



Political correctness isn't the problem

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November 20, 2017

The pundit class has remained deeply in touch with the goings on at various college campuses while remaining blind to the rise of white nationalist authoritarianism. Weeks after an explosive *New Yorker* investigation on the rise of white nationalism under Trump, Jonathan Chait in *New York* magazine warned of a movement that “regards the delegitimization of dissent as a first-order goal.” He wasn’t referring to white supremacists, but rather, political correctness:

The upsurge of political correctness is not just greasy-kid stuff, and it’s not just a bunch of weird, unfortunate events that somehow keep happening over and over. It’s the expression of a political culture with consistent norms, and philosophical premises that happen to be incompatible with liberalism.

Even after Trump won the presidency, pundits have remained inordinately focused on the goings-on at college campuses across the country. *The Atlantic*’s Peter Beinart and Conor Friedersdorf and CNN’s Fareed Zakaria at CNN and have all written breathless op-eds about the perceived threat of campus politics. *Slate*’s Jacob Weisberg took a much-needed break from crushing a union drive to lament the “left-wing authoritarians” on our country’s campuses. Indeed, rather than systematic voter disenfranchisement and widespread racism, “political correctness” and “identity politics” have frequently been pointed to as the culprit in Clinton’s 2016 loss. According to a recent poll from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, “71 percent of Americans believe that political correctness has silenced important discussions our society needs to have.” Political correctness, we’re told, is the *real* bigotry.

THE REALITY

Despite the widespread panic that their speech will be suppressed, white supremacists, authoritarians, and war criminals continue to have very little trouble finding a platform for their views, especially on college campuses. In fact, the *true* threats to speech on campus are not idealistic students but the rich, old, and typically white male gatekeepers — the administrators, trustees, and donors.

In September, Columbia University allowed college Republicans to bring a range of white-supremacist speakers to the school and sent out an email to students warning that, “It is a violation of the Rules of University Conduct to interrupt, shout down, or otherwise disrupt an

event.” At Harvard, campus gatekeepers have consistently chosen liars (Sean Spicer), war criminals (Henry Kissinger), people who physically assaulted journalists (Corey Lewandowski) and torture defenders (former CIA deputy director Michael Morell) rather than dissidents (Chelsea Manning) to inform their students about the state of modern politics. Harvard also denied Michelle Jones, a formerly incarcerated woman of color, the opportunity to pursue her Ph.D there (she ended up going to NYU). Meanwhile, the architects of torture, drone strikes, and illegal wars have had no trouble booking campus gigs. Yet there are few articles questioning *these* choices. Recent reporting revealed that the demand for prominent white-nationalist figures to speak on campus is not being driven by students wanting diverse speech, but rather a secretive foundation backed by the billionaire Koch brothers that aims to groom conservative provocateurs.

Indeed, a recent much-publicized poll purporting to show creeping authoritarianism among young people was funded with Koch money, and the best academic research proves the poll’s findings wrong. A study using General Social Survey data published in 2015 using data through 2012 found that tolerance for unpopular speech has increased dramatically. I analyzed 2016 GSS data and find that 60 percent of individuals who graduated college between 2010 and 2016 would allow a man who believes black people are genetically inferior — such as Charles Murray — to speak in their community. That compares with 61 percent of the general public.

