

Opinion: A young Democrat's viral takedown demands a 'wokeness' rethink

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"Wokeness is a problem and we all know it," James Carville [recently told Vox](#) in his inimitably splenetic way. The veteran strategist called on Democrats to distance themselves from "faculty lounge bulls---" and to undo their image as an "urban, coastal, arrogant party."

This was widely treated as a breakthrough moment in the debate over whether Democrats have a "wokeness" problem. It was approvingly quoted by not [one](#), but [two](#) major New York Times writers.

So I contacted Carville to ask what he thought of Mallory McMorrow.

McMorrow, a Democratic state senator in Michigan, delivered an epic takedown of a GOP colleague on Tuesday that continues to go viral. It included forceful pushback against Republicans over laws stigmatizing gay and trans children and families, and a searing moral defense of treating them respectfully.

Was that "wokeness"? Yes, at least in a sense. But either way, Carville appeared transfixed by it.

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"Enormously effective piece of communication," Carville told me. "There's really no comeback to it."

Carville's endorsement of this approach suggests how this McMorrow moment might push the stale "wokeness" debate in a more salutary direction. It might prod Democrats to rethink their responses to GOP attacks along these lines.

The 35-year-old McMorrow's ire was triggered by a Republican colleague's fundraising pitch describing McMorrow as a "groomer." Be sure to watch McMorrow's full response:

You'll note that McMorrow didn't sound defensive or offer mealy-mouthed, hairsplitting fact-checks. She didn't capitulate to the Republican framing of these matters for a second.

Instead, McMorrow laid bare her deepest convictions and explained how they lead her to her positions on gay and trans rights, and why basic human decency demands them. Importantly, she made this about what *Republicans* are doing.

Many Democrats do profess outrage about the GOP's use of the "groomer" slander. But you rarely hear Democrats go beyond casting themselves as mere victims of a vile smear, and instead hammering those pushing it for their rhetorical degeneracy, phony piety about protecting children, profound lack of rectitude, and all around sleazy and debased public conduct.

McMorrow's description of herself as a White, Christian, suburban mom — one who wants her children to respect and empathize with non-Christian, non-White, gay and trans kids and families — gets at this. It turns the "identity politics" debate on its head.

It says, in effect, that the anti-"woke" warriors will not be permitted to sanctimoniously monopolize the moral and religious high ground for their identity group, while simultaneously pretending to be above identity-mongering and advancing a cruel and exclusionary agenda.

So what does this tell us about the "wokeness" debate?

Carville sees no contradiction between praising McMorrow and denouncing "faculty lounge" language. The rap against "wokeness" is often that Democrats traffic in or are too tolerant of professional-class jargon about race and gender, and that this must be reversed to avoid long-term political doom.

But the answer offered by critics of wokeness often suggests little more than employing some form of rhetorical jujitsu, or some Sister Souljah moment, to evade the charge. This provides another way.

"She spoke English," Carville told me. "She wasn't defensive at all." He noted that McMorrow personalized the issue, drew a sharp and legible contrast with Republicans, and even added in an argument about "roads and schools."

"I'd show this clip as an instructional video," Carville said. Asked if he'd advise other Democrats to talk this way, he said: "I would. *I'm* going to start talking that way."

Those who argue for a middle-ground approach — one that calls out certain rhetoric and analysis about topics such as gender identity as excessive while advocating for a defense of minority rights — can also land on something akin to this sweet spot.

The arguments can continue over where the line should be drawn against excessive wokeness. But liberals and Democrats can at least agree to forcefully defend shared baseline convictions, and above all, to centralize them. As Carville told me, McMorrow showed the way by plainly explaining "what every Democrat believes."

Those warning of the dangers of wokeness are also making a structural argument. Because the Senate and electoral college are biased toward rural, dispersed populations and working-class Whites, Democrats must achieve a deep coalitional shift that reverses ongoing partisan polarization along educational lines. Key to this is reducing the salience of wokeness issues.

Obviously those structural problems would not be solved if every Democrat suddenly started echoing McMorrow, and many other solutions will have to be sought. But as Brian Beutler notes, Democrats who survive in demographically and structurally challenging areas do so in part by building a certain type of image.

This tends to involve an aura of rectitude, ethical conduct and authentic empathizing with working-class people of all races enduring hardships of all kinds. It involves a willingness to say what you believe, to forthrightly expose deeply held convictions to moral scrutiny and argument. This moment appears to fit that bill.

Those demanding that Democrats achieve vast separation from wokeness should say where McMorrow's handling of this fits into their schema. She didn't distance herself from race or gender identity or avoid raising their salience.

So does this constitute something they'd advise against, for fear of aligning too closely with politically dangerous topics or positions? If not, what exactly *are* they saying?