

Trump poised for 'woke' crackdown

President-elect has been critical of DEI for years

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USA TODAY

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump promoted the idea that white Americans were targets of racism and made reversing President Joe Biden's "woke takeover" of Washington a priority of his second term.

Now, the president-elect is in a position to make good on his promises to crack down on corporations that do business with the federal government. On the chopping block: diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

"Trump has been very clear about ending the woke, DEI garbage infecting this country," said Trump spokesperson Steven Cheung.

Trump is staffing his government with loyalists who want to de-"woke" America, from Pete Hegseth, his choice to be Pentagon chief, to Brendan Carr, his pick for Federal Communications Commission chairman, said Allan Schwyer, a principal researcher with business research group The Conference Board.

Longtime aide Stephen Miller has spent the last four years spoiling for this fight, filing dozens of legal actions against "woke" corporations. Vice President-elect JD Vance co-sponsored legislation as a senator to eliminate all federal DEI programs.

"As every day passes and you read more about the types of people he is appointing to different positions, organizations have to take this very seriously," Schwyer said.

In his first term, Trump used executive power to bar the federal government and government contractors from conducting racially "divisive" and "un-American" diversity training. Trump's Labor Department questioned whether diversity initiatives to increase the ranks of Black executives at Microsoft and Wells Fargo violated federal anti-discrimination laws.

"A lot of what the president-elect wants to do, he can do through executive order. He doesn't need congressional



Donald "Trump launched the fight against left-wing racialism in his first term. Now he has the opportunity to finish it," says Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute think tank. THOMAS BENDER/SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE FILE

approval. And it's pretty far reaching," Schwyer said.

Proposals from conservative activists include striking terms like "DEI" from every federal rule and contract, having the Justice Department investigate diversity programs and abolishing Biden administration rules that bar discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, businesses pledged to make their workforces and leadership better reflect the communities they serve. Workers of color are underrepresented at every level of power in corporate America, according to USA TODAY data investigations.

JPMorgan Chase's Jamie Dimon and other business leaders have repeatedly stressed that diversity is good for business.

But four years later, the political landscape has shifted. While corporate diversity efforts are broadly supported

by the American public – especially younger Americans – they face growing scrutiny in courts and statehouses across the country as right-wing groups and operatives push "race neutral" policies. The Supreme Court decision in 2023 to ban the consideration of race in higher education emboldened attacks on workplace programs.

Public sentiment has also shifted. Consumer boycotts and pressure campaigns forced some brands to retreat from marketing campaigns to the LGBTQ+ community, among others.

A new Pew Research Center survey found American workers' opinions on the role of DEI in the workplace have become more negative. About half – 52% – of workers said DEI at work is mostly a good thing, down from 56% in February 2023. The share of workers who said DEI is bad – 21% – is up 5 percentage points since last year.

Luke Hartig, president of reputational risk firm Gravity Research, said Trump's decisive victory created a narrative "that this election was a referendum on DEI and a range of so-called woke policies."

Inclusion strategist Amber Cabral called it quits on her consulting firm

hours after Trump's acceptance speech. She was already out nearly \$500,000 in contracts as mounting attacks on corporate DEI and Trump's campaign rhetoric gave clients cold feet. Colleagues told her she's not alone.

"What the work really is and how it can help us all has been completely obliterated," Cabral said.

Still, Joelle Emerson, co-founder and CEO of diversity strategy and consulting firm Paradigm, has a less pessimistic view.

Fewer than 10% of the organizations surveyed by The Conference Board planned to scale back their DEI commitments over the next three years.

"I think we'll see companies adjust," Emerson said. Most are not abandoning the work, which can range from broadening candidate pools to creating mentorship and coaching programs open to all.

Instead, business leaders are shoring up DEI programs to make them less vulnerable to legal challenges and public criticism. They have backed away from initiatives like hiring targets that conservatives claim are illegal quotas and from executive bonuses tied to DEI goals. A growing number have dropped mentions of diversity goals in shareholder reports.

These days, few companies publicly promote their diversity programs. Major corporations from Walmart to Salesforce declined or did not respond to requests to make executives available to discuss their DEI programs.

Microsoft pointed USA TODAY to its recent diversity and inclusion report, which says: "We remain deeply committed to D&I because it is what creates transformational solutions to the most complex challenges for customers, partners and the world."

Franklin Turner, co-chair of the McCarter & English law firm's government contracts and global trade practice, said the Trump White House will increase pressure on companies that rely on federal funding and those companies may make some adjustments to policies or training materials. But "I don't see the C-suites at companies – and I work with a lot of them – taking an intentional step back," Turner said.