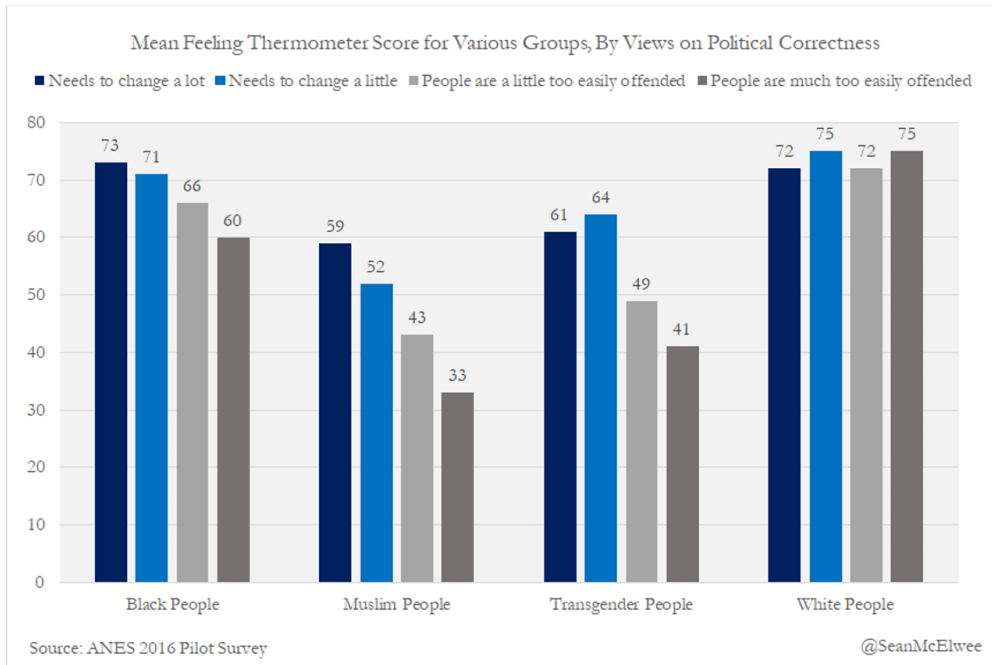
It’s worth highlighting the Kochs’ connection to white nationalists on campus, because they and other billionaires are using their money to influence campuses. The Koch brothers have spent millions on campuses often with strings attached that allow them to determine what is taught and by whom. At Florida State University, where the Koch brothers have invested millions, have influence over hiring, and have sought even more influence over curricula, students are taught that sweatshops are good in economics courses. And their influence does not extend just to colleges. The Kochs backed Young Entrepreneurs, a group that offers to teach business classes to cash-strapped public school systems (such as in Kansas, where a Koch-backed Gov. Sam Brownback slashed taxes so much courts deemed school funding unconstitutionally low).

Another Koch “curriculum hub” called The Edvantage includes lessons that teach students that the Environmental Protection Agency is bad for the environment. In North Carolina, Republicans defunded a University of North Carolina center for accurately describing the impact of their policies. In 2012 John Allison, a former head of the Cato Institute, said that spending money and energy to influence curricula was “clearly in our shareholders’ long-term best interest.” Few pundits have criticized these arrangements, revealing their implicit belief that the proper way to influence the national discourse is through the exercise of wealth, rather than protest.

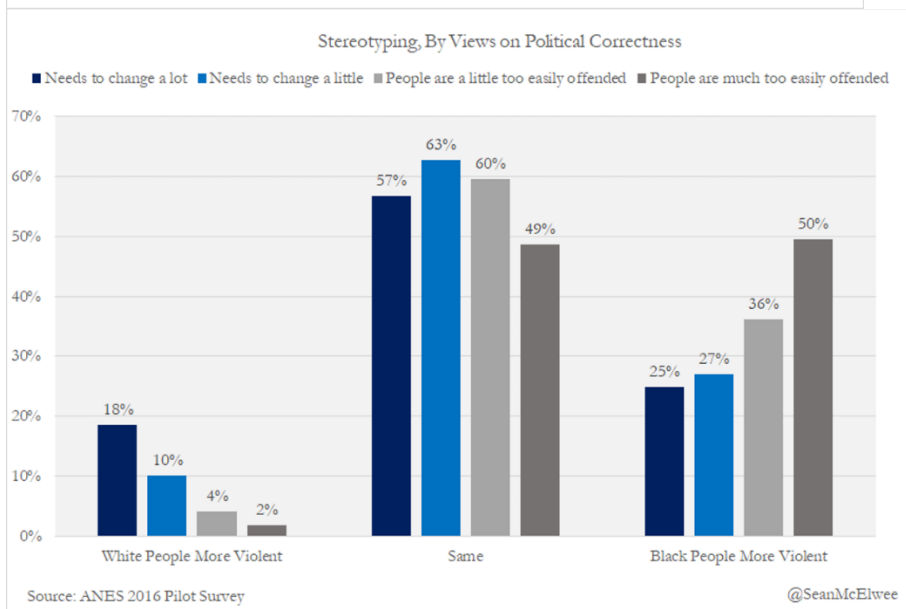
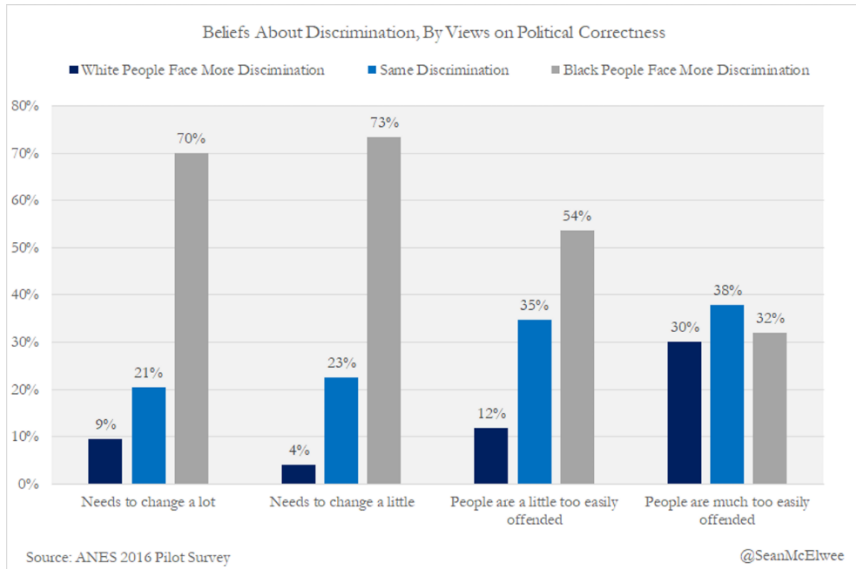
OPPOSITION TO “POLITICAL CORRECTNESS” IS ROOTED IN BIGOTRY

