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Class Notes

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Opinion

The Marriage Between Republicans and Big Business Is on the Rocks

But the internal contradictions of “woke capitalism” are a mixed blessing for the Democratic Party.



By Thomas B. Edsall

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington on politics, demographics and inequality.

April 14, 2021



Credit...Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

“Woke capitalism” has been a steadily growing phenomenon over the past decade. The muscle of the movement was evident as early as [2015 in Indiana](#) and [2016 in North Carolina](#), when corporate opposition forced Republicans to back off anti-gay and anti-transgender legislation.

Much to the dismay of the right — a recent Fox News headline read “[Corporations fear woke left minority more than silent majority](#)” — the movement has been gaining momentum, obscuring classic partisan allegiances in corporate America.

This drive has a fast-growing list of backers from the ranks of the Fortune 500, prepared to challenge Republican legislators across the nation.

Right now, the focus of chief executives who are attempting to burnish their progressive credentials is on blocking legislation [in 24 states](#) that curtails access to the ballot box for racial and ethnic minorities — legislation that, among other things, reduces the number of days for advance voting, that requires photo ID to accompany absentee ballots and that limits or eliminates ballot drop boxes.

Perhaps most threatening to Republicans, key corporate strategists attempting to woo liberal consumers have come to believe that their support for progressive initiatives will generate sufficient revenue to counter retaliation by hostile white voters and the Republican politicians who represent them.

The corporate embrace of these strategies has generally received favorable press, but there are some doubters.

Adam Serwer, a staff writer at The Atlantic, argued in “[‘Woke Capital’ Doesn’t Exist](#)” on April 6 that capital “pursues its financial interests in whatever political or social context it finds itself.”

As Serwer puts it,

For big firms, talk is very cheap. Similarly, the actions of Major League Baseball, Coca-Cola, and Delta reflect the political landscape in Georgia and its interaction with their bottom line, not the result of a deep ideological commitment to racial equality.

Similarly, Matthew Walther argued in an [August 2017 article](#) in The Week, that “we should not be looking to corporate America for moral instruction or making exemplars of its leaders or heaping approbation upon their bland, cynical consultant-designed utterances.”

Apple’s Tim Cook, Walther continued, “tells us that he is against racism. I believe it. Good on him.” As commendable as Cook may be for his antiracism, Walther writes, he

is the C.E.O. of a corporation that has made profits on a scale hitherto unimaginable in human history by exploiting cheap labor in a poor country ruled by tyrants whose

authority is perpetuated in no small part thanks to Apple's own compliance in its silencing of dissent and hiring the smartest lawyers in the world to make their tax burden negligible.

Companies leading the charge against laws promoted by Republican state legislators include Delta Air Lines, Coca-Cola, Merck, Dell Technologies, Mars, Nestlé USA, Unilever and American Airlines.

Editors' Picks

And just two days ago, 30 chief executives of Michigan's largest companies, including Ford, General Motors and Quicken Loans, [declared their opposition](#) to similar changes in voting rules pending before the legislature.

The [headline](#) on an April 10 Wall Street Journal article sums up the situation: "With [Georgia Voting Law](#), the Business of Business Becomes Politics." The law was described by [USA Today](#) on April 10 as one "that includes restrictions some activists say haven't been seen since the Jim Crow era."

Last week, [executives from over 100 companies](#) held a video conference call to explore ways to voice their opposition to pending and enacted election legislation.

For many Republicans, the future of their party's dominance in such states as Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Georgia rides on their ability to hold back the rising tide of minority voters.

While Republicans are convinced of the effectiveness of their legislative strategies, [poll data from the 2020 election](#) suggests they may be mistaken. Republicans made inroads last year among Black and Hispanic voters, the constituencies they would now suppress, while losing ground among white voters, their traditional base of support.

Growing numbers of Republicans are refusing to buckle under pressure from the corporate establishment.

For Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia, who rejected Donald Trump's pleas to overturn the state's presidential election results, the controversy offers the opportunity to claim populist credentials and perhaps to win back the support of Trump loyalists.

