



CANCEL CULTURE

SOCIAL JUSTICE or MOB RULE?

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About the Author

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© 2022 ReferencePoint Press, Inc.
Printed in the United States

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PO Box 27779
San Diego, CA 92198
www.ReferencePointPress.com

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Allen, John, 1957- author.

Title: Cancel culture : social justice or mob rule? / John Allen.

Description: San Diego, CA : ReferencePoint Press, Inc., 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021037195 (print) | LCCN 2021037196 (ebook) | ISBN 9781678202347 (library binding) | ISBN 9781678202354 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Cancel culture--Juvenile literature. | Social media--Political aspects--Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC HM1176 .A45 2022 (print) | LCC HM1176 (ebook) | DDC 302/.13--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021037195>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021037196>

CONTENTS

Introduction **4**

A Controversial Trend

Chapter One **8**

What Is Cancel Culture?

Chapter Two **20**

The #MeToo Movement

Chapter Three **32**

Cancel Culture and Political Speech

Chapter Four **43**

Reexamining the Past

Source Notes **55**

Differing Views: Accountability or Punishment? **58**

For Further Research **59**

Index **61**

Picture Credits **64**

CHAPTER ONE



What Is Cancel Culture?

Comedian Kevin Hart makes his living by delivering edgy comments. He knows that a joke, by definition, has to surprise the audience—maybe even startle it. But in today’s politically sensitive climate, edgy humor can be judged as having crossed a line and become offensive. In 2018 Hart experienced a sharp backlash on Twitter and other social media over tweets he had posted nearly a decade before. The tweets included derogatory names for gay people and off-color remarks about gay sexuality. The social media storm and resulting publicity caused Hart to step down as host of that year’s Academy Awards ceremony. However, Hart’s brush with cancel culture did not permanently damage his career. He continued to appear in podcasts, commercials, and movies, and he plans to resume touring with his comedy routine. “I’ve been canceled, what, three or four times?” says Hart. “Never bothered. If you allow it to have an effect on you, it will. Personally? That’s not how I operate. I understand people are human.”⁵

Different Meanings for Different People

Although Hart downplays the effects of cancel culture, the concept continues to draw controversy. The term *cancel culture* means different things to different people. Some on the political left dismiss it as a loaded “scare” term that conservatives use to rally their supporters. They note that former president Donald Trump attacked cancel culture in campaign speeches at Mount Rushmore and at the Republican National Convention. Others view the trend as a harmless exchange of opinions online. Political activists relate it to social justice, with Twitter users joining together to call out bad behavior or hate speech. Critics, however, many of them on the political right, view cancel culture as a toxic trend that threatens free speech. They claim its judgmental attacks, whether on celebrities or private citizens, can amount to bullying and harassment.

“I’ve been canceled, what, three or four times? Never bothered. If you allow it to have an effect on you, it will. Personally? That’s not how I operate. I understand people are human.”⁵

—Kevin Hart, comedian and film star

Polls show that Americans are deeply divided about cancel culture—that is, if they know about it at all. A February 2021 poll conducted by the Huffington Post and YouGov revealed that nearly half of Americans are not familiar with the term. Among those who know about it, two-thirds believe it is a serious problem. Concern about cancel culture also diverges along political lines. Only 11 percent of Democrats consider it a very serious problem, compared to 57 percent of Republicans and 44 percent of Independents. Forty-four percent of all those polled believe conservatives are more likely than liberals to receive negative effects from cancel culture. More than two-thirds of Republicans agree that conservatives are its main targets.

Despite the recent clamor over cancel culture, many historians and social scientists see it merely as a new form of social

boycott. They point out that America has a long tradition of punishing groups or individuals for bad behavior, often by making public accusations and withdrawing financial support. According to Lawrence Glickman, professor of American studies in the Department of History at Cornell University, “This is one of the oldest forms of political activism in the United States, using the power of the purse to transform the political landscape.”⁶

