

BUSINESS INSIDER

If wanting to fire people for supporting Trump or Biden isn't cancel culture, then nothing is

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"Cancel culture" is an increasingly worthless term.

That said, a new poll showed a disturbing amount of Americans think business executives who donate to Trump or Biden's campaign should be fired.

For better and for worse, the US has a two-party system. If supporting a major party candidate is beyond the pale, then at a minimum, we have a culture of intolerance in this country.

One holds that a zero-tolerance, no-second-chance culture of firing people because they made clumsy or stupid or misunderstood (but not overtly or intentionally bigoted) statements contributes to making society a more punitive place, and will ultimately backfire on marginalized voices.

Another holds that harsh sanctions for an increasingly broad swath of opinions and past transgressions are good because they demonstrate the seriousness of the offenses — and also, just how overdue the reckoning on racial, gender, and other social issues has been.

Still another holds that there's no such thing as cancel culture, that the stories you've heard about cancellation excesses are merely anecdotal and unrepresentative, and that this whole controversy is an overreaction on behalf of the coddled elite and status quo warriors.

Because pretty much no one can agree on what it is, whether or not it's just, and whether it exists at all — "cancel culture" has become a useless, ubiquitous buzz phrase like "fake news," as meaningless as "neoliberal," "postmodern," and "political correctness."

But before we put "cancel culture" out to pasture, it's worth considering just the results of a recent poll that seems to indicate participating in the US' two-party political system is — for a great many Americans — beyond the pale.

It's a two-party system, and one side should be cancelled

Do you think people should be fired for donating to Donald Trump or Joe Biden's campaign? If you said, "No, that's ridiculous, this must be one of those cancel culture exaggerations," I've got some bad news.

According to a July poll by YouGov and the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, nearly one-third (32%) of Americans fear that their political opinions — if publicly known — could cost them their job or otherwise hinder their careers. The fear is spread roughly equally among broad political ideologies, with about one-third each of liberal, conservative, and moderate respondents worried about making their politics known.

Are these people overreacting? Perhaps not.

The same poll shows an alarming percentage of Americans think an executive donating to the political campaigns of either the Republican or Democratic nominee should be a fireable offense. That doesn't leave you with a lot of political options in a two-party system. This isn't like donating to a fringe candidate, or even a racist congressman like Steve King. Biden and Trump are the standard-bearer of the only political parties of any consequence in this country.

Almost one-third of Americans (31%) think business executives who donate to Trump's campaign should be fired, according to the poll. That number goes up to a full 50% of "staunch liberals" who'd support the firing of a Trump donor.

Conservatives who fancy themselves the exclusive victims of cancel culture might want to sit down at this point, because 36% of "staunch conservatives" — and 22% of Americans overall — think an executive should lose their job for donating to Biden's campaign.

I generally try to be optimistic about America's culture of free speech, in all its messy and unpredictable forms, but this poll is chilling. The level at which Americans feel they need to both censor others and self-censor themselves is widespread and cross-partisan.

Supporting a presidential candidate is the basic form of political expression. It's considered a dereliction of civic duty to not participate in the electoral process. And in our system of government, like it or not, political donations are a constitutionally protected form of expression.

No one has to love the idea of executives with such available disposable incomes that they can make big donations to political candidates, but firing them over it is unambiguously cancelling them for their speech.

Freedom of speech does not mean freedom from consequences, and executives shouldn't be exempt from speech (or even outrage) criticizing their actions. But it's important to resist taking such an extreme stance as to take someone's job over their participation in the legal political processes of a two-party system.

If such limitations on speech were normalized against the executive class, it wouldn't take very long for the cancelers to come for the working class' political participation.

And if a third of all Americans — not activists and college students and media elites, but all Americans — are willing to impose such punitive consequences over basic expression of beliefs about politics, the outlook is grim for having the socially acceptable space to debate and disagree about the finer points of the social and political issues of the day.

An environment of political uniformity doesn't prove an argument has been won, it just proves an echo chamber of opinion can be created with brute force.

Past polling from 2017 showed that while 58% of Americans had political views they were afraid to make public, a majority of Americans opposed firing people for controversial political beliefs. So while it's hard to define whether this problem is getting "worse" or if it's a reflection of typical election year hyper-partisanship, it's disturbing.

We don't have to call it "cancel culture." I'd prefer that, frankly. But however you want to label it, far too many Americans are willing to impose serious financial consequences on a person just for participating in a baseline activity in our political culture.

It's a culture of intolerance and intimidation.