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"I will not be backing down from this fight," Kemp [declared at an April 3 news conference](#): "This is a call to everyone, not only in Georgia but all across the country to wake up and get in the fight and help us in that fight. Because they are coming for you next."

In Texas, where American Airlines, Dell Technologies, Microsoft and Southwest Airlines have opposed laws under consideration by Republican state legislators, Republicans have been [quick to go on the attack](#).

“Texans are fed up with corporations that don’t share our values trying to dictate public policy,” Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, a Republican, declared in a news release attacking liberalized voting protocols. “The majority of Texans support maintaining the integrity of our elections, which is why I made it a priority this legislative session.”

Other Republicans are explicitly warning business that it will pay a price if it goes too far. “Corporations will invite serious consequences if they become a vehicle for far-left mobs to hijack our country from outside the constitutional order,” Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, [declared](#) at an April 5 news conference. “Our private sector must stop taking cues from the outrage-industrial complex.”

In the past, the corporate community has been one of McConnell’s most steadfast allies, and its current adversarial stance is a major loss.

[Alma Cohen](#), a professor at Harvard Law School, and three colleagues analyzed campaign contributions made by 3,800 individuals who served as chief executive of large companies from 2000 to 2017 in their 2019 paper, “[The Politics of C.E.O.s](#).” They found a decisive Republican tilt: “More than 57 percent of C.E.O.s are Republicans, 19 percent are Democrats and the rest are neutral.”

I asked [W. Bradford Wilcox](#), a conservative professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, for his assessment of the conflict between big business and Republicans. His reply suggested that Kemp’s defiant stance will resonate among Republican voters:

The decades-long marriage between the G.O.P. and big business is clearly on the rocks. This is especially true because the G.O.P. is increasingly drawn to a pugnacious and populist cultural style that has more appeal to the working class, and Big Business is increasingly inclined to support the progressive cultural agenda popular among the highly educated.

Taking on corporate America meshes with the goal of [rebranding](#) the Republican Party — from the party of Wall Street to the [party of the working class](#).

The response of the white working-class to the leftward shift on social issues by American businesses remains unpredictable.

Democracy Corps, a liberal group, [conducted focus groups](#) of white Republicans in March and reached the conclusion that conservative voters are cross-pressured, saying, “The Trump loyalists and Trump-aligned were angry, but also despondent, feeling powerless and uncertain they will become more involved in politics.”

While anger is a powerful motivator of political engagement, despondency and the feeling of powerlessness often depress turnout and foster the belief that political participation is futile.

Opinion on the motives of corporate leaders diverges widely among those who study the political evolution of American business.

Scholars and strategists differ over how much the growth of activism is driven by market forces, by public opinion, by conviction and by the growing strength of Black and Hispanic Americans as consumers, employees and increasingly as corporate executives.

[James Davison Hunter](#), professor of religion, culture and social theory at the University of Virginia, is interested in the psychology of those in the executive suite:

At least on the surface, corporate America has accommodated progressive interests on these issues and others, including the larger agenda of critical race theory, the Me-Too movement, the gay and transgender rights, etc. There has been a shift leftward.

The question he poses is why. His answer is complex:

The idea, once held, that what was good for business was good for America is now a distant memory. A reputation, long in the making, for avoiding taxes and opposing unions all in pursuit of profit has done much to undermine the credibility of business as a force for the common good. Embracing the progressive agenda is a way to position itself as a “good” corporate citizen. Corporations gain legitimacy.

The fluid ideological commitments of business should be seen in the larger context of American politics and culture, Hunter argues:

Over the long haul, conservatives have fought the culture war politically. For them, it was the White House, the Senate and, above all, the Supreme Court that mattered. Political power was pre-eminent.

Progressives have struggled in political combat, while in the nation’s cultural disputes, in Hunter’s view, the left has dominated:

Even while progressives were losing elections, gay and transgender rights, feminism, Black Lives Matter and critical race perspectives were all gaining credibility — in important cultural institutions including journalism, academia, entertainment, advertising, public education, philanthropy, and elsewhere. Sooner or later, it was bound to influence corporate life, the military, and other so-called conservative institutions not least because there was no credible conservative alternative to these questions; only a defensive rejection.