Borrowing from Black Culture

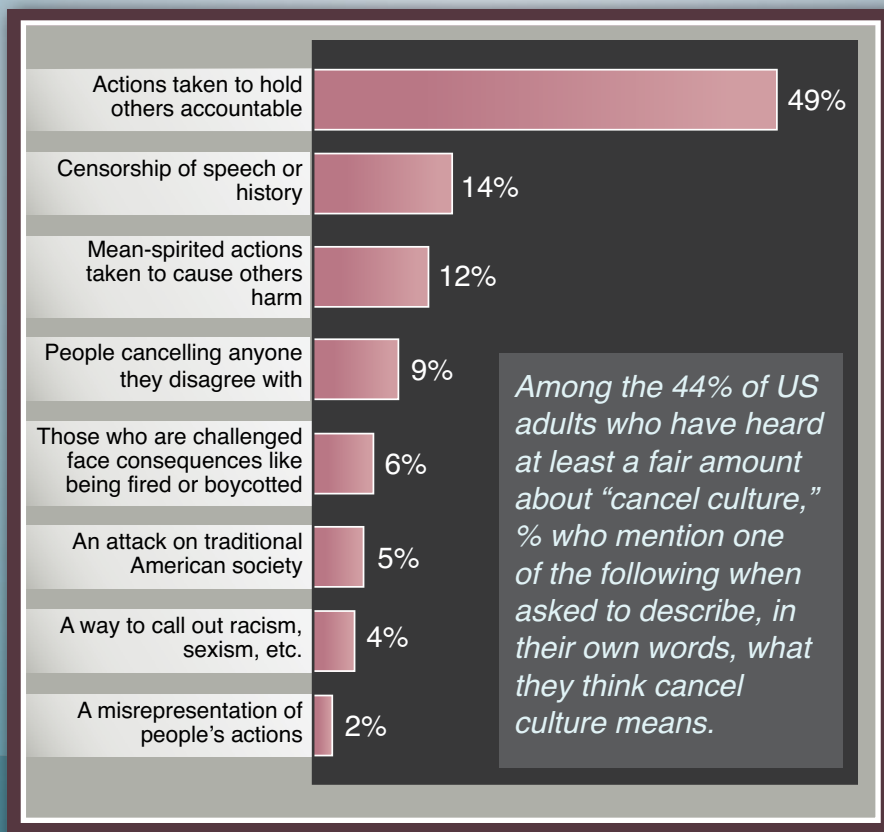
According to some sources, the notion of canceling someone for unacceptable behavior has roots in Black culture. As far back as 1981, Nile Rodgers, guitarist for the funk band Chic, recorded the single “Your Love Is Cancelled,” describing how he was dropping a love interest from his life. In the 1991 film *New Jack City*, Wesley Snipes’s gangster character announces he is canceling his girlfriend, or dumping her. From there, the term worked its way into a 2010 hip-hop song by Lil Wayne and a 2014 episode of the reality show *Love and Hip-Hop: New York*. These joking references soon turned up on Twitter, as users declared their friends to be canceled for a dumb remark or bad taste. Finally, it spread to more serious usage. Celebrities or politicians who were judged to have made bigoted or insensitive comments got canceled, as did those accused of exploiting minorities or women. Black activists embraced canceling as a kind of empowerment, a way to publicly reject politicians or performers who had lost support in the Black community. Typical was a 2016 tweet about rapper Kanye West, who had expressed support for Trump’s candidacy: “I was blasting *Fade* by Kanye and then I remembered he’s cancelled and changed.”⁷ Soon other groups adopted the political edge of cancel culture to express their own disapproval of certain figures.

“This is one of the oldest forms of political activism in the United States, using the power of the purse to transform the political landscape.”⁶

—Lawrence Glickman, professor of American studies at Cornell University

How People Define Cancel Culture

In May 2021 the Pew Research Center published results of a poll on public attitudes toward cancel culture. The 44 percent of US adults who said they had heard a fair amount or a great deal about cancel culture, were asked to provide their own definition of that term. The largest percentage of respondents, 49 percent, described cancel culture as “actions taken to hold others accountable.”



Source: Emily A. Vogels et al., “Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment,” Pew Research Center, May 19, 2021. www.pewresearch.org.

Social media has been key to the rise of cancel culture. The immediacy of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms enables users to jump into the cultural conversation in real time. Twitter in particular has become a weather vane for attitudes about people in the news. No sooner does a controversial remark or action come



Musician Kanye West (pictured in 2016 with president-elect Donald Trump) had publicly voiced support for Trump's campaign. Fans who were unhappy with this stance considered West to be canceled and stopped listening to his music.

to light than the so-called Twitterverse reacts in cascading numbers. On Twitter, success for calling out someone for bad behavior is measured in likes and retweets, which can quickly mount into the thousands. By contrast, a comment that takes issue with a swarm of cancellation calls can get ratioed. That means getting more replies than likes. It usually indicates that many users reject the comment and feel the need to explain why. Often the commenter is accused of being divisive or misguided.