What is commonly referred to “political correctness” is in fact an attitude of cultural inclusion that broadens the intellectual experience. And those who dislike political correctness often disguise the extent to which their attitudes are tied to racial animus.

The 2016 American National Election Studies pilot survey, fielded during the primary elections, included the question: “Some people think that the way people talk needs to change with the times to be more sensitive to people from different backgrounds. Others think that this has already gone too far and many people are just too easily offended. Which is closer to your opinion?” (There were two versions of the question, one of which specifically references “political correctness.” Respondents were randomly assigned which version to be asked, I combined the two for this analysis). As the chart below shows, people who reject political correctness have colder feelings toward marginalized groups.



People who reject political correctness are also far more likely to endorse ideas of “reverse discrimination” against whites and stereotypes about black people being “more violent” than white people.



Opposition to political correctness is rarely rooted in deeply held liberal notions of tolerance and equality, but rather an impulsive reaction to the demands of groups: women, people of color, LGBTQ people and others who have been silenced for decades demanding representation.

THE REAL THREAT TO SPEECH: THE BILLIONAIRES AND WHITE SUPREMACISTS WHO CONTROL THE GOVERNMENT

While views on free speech among the young haven't changed, and much of the backlash is rooted in bigotry, there is another group who have used their wealth to dramatically limit speech: billionaires. From actually suing publications into oblivion, to attempting to sue publications into oblivion, to threatening to sue publications into oblivion, to buying publications and then pushing out people who disagree with them, to literally buying and then

destroying publications in a hissyfit, billionaires have long been keen on silencing speech they dislike. It's fair to say that over the last few years, the direct intervention of billionaires has led to the closure of more news outlets (and the unemployment of more journalists), than campus protests.

Disgraced movie producer Harvey Weinstein hired secret investigators and former military operatives to silence journalists and the billionaire Koch Brothers deployed similar tactics to stop a book about them. But Jonathan Chait, who compared students chanting "Hey, hey, ho, ho, journalists have got to go," to creeping Stalinism, has yet to find time to comment on these incidents. Chait also could not find the room in one of his columns to highlight the "rioting" charges journalist Jenni Monet received while covering the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Monet was one of the many journalists arrested at Standing Rock, the site where police used water cannons on protesters in freezing temperatures, nearly dismembering one protester and leaving 300 more injured. Newly leaked documents suggest that the private company building the pipeline hired a mercenary firm to use counterterrorism tactics against protesters.

White supremacists have also used their newfound power to silence speech. Princeton American Studies professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor had to cancel her public speeches after facing death threats for calling Trump a "racist, sexist megalomaniac" in a commencement speech. White supremacists have threatened to shoot protesters at their speeches and have frequently threatened litigation against journalists they dislike.

Chait, Friedersdorf and other valiant defenders of speech have also yet to comment on the government's attempt to jail journalists covering the protests at Trump's inauguration in January. In his 2015 opus on political correctness, Chait wrote: "American political correctness has obviously never perpetrated the brutality of a communist government, but it has also never acquired the powers that come with full control of the machinery of the state." Throughout American history, white supremacists have executed untold brutality and billionaires have worked to silence dissent — and they now control the full machinery of the state. And yet, it's speech we're supposed to be worried about?