How will this play out?

We will continue to see ugly political battles long into the future, but the culture wars are tilting definitively toward a progressive win and not least because they have a new patron in important corporations.

[Malia Lazu](#), a lecturer at M.I.T.’s Sloan School of Management, argued in an email that the public’s slow but steady shift to the left on racial and social issues is driving corporate decision-making: “Corporations understand consumers want to see their commitment to environmental and social issues.”

Lazu cited studies by Cone, a business consulting firm, “showing that 86 percent of Americans would support a brand aligned with their values and 75 percent would refuse to buy a product they saw as contrary to their beliefs.”

Lazu contends that “there is a generational shift in America toward increasing justice and collective responsibility” and that as a result, “institutions, including corporations, will make incremental change.”

[John A. Haigh](#), co-director of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government at Harvard’s Kennedy School, does not agree with those who see business motivated solely by potential profits, arguing instead that idealism has become a major force.

“Corporations have an obligation to deliver high performance for their shareholders and other stakeholders — customers, employees, and suppliers,” Haigh wrote in an email. But, he continued, “corporations also have an obligation to do so with high integrity.”

In the case of challenges to restrictive voting laws, Haigh believes that

there is also a possibility that they are behaving with some sense of their moral obligation to society — with integrity. The right to vote could be seen as a pillar of our democratic system, and blatant attempts to suppress votes are offensive to our core values.

Haigh says that he does not want

to sound Pollyannish — these are difficult trade-offs within corporations, and it is much more complicated than simply “doing good.” But there are thresholds for moral behavior, and companies do have an obligation to speak up. There is a long history in the U.S. around issues of civil rights and their suppression, and mixed engagement by companies in addressing these issues.

[Neal Hartman](#), a senior lecturer who is also at M.I.T.’s Sloan School, argued that in attacking voting rights, Republicans violated a tenet of American democracy important to voters of all stripes.

Not only have the restrictive proposals [in Georgia](#) and other states awakened “strong levels of activism among many moderate-to-liberal voters,” Hartman wrote by email, but

many people in the United States — including a number of more conservative individuals — believe voting should be as simple and widespread as possible. It is a fundamental principle of our democracy.

Corporations, Hartman continued, “are responding to calls from the public, their shareholders, and their employees to respond to bills and laws deemed as being unfair.”

Hartman argues that “voting rights is front and center today,” but that “not far behind will be efforts to thwart L.G.B.T.Q.I. rights — bills targeting the transgender community are already being introduced and passed — as well as continuing battles regarding abortion and the rights of women to choose.”

There is some overlap between the thinking of [Robert Livingston](#), a lecturer in public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School, and Haigh and Hartman:

What we are seeing in Georgia is an affront to people’s basic sense of morality and decency. And people will sometimes subordinate their self-interest to cherished values and beliefs. Many of these companies have credos and core values that are internalized by their leadership and employees, and we see leaders becoming increasingly willing to express their disapproval of the reckless temerity of politically savvy but socially irresponsible politicians.

Livingston acknowledges that many companies are

motivated by their own interests as well. Major League Baseball is an organization that depends on people of color. Nike tends to cater to an increasingly youthful and diverse customer base. So, there is something in it for them too.

But, he continued, “I’ve worked with a lot of top leaders and can tell you that for many of them, it’s more a question of principle than politics.”

[Joseph Aldy](#), a professor of public policy at the Kennedy School, noted in an email that willingness to engage in controversial political issues is most evident in the case of climate change “The climate denial/climate skeptic attitude that characterizes many Republican elected officials is increasingly out of step with the majority of the American public and the American business community,” he said, while

“the continued focus on cultural issues among Republicans reflects a growing estrangement between the business community and the Republican Party.”

There are several possible scenarios of how these preoccupations and conflicts will evolve.

Insofar as the split between American business and the Republican Party widens and companies begin to cut campaign contributions, the likely loser is Mitch McConnell, the leader of the party’s corporate wing. Any limit on McConnell’s ability to channel business money to campaigns would be a setback.