Certain Black artists and intellectuals connect cancel culture to wider concerns about civil rights and having a voice in society. Screenwriter Barry Michael Cooper, who wrote Wesley Snipes's famous line about cancellation in *New Jack City*, is amazed at how the whole idea of canceling someone has spread. He sees it as an example of Black humor and pride. Announcing that someone is canceled is like changing the channel, refusing to listen to the

same old messages. For African Americans, cancellation is “a way to wield power, where we haven’t been able to really do it before on a cultural level,” says Cooper. “Twitter has allowed us to say, ‘We’re here, we’re not going to be discounted, and if you say anything to try to diminish us, we’ll cancel you.’”⁸

Many have noted that the term *woke*, as shorthand for a progressive political outlook, also comes from Black culture. It originally referred to seeing the truth behind the official story, the things that those in power do not want people to know. In 2014, protests about the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, urged Blacks to “stay woke,” or be aware of alleged police brutality. The phrase goes back to a 1938 song by the Black folksinger Lead Belly, describing a lynching in the South and warning Blacks to beware. Modern singers such as Erykah Badu and Childish Gambino have urged listeners to “stay woke” in their songs. In the past few years, *woke* has come to mean an emphasis on social justice. As Twitter and other social media platforms have embraced cancel culture, the influence of left-leaning woke political ideas has grown.

“Twitter has allowed [African Americans] to say, ‘We’re here, we’re not going to be discounted, and if you say anything to try to diminish us, we’ll cancel you.’”⁸

—Barry Michael Cooper, screenwriter

Cancellation and Consequences

Canceling may have begun as an offhand way to reject people for insensitive remarks or bad behavior. However, as the trend has taken root, cancellation has occasionally delivered real consequences. The most obvious examples come from the #MeToo movement, in which victims came forward to accuse high-profile individuals of sexual assault and harassment. Many of those accused lost their jobs, and a few have gone to jail. But other targets of cancel culture have also felt the effects of public censure.

A decorative header image showing the lower legs and feet of several people walking, rendered in a light blue silhouette style against a darker blue background.

A Conservative Cancellation

Conservatives often paint cancel culture as a purely woke phenomenon, but people can get canceled by conservative backlash as well. One example is the case of Colin Kaepernick, a National Football League (NFL) quarterback who led the San Francisco 49ers to the Super Bowl in 2012. Four years later, Kaepernick, then a backup for the 49ers, sparked right-wing anger over his protests against police violence against Blacks. Kaepernick and a few teammates chose to express their views by kneeling during the national anthem. Conservative pundits lashed out at what they characterized as an unpatriotic display. As player protests during the anthem grew, there was talk on the political right of boycotting NFL games. Eric Reid, Kaepernick's teammate at the time, claimed that the protests were being twisted into something they were not. "Our protest is still being misconstrued as disrespectful to the country, flag and military personnel," said Reid. "It's exactly the opposite."

In 2017 Kaepernick opted out of his 49ers contract. None of the other thirty-one NFL teams signed him, effectively ending his football career. Some observers questioned whether the team owners had colluded to oust a troublemaker from the league. As for Kaepernick, he is now a well-paid spokesperson for the sporting goods giant Nike.

Eric Reid, "Eric Reid: Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee," *New York Times*, September 25, 2017. www.nytimes.com.

In May 2020 a squabble in New York's Central Park led to a woman losing her job. An African American man named Christian Cooper was enjoying the evening as an expert birdwatcher when he asked Amy Cooper (no relation) to put her dog on a leash, as park rules require. The woman, who is White, refused. In fact, she grew increasingly hysterical as the man insisted that her dog be leashed. Finally, Amy Cooper called the police to say that an African American man was threatening her life. A video, filmed by Christian Cooper and posted to Twitter, was viewed more than 30 million times in the days that followed. Many people saw the incident as an example of how Blacks are falsely accused and placed in danger themselves. The woman was widely mocked as a "Karen"—slang for an entitled middle-aged White woman making demands. As the video went viral, the Twitter backlash led to the woman getting fired from her job despite making a public

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DIFFERING VIEWS: ACCOUNTABILITY OR PUNISHMENT?

When a person gets called out on social media, is this accountability or punishment? In a Pew Research Center poll on the topic of cancel culture, 58 percent said it is accountability; 38 percent described it as punishment. These are some of the views expressed in the poll.

Why Is It Accountability?

"Calling out offensive content forces people to confront the issue as to whether their content is actually racist, and if it is, to account for their motive in posting it."

—Man, 30s, Conservative Republican

"Because offensive content that is posted allows for the offender to feel more brash with their beliefs while also feeling safe behind the virtual barrier of the internet. However, being called out by someone in the virtual sense can check a person's brazen comments and highlight that their belief is not okay and offensive ... which hopefully causes them to reflect and reevaluate the offensive nature of this content."

