

# Why the term 'DEI' is being weaponized as a racist dog whistle

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[A bridge in Baltimore collapsing](#), [a door falling off an airplane](#) and [antisemitism](#)—what do they have in common? In recent months, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has been blamed for all three.

This may seem a little baffling. In fact, when I tell this to friends who don't keep up with these issues, they're stunned. How, they want to know, is DEI being blamed for these issues? And why would anyone do so?

They're right to be skeptical: these explanations really are quite terrible. But there are reasons why the term DEI is leaping to the forefront of the culture war, pushed by the far right into every conversation possible.

In right-wing rhetoric, the DEI label is often used to play upon racial resentments. It is increasingly appropriated as a racist [dog whistle](#) used to question and undermine the positions, qualifications and abilities of racialized people.

A dog whistle is [a term that also does something else](#)—something less socially acceptable—below the surface. It is a [coded, deniable bit of language](#) that allows people to communicate ideas that would be too offensive if done explicitly.

As podcaster [Peter Shamshiri puts it](#):

"What they're doing is trying to create a framework whereby any person of color's position is inherently suspect...It's about building a sociocultural mechanism for reinforcing the existing hierarchy."

## Co-opting terms

There's [nothing new](#) about [this sort of effort](#). But the way DEI is used to play into racist sentiments is uniquely powerful, and more potent than other culture war terms.

Condemnations of [critical race theory](#) played a key role in [educational gag orders](#) and [book bans](#) in states like Florida. But that is limited to

educational contexts.

"[Affirmative action](#)" is also used to attack members of underrepresented groups who find their way into desirable positions, but it's no good for book bans. Other terms like "woke," "snowflake" and "politically correct" can readily be used to discredit anti-racist activists, but they can't be easily applied to someone who integrates into a white workplace.

DEI can cover all of these. Those books you don't like? Blame DEI initiatives. Black people getting prestigious jobs? DEI is at fault. Annoying young student activists? Too much DEI on university campuses. It's hard to find a hot-button issue or social context where DEI can't be hurled as a term of abuse to undermine marginalized people.

And that's just what has happened. A Republican lawmaker in Utah [blamed the Baltimore bridge collapse on DEI](#) saying, "this is what happens when you have governors who prioritize diversity over the well-being and security of citizens." Others called the city's Black mayor, Brandon Scott, a "[DEI mayor.](#)"

In response to a door falling off a Boeing plane, [Elon Musk asked](#) Twitter users: "Do you want to fly in an airplane where they prioritized DEI hiring over your safety?"

Harvard professor [Alan Dershowitz](#) claimed that a "DEI bureaucracy has become a central contributor to anti-Jewish attitudes on campuses."

However, DEI is more than just a convenient catch-all term for culture war flashpoints. This rhetoric is having a real effect on how various institutions run. [Universities in Texas and Florida have cut dozens of jobs](#) in response to state bans on DEI initiatives.

## DEI as a dog whistle

When people blame DEI for airplane doors coming off, or a bridge collapsing, they are really blaming Black people without saying so explicitly. As American TV host [Joy Reid noted](#): "At this point it's evident what they mean by "DEI," right? It means Black people... It's not fashionable to be openly racist anymore in America... so referring to a Black mayor as a DEI mayor gets the point across."

Baltimore Mayor Scott was [even more pointed](#): "We know what these folks really want to say when they say DEI mayor... They really want to say the N-word."

Dog whistles require two meanings. The surface, more acceptable one, is widely understood; the other is the less acceptable one, hidden because it needs to be.

Scott explained the hidden meaning of "DEI" in racist contexts. But the surface one matters too because it provides good cover to argue that one's rhetoric is not racially charged. The Utah lawmaker was able to insist that he meant officials had been more concerned with DEI programs than with safety, and that's the very same line that was used about Boeing. It's more acceptable to criticize a program or corporation than it is to criticize people for their race.

Another reason DEI is especially effective as cover for racist views is because even anti-racists can find it objectionable. Workplace DEI training sessions are widespread, and face criticism from across the political spectrum.

On the right, the concern is that white people are being made to feel guilty. On the left, it's that these sessions can be a way [for organizations](#) to [virtue signal](#) while avoiding effective action.

DEI, then, can be seen as a rhetorical Swiss Army knife of weaponized language. It can be used to blame racialized people for doors falling off airplanes, history classes, bridges collapsing, student activism or simply for getting jobs. And it will carry with it the hostility that people from all along the [political spectrum](#) feel towards DEI training programs.

All the while, it will also be dog whistling the very worst racist sentiments. Swiss army knives are useful, but in the wrong hands they can be dangerous. We need to recognize the very real dangers of how DEI is being used.

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