Such a development would further empower the more extreme members of the Republican Party’s Trump wing and would embolden Republican officials to escalate their conflict with corporate America.

For example, David Ralston, the speaker of the Georgia House — which has just passed a retaliatory bill penalizing Delta by eliminating a tax break on jet fuel — [told reporters](#): “You don’t feed a dog that bites your hand.”

Finally, for Democrats, the leftward shift of business is a mixed blessing.

On the plus side, Democrats gain an ally in pressing a liberal agenda on social and racial issues.

On the downside, the perception of the party as allied with corporate interests may take root and Democratic officials are very likely to face pressure to make concessions to their new allies on fundamental economic policies — bad for the party, in my view, and bad for the country.

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Business

Mounting corporate opposition to proposed voting restrictions tests long-standing alliance with GOP

Merck chairman and chief executive Kenneth Frazier, seen on Capitol Hill in 2019, helped lead the effort that culminated with a statement signed by hundreds of companies and prominent business leaders on the need to preserve voting rights. (Jacquelyn Martin/AP)

By

[Todd C. Frankel](#),
[Josh Dawsey](#) and
[Jena McGregor](#)

April 15, 2021 at 1:17 a.m. GMT+2

Top Republican officials continue to push back against a surge of major companies and corporate leaders who oppose new voting laws being pursued by Republicans in dozens of states, with fresh signs that some in the GOP are waiting to see how far companies are willing to go on this issue.

Even as executives representing a wide swath of Corporate America discussed via Zoom last weekend potentially withholding political donations and business investments over the issue, speakers at the Republican National Committee retreat in Palm Beach were pledging to continue the fight. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis was applauded at the RNC meeting for attacking Major League Baseball, among others, according to a recording obtained by The Washington Post.

“Major businesses who are getting in bed with the left, the corporate media and big tech ... these corporate executives have no backbone, they don’t want to be criticized by the corporate partisan media — they cave, they virtue signal in one direction,” DeSantis said.

“You have these woke corporations who are colluding with all those folks,” he continued. “We have to stand up for ourselves, we’ve got to fight back.”

On Wednesday, hundreds of major companies and corporate leaders released a joint statement that said voting is “the lifeblood of our democracy” and “we must ensure the right to vote for all of us” — a seeming rebuke of the hostile tone coming from Republicans who insist the laws are needed for election security and companies should stay out of politics.

The developments could possibly reshape political giving and potentially fracture a long-held alliance between the GOP and corporate business giants, who are increasingly under pressure to take political stands — and can feel the backlash for doing it. “I think what is happening is new,” said Steven Law, who runs the Senate Leadership PAC, the major fundraising arm for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.). Political groups say corporate PAC giving is down this year across the board.

Still, it remains to be seen whether the mounting rhetorical attacks will lead to an actual rupture between corporations and the GOP.

Wednesday’s statement by corporate leaders — which cast the issue as nonpartisan — included support from recognizable corporate names such as Target, Netflix, Bank of America, Facebook, Cisco, Twitter, Microsoft, Starbucks, Amazon, Mastercard, American Airlines, United Airlines and Vanguard, as well as prominent people such as investor Warren Buffett, law firms and nonprofit organizations.

The statement was also notable for the names that were missing, including Delta Air Lines and Coca-Cola — two companies that earlier this month were among the first to oppose new voting rules in their home state of Georgia.

The current crop of voting measures being debated in statehouses nationwide is fueled by lingering animosity over the last presidential election, when baseless accusations of voter fraud resulted in Republican officials pushing for restrictive new laws.

“The legislation is so egregious and so targeted as to keep certain types of people from voting — I think it’s wonderful that Corporate America is taking a stand,” said one of the signers, Debra L. Lee, the former chief executive of Black Entertainment Television, who sits on four corporate boards.

But it remains unclear how far companies are willing to go to address concerns about voting rights.

Some GOP operatives believe the tensions will die down once the business community realizes it needs the GOP as it faces a Democratic White House proposing major new spending and potentially higher corporate tax rates.

"I am curious to see how corporations are going to feel once they start feeling the wrath of this administration, which is going to raise their taxes," said Lisa Spies, a prominent GOP fundraiser.

