registered voters in both camps said their differences with the other side were about core American values, and roughly nine-in-ten – again in both camps – worried that a victory by the other would lead to 'lasting harm.'" As the stakes continued to be exaggerated and polarized, American citizens made their political stances known to those around more than ever them and an array of offensive insults were thrown across both party lines toward peers and fellow citizens whose views did not align.

As the isolation of each party's affiliates increased, Pew Research Center conducted a survey asking U.S. registered voters whose party their close friends support. The research found that Biden voters reported having 'just a few' or no close friends at all that support Trump. While some people encountered hurling insults such as homophobe (in reference to gay rights), murderer (in reference to abortion), racist (in reference to the Black Lives Matter and Subsequent Blue Lives Matter groups), Nazi and misogynist (in reference to being a Trump supporter), or communist, socialist, and the newly coined phrase "libtard" (in reference to being a Biden supporter), others said goodbye to relationships of best friends, parents, siblings, and coworkers due to the differences in political ideology revealed during this cycle. These people "are among the many Americans for whom political rifts have deepened. It's one thing to disagree about something such as tax policy, they said. But they see their differences now as ones of basic morality, core values and character, and that cannot be overlooked" (Smith). This is not a phenomenon that is associated with just one side of the political spectrum. Voters on both sides are disavowing individuals who don't share their same opinion, and people are impulsively cutting off those who could offer them a new perspective and mindset that has led to this melting pot of America.

In accordance with the life-or-death essence that has surrounded these past two years, another consideration that has been especially important for the political spectrum is the economy. As the pandemic has lasted much longer and hit much harder than anyone anticipated, the economy has taken a strong hit as people have been left unemployed, businesses have been forced to close, and people have been asked, and sometimes

mandated, to stay at home and away from spending money to stimulate the economy. Because Donald Trump's reputation in office proved him capable of keeping the economy afloat, some people found hope in trusting Trump as they believed their livelihoods were entirely dependent on him. Meanwhile, other people lost hope in the sitting president as they lost loved ones and close relatives to the virus and desired a change in leadership to tackle the future of the pandemic. Both scenarios (some constituents fearing a change in leadership and some constituents yearning for a change in leadership) led to very adamant supporters of either candidate, neither willing to consider a future where the other side could offer stimulating insight and valuable outlook.

As a college student at the height of the digital age, enduring an era of intensified stakes due to a pandemic and suffering economy, I have experienced first-hand how these tumultuous years have affected American society, especially the American youth. Views and political ideals that have long differed between friends, between family members, between coworkers, between social media followers, etc. have pushed these relationships so far apart that they are no longer willing to coexist like they have in the past. The polarized partisanship that has ensued in Washington, exhibited by numerous instances of deadlock and refusal to compromise and cooperate, has not only trickled down to state governments, but local people all across the nation in populous and small towns alike. The technological globalization of the 2000s has furthered the agenda of bringing the world closer together, but 2020 and beyond has shown that social media is an agent of tearing people apart as well.

While it is a remarkable notion that American citizens of all ages are embracing the First Amendment right of free speech granted by the Constitution, it is a devastating notion that so many people are willing to censor themselves in order to fit in and mold to the crowd. As we continue to let this censorship threaten the democratic ideals our country was built on, we step closer and closer to a communist society where the young people—who are most favorably and vehemently pushing this agenda—are not being educated about thoroughly enough. In a [Baltimore Sun](#) opinion piece, Anthony Lambros notes that "it is ironic that the very people demanding a turn to socialism will become its own victim." While ideas of free education and free healthcare are understandably attractive to struggling college students, allowing communism to take root in America would come at a much higher price. The abolishment of free speech, private property, open elections, and democracy as we know it is becoming a dangerous reality and is an undeniable indicator of a shift toward communist control by a rigid central government. The high-stakes cancel culture that has permeated society over the past few years is a slippery slope toward a central tenet of communism: "The idea of an individual freedom is incompatible with a communist ideology. The only reason to hold individual speech and information rights would be to better the society, a condition which would likely be met only in certain instances rather than across time, making the default a lack of freedom" ([Stanford](#)). While losing Instagram followers because of non-"politically correct" beliefs may seem petty and inconsequential, the true consequences of this rampant censorship are quickly chipping away at the liberties this country was founded on.