

# No One Has a Position Anymore

Why Democrats are acting as though corporations are people, and Republicans are acting as though they're not

[Sonny Bunch](#) May 23, 2022, 6 AM ET

Hypocrisy is the [only modern sin](#) and a bit overplayed, a term deployed to justify one's own power grabs and political-professional faults. I hardly notice it anymore. But I confess I'm a little shocked by the abrupt about-face on the issue of corporate speech and government efforts to restrain—or encourage—it. I'm so disoriented that I don't know if left and right have switched positions, or if no one really has a position anymore.

I was 29 when Mitt Romney proclaimed, during the primary in the 2012 presidential campaign, that "corporations are people, my friend." So: old enough to know exactly how this sort of statement would play with a press corps enamored of the Republican front-runner's Democratic opponent. As NPR [noted](#), this statement was a "gift to political foes." An easily condensed, easily dunked-upon sound bite, Romney's gaffe revealed him to be a tool of the corporate class he had enriched as a vulture capitalist at Bain.

Corporations aren't people, which is why corporate speech needs to be regulated, which is why Supreme Court decisions like *Citizens United* are so grotesque. This, anyway, was the Democratic view.

And this set of assumptions was why progressive activists and politicians felt so comfortable—nay, righteous—during that same campaign season going after Chick-fil-A, the fast-food purveyor that rubbed the morality of its owners in the face of nonbelievers by donating to causes deemed anti-

LGBTQ. Conservatives were outraged when [Chicago pols](#), [New York pols](#), and the [San Antonio, Texas, airport went to war](#) against Chick-fil-A. The government has no right to tell a business or its officers how to spend their money; government neutrality in all matters speech is a fundamental First Amendment principle. This, anyway, was the Republican view.

### [Derek Thompson: This is how America's culture war death spirals](#)

Now it's Democrats who—feeling a bit adrift, having lost control of the courts and seemingly unable to pass meaningful federal legislation—take solace in the idea that corporations are people, nothing more than the avatars of their employees and customers. That's why Disney personnel were outraged when CEO Bob Chapek [argued](#) that the company shouldn't weigh in on Florida's Parental Rights in Education Bill, which proponents say is necessary to protect children from age-inappropriate sex education and opponents decry as the "Don't Say Gay" bill that would force teachers back in the closet. In hindsight, Chapek was right that the Mouse House would be used as a cudgel in the culture war to the detriment of both the cause and the corporation. But that didn't matter to Disney's rank and file. What mattered was the company taking a stand and doing the right thing.

Meanwhile it's Republicans—many of whom slammed efforts to silence Chick-fil-A—who were excited to see Florida Governor Ron DeSantis using the [levers of government](#) to stifle Disney's criticism of the legislation. The right wing's sense of cultural impotence and its frustration with the success of accountability-free "woke capital" to change the country's cultural direction prompted a reactionary move. The party of "corporations are people" is furious that the people who make up those corporations would push their employer to act in their perceived interests.

The move on the left to embrace the "corporations are people, my friend"

ethos isn't limited to the Disney mess. It's why the video-game maker Bungie [feels the need](#) to weigh in on *Roe v. Wade* and [why a news outlet would call 20 video-game makers](#) asking *them* to weigh in on *Roe v. Wade* and why PlayStation's CEO would get [dragged](#) for spending more time talking about his cats than weighing in on *Roe's* potential reversal.

All of this makes perfect sense if one understands it to be the inevitable result of workism, the *Atlantic* writer Derek Thompson's term for the religious-like sentiment that accompanies so much of modern work life. Whereas religion was once the hub around which many of us oriented our lives, the office—what we do there, whom we do it with, and for whom we do it—has replaced the church as the center of our social life.

### [Derek Thompson: Workism is making Americans miserable](#)

"The best-educated and highest-earning Americans, who can have whatever they want, have chosen the office for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays: It's where they feel most themselves," Thompson [wrote](#). "The American conception of work has shifted from *jobs* to *careers* to *callings*—from necessity to status to meaning."

Meanwhile, the right has rejected its corporate-friendly ethos equally speedily for reasons that don't extend far beyond "If you're not with us, you're against us." The motivation is less ideological than punitive, which you can see best in Republican Senator Josh Hawley's bill "to strip Disney of special copyright protections." Disney has no special copyright protections; the copyright law in question may exist partly as a result of Disney's lobbying to maintain control over Mickey Mouse, but it covers *all* holders of copyright. That said, Hawley has phrased his nonsense bill—a repudiation of the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, literally named for a Republican congressman—in this way to make clear *whom* he's against rather than *what*

he's for.

"Now and then it is possible to observe the moral life in process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue," begins Lionel Trilling's collection of lectures, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, first published half a century ago.

We are, perhaps, in one such shift now, during which new elements are added to each ideological wing's respective roster of virtues. You sense it when you read about progressives being [bummed](#) because PR pros are begging clients and potential clients to do whatever they can to avoid becoming the face of a cause or the face of opposition to a cause on social media. You feel it when gadflies on the right [try to destroy a filmmaker](#) because [he spoke critically](#) of a comedian who made un-PC jokes—no matter that he *also* made un-PC jokes, right before the criticism.

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In the face of such a revision, it's a fool's game to try to lay out new rules. We're at a delicate moment in the country's history, one in which rules and fairness matter less to voters or their champions—in boardrooms or Congress—than pure power and the will to use it. With luck, the courts will serve as a bulwark against government excess and the market will serve to correct businesses that step beyond their purview. My hope is that companies, of their own accord, will limit their lobbying to laws that actually affect their business while providing employees encouragement to pursue political goals on their own time, and that politicians will stop pursuing strictures on speech, corporate or otherwise, that they don't like.

But for that to come to pass would require something like a de-escalation in

the culture war. And I fear that [Jonathan Haidt](#) is right: Things are almost certainly going to get worse on that front before they get better.