Spies said she suspected much of the controversy churned was for "public display" and "a lot of these people are still donating and very active."

Law said he didn't think Major League Baseball thought through its decision this month to move the All-Star Game from Georgia to Colorado over a voting rights bill.

"There can be an astonishing cost as to what they might always think is virtue signaling," Law said.

"This is happening at the same time the new Biden administration is planning very aggressive moves that will be largely hostile to the business interests of these companies," Law said.

He also pointed out the absence of Coca-Cola and Delta from Wednesday's statement. "That could suggest that these companies learned the hard way, that when you go out relying on fake talking points supplied by (leading Georgia Democrats) Stacey Abrams and Raphael Warnock, you do so at your own risk," Law said.

A Delta Air Lines spokeswoman declined to comment further about why it did not sign Wednesday's statement, pointing to a statement made by the carrier's CEO [March 31](#). Coca-Cola said it did not receive the statement or a request to sign it and that its "focus has been on meeting and collaborating with local groups, and we have spoken up in support of the foundational right to vote."

Several company officials said their decision to sign Wednesday's statement was not a partisan one.

"We believe that is a false talking point that is being mounted by the individuals who are trying to restrict voting access to large segments of Americans," said Neil Blumenthal, co-CEO of Warby Parker.

Chenault and Frazier coordinated a letter signed last month by 72 Black business executives that made a similar point — a letter that first drew attention to the voting bills in executive suites across the country.

Dozens of law firms also signed the statement, representing a growing effort to fight restrictive voting laws in court. Among the firms listed were Squire, Patton, Boggs; Cravath, Swaine and Moore; Akin Gump Strauss Hauer and Feld; and Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison.

There was also a smattering of celebrities — some with their own companies — included on the statement, such as Naomi Campbell, Tracee Ellis Ross, Katy Perry and Gwyneth Paltrow.

The fight has left some business leaders torn.

Kathryn Wylde, who leads the Partnership for New York City, which calls much of the elite business community its members, said Republicans tend to see the voting rights issue as a partisan effort to shore up the chances of a continued Democratic majority.

“The Black executives don’t see it as a partisan issue. They see it as a civil rights issue,” Wylde said. “But a lot of the businesses can’t afford to alienate the Republicans who have defined this as a partisan issue. The reason people didn’t sign is that.”

But it is not a fight either side seemed ready to back away from.

Reid Hoffman, the co-founder and former chairman of LinkedIn, said he expects the business community to keep fighting.

“My hope would be a willingness to go all the way on this issue,” he said.

666 Comments



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United pledged to diversify its pilot pipeline. Outrage from conservative pundits was swift.

The airline announced a goal that at least half of new pilots in its development program will be women or people of color

By

[Hannah Sampson](#)

April 14, 2021 at 12:46 a.m. GMT+2

Less than 20 percent of United Airlines' pilots are women or people of color — a statistic the carrier wants to change.

So United [said](#) last week that it had set a goal to train 5,000 new pilots, at least half of them women or people of color, at its new flight school over the next decade. In a statement, CEO Scott Kirby said those pilots would be guaranteed a job after completing the requirements of the airline's pilot career development program, called Aviate. "Our flight deck should reflect the diverse group of people on board our planes every day," the airline said in a [tweet](#).

While some social media users praised the goal, others protested — and some high-profile conservative media personalities described the goal as "wokeness" run amok. A spokesman for United declined to address the pushback. The airline responded to one user in a [tweet](#), saying that all "highly qualified candidates" who are accepted into the academy "will have met or exceeded the standards we set for admittance."

"Our commitment to diversity is about recruiting from the deepest pool possible of exceptional and qualified candidates who want to pursue a career as a commercial airline pilot, particularly those who otherwise may not have attempted to do so due to a variety of factors, primarily financial barriers," said United spokesman Charles Hobart. "We believe that we're going to be a better, stronger airline because of this, and we also understand that our pilot group needs to better reflect the communities that we serve." United and its credit card partner, JPMorgan Chase, have dedicated \$2.4 million in scholarship money to the goal. The airline is partnering with groups including the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals, Sisters of the Skies, the Latino Pilots Association and the Professional Asian Pilots Association, which will identify applicants for the scholarships and help direct potential students to the United Aviate Academy. "It's about recruiting from the deepest pool possible and ensuring that we're able to bring more qualified candidates into the pilot pipeline," Hobart said. "By looking

everywhere for talent, particularly within communities that have traditionally been underserved while also upholding our high standards, we'll be a better airline for it."