—Woman, 20s, Moderate Democrat

"With calling out culture, people look closer at their actions, forcing them to examine what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what are the consequences of said actions."

—Man, 30s, Liberal Democrat

"People need to confront hate when they see hate. People need to confront the dark past [that] is haunting our country. Calling out offensive content is holding people to the standard of what America should be."

—Woman, 30s, Liberal Democrat

"Views expressed online are just as damaging if not more damaging than views expressed in person. People who promote and validate views that hurt other people should have to deal with the consequences of their actions."

—Identifies gender in some other way, 20s, Liberal Democrat

Why Is It Punishment?

"Others are entitled to their opinion, and too often it isn't about having a discussion but berating others for not agreeing with our point of view."

—Woman, 20s, Conservative Republican

"We have freedom of speech in this country. I think you should be able to post whatever you want. It's a free country. If you don't like it, keep scrolling. But people will yell and get upset if they find it offensive and cry like babies."

—Woman, 30s, Conservative Republican

"Social media is designed for people to express their opinions and feelings unique to the individual. A lot of times, people jump down the throats of anything that doesn't align with their views. So nowadays, cancel culture is a thing and too many people want to cancel anyone with an opinion that is considered not politically correct ... You can't try and silence everyone who has an opposing viewpoint to yours."

—Man, 30s, Liberal Democrat

"Many times, we cannot see the source or reasoning or driving forces from what we see online. Although calling out offensive content holds many people and organizations to a higher standard and is necessary and vital, often social media can have an effect of a mob mentality and swift judgement when situations are more complex."

—Woman, 20s, Liberal Democrat

"When people post online, it should be a free platform of expression and others should not be calling people out for their own opinions, just because they differ from their own. Social media can be punishing because when others target someone for their thoughts it can be hurtful or degrading. If someone doesn't like another person's opinion they should unfollow or keep scrolling—not 'call each other out.'"

—Woman, 20s, Conservative Republican

Source: Emily A. Vogels et al., "Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment," Pew Research Center, May 19, 2021. www.pewresearch.org.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Aaron, Hank, 35
Ahmad, Hassan, 4
Ailes, Roger, 22
Allen, Woody, 6, 26–27
Alphan, Melis, 21
American Black culture
 use of “cancel” in
 as example of Black humor and pride, 12
 as form of power, 10, 13
 history of, 10, 19
 “woke” and, 13
art and political correctness, 18
Ataselim, Fidan, 21
Atlantic (magazine), 36
- Baquet, Dean, 15
Barr, Roseanne, 5
#BelieveWomen, 27–29
Bennet, James, 37, 38
Berlin, Irving, 43
Biden, Joe, 30–31, 45, 50, 52
Biles, Simone, 26
Blair, Douglas, 17
Boston, 48–49
Bottoms, Keisha Lance, 35
Brown, Anthony, 50–51
Bryant, Zyahna, 46
Buck, Ken, 39
Burke, Tarana, 21, **22**, 23
- Calhoun, John C., 52
call-out culture, 5–6
cancel culture
 alternative term for, 5–6
 described, 5, 9
 history of term, 10, 19
 public’s definitions of, **11**
#CancelYale campaign, 53
Cardona, Miguel, 30
Cato Institute, 36
Cernovich, Mike, 17
- Cesario, Joe, 34
Charlottesville, Virginia, **46**, 46–47
Cheney, Liz, 39
Chow, Keith, 18
Clark, Charles T., 54
Colak, Ibrahim, 20
Collum, David, 34–35
Communications Decency Act (1996), 52
Confederate monuments, 45–47, **46**
Confederate symbols, 45–47, **46**, 50–52, **51**
consequences of cancel culture
 empowerment of individuals, 10, 13, 19
 imprisonment, 26
 increase in reporting sex crimes, 30
 loss of employment, 30
 Bennet, 37–38
 Amy Cooper, 14–15
 at Fox News, 22
 in Hollywood, 27
 Kaepernick, 14
 Bandy Lee, 33
 McCammond, 16–17
 McNeil, 15
 Sellers, 4–5
 at Uber, 22
 Wynn, 25
 political figures and, 28–31, 39
Cooper, Amy, 14–15
Cooper, Barry Michael, 12–13
Cooper, Christian, 14–15
Cotton, Joe, 37–38
- Dershowitz, Alan, 32, **33**
DeVos, Betsy, 30
Douglas, Gabby, 26
Dowd, Maureen, 31
doxing, 17–18
Drum, Kevin, 53–54
- entertainment industry. *See* Hollywood/entertainment industry