Joel Webley, chair of the board of directors of the [Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals](#), said in a statement that the group plans to form a consortium of nonprofits to provide additional support for scholarship recipients including mentorship, career development resources and financial help. He called the United goal "an ambitious and public affirmation of not only the value of diversity, but the business benefits of it."

"It's a bold statement, and United Airlines should be applauded for having the courage to state it so publicly," Webley said. "Over the years, many companies have dedicated resources and dollars to solving these challenges, but rarely with this level of direct investment for students. We hope Aviate will serve as a model for other companies in the future."

United says it expects to hire more than 10,000 pilots total over the next decade, roughly double the amount it plans to train. For those who take the United Aviate Academy path, the flight training school's [website](#) lays out the years-long process to become a United pilot, including training, building flight hours and flying for a regional carrier.

"We will be sure that all safety standards are met and will continue to be met," said Capt. Todd Insler, chairman of the pilot union at United. "This will not be dumbed down. It will be plussed up."

He said the union supports the initiative "because it provides opportunities and exposure for individuals who may not have pursued a career in aviation."

[*Delta is the last U.S. airline blocking middle seats. That ends May 1.*](#)

Criticism of the plan suggested United was prioritizing the wrong qualities and, in many cases, overlooked the fact that pilots would still have to undergo extensive training to be eligible for a job.

Daily Wire columnist Matt Walsh penned an opinion piece titled "United Offers Passengers Exciting Opportunity To Die In Diverse And Equitable Plane Crash." Fox News host Tucker Carlson tackled the issue the day after United's announcement, accusing the airline of prioritizing identity politics over safety.

"So if hiring on the basis of irrelevant criteria will, over time, get people killed — and it will — why are they demanding it?" he said. "Because they don't care. They're ideologues. They're suffering from an incurable brain disease called wokeness."

And Piers Morgan — who resigned from "Good Morning Britain" last month after criticizing Meghan, Duchess of Sussex — wrote in the Daily Mail that White male pilots were being discriminated against by the airline's plan.

"The woke tyranny that's swept through corporate America is now forcing companies like United into making these asinine, potentially deadly decisions purely to appease the woke mob and pre-emptively defend themselves against non-existent racism or sexism," he wrote.

Courtland Savage, founder and CEO of [Fly for the Culture](#), which aims to expand diversity in aviation by working with young people who are interested in the profession, said the goal of the program was great. But “new methods will be needed to attract the younger generation,” he said in an email. “The current culture of aviation is toxic.”

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He said the views espoused by Carlson are shared by some pilots — which, he said, is a risk to aviation. Savage, who recently resigned as an airline pilot and started the recruiting and aviation consulting company [Savage Aviation](#), said the kind of vitriol that followed the announcement could hurt the efforts to draw more diverse candidates to the field.

“Children, young teens, young adults all see the comments on social media,” he said.



[Hannah Sampson](#)

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Orwellian

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"**Orwellian**" is an adjective describing a situation, idea, or societal condition that [George Orwell](#) identified as being destructive to the welfare of a free and [open society](#). It denotes an attitude and a brutal policy of draconian control by [propaganda](#), [surveillance](#), [disinformation](#), [denial of truth](#) ([doublethink](#)), and manipulation of the past, including the "[unperson](#)"—a person whose past existence is expunged from the public record and memory, practiced by modern repressive governments. Often, this includes the circumstances depicted in his novels, particularly [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#)^[2] but political [doublespeak](#) is criticized throughout his work, such as in [Politics and the English Language](#).^[3]

[The New York Times](#) has said the term is "the most widely used adjective derived from the name of a modern writer".^{[4][5]}