

# Political correctness

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## WHAT IS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS? DEFINITION, PROS, AND CONS

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“Political correctness” is the process of speaking without offending anyone. Love it or hate it, what was once considered simple “good manners,” has become far more involved, and frankly, controversial. Exactly what is political correctness, where did it come from, and why do we love to argue about it?

### Key Takeaways

- Political correctness (PC) refers to language that avoids offending persons of various genders, races, sexual orientations, cultures, or social conditions.
- One of the most commonly stated goals of political correctness is the **elimination** of verbal discrimination and negative stereotyping.
- The **demand for** political correctness is often controversial and becomes the source of criticism and satire.
- Critics argue that political correctness cannot change the underlying feelings that lead to discrimination and social **marginalization**.
- Political correctness is now a common weapon in the cultural and political war between American conservatives and liberals.

### Political Correctness Definition

The term political correctness describes written or spoken language that's intentionally phrased to avoid offending or marginalizing groups identified by certain social characteristics, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. Beyond the obvious avoidance of **overt slurs**, political correctness also includes the avoidance of terms that **reinforce preconceived** negative stereotypes. The elimination of verbal discrimination is often considered one of the main goals of political correctness.

Since the 1980s, the increasing demand for political correctness has been alternately praised, criticized, and satirized by commentators from all corners of the political spectrum. The term is sometimes applied **derisively** in order to **ridicule** the idea that language is capable of change—or that the public's perceptions and prejudices against certain groups can change through language.

Among the more subtle forms of political correctness is the avoidance of the use of microaggressions—brief **off-hand comments** or actions that either intentionally or unintentionally express negative prejudicial **slights** toward any marginalized or minority group. For example, telling an Asian-American student, “You people always get good grades,” while possibly meant as a compliment, may be taken as a microaggressive slur.

A relatively new form of being politically correct is to avoid “**mansplaining**.” A combination of “man” and “explaining,” mansplaining is a form of political incorrectness in which men marginalize women by attempting to explain something to them—often unnecessarily—in a **condescending**, oversimplified, or childlike manner.

## History of Political Correctness

In the United States, the term “politically correct” first appeared in 1793, when it was used in the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the case of *Chisholm v. Georgia* dealing with the rights of state citizens to **sue** state governments in U.S. federal courts. During the 1920s, the term was used in political discussions between American communists and socialists to refer to a strict, almost dogmatic, **adherence** to the Soviet Union’s Communist Party doctrine, which socialists considered to be the “correct” position in all political issues.

The term was first used sarcastically during the late 1970s and early 1980s by moderate-to-liberal politicians to refer to the **stance** of extreme left-wing liberals on some issues considered by the moderates to be frivolous or of little actual importance to their causes. In the early 1990s, conservatives had begun using “political correctness” in a **pejorative manner** criticizing the teaching and **advocacy** of what they considered left-wing liberal ideology “gone wild” in U.S. colleges, universities, and liberal-leaning media.

In May 1991, then U.S. President George H.W. Bush used the term when he told the graduating class of the University of Michigan that, “The notion of political correctness has **ignited controversy** across the land. And although the movement arises from the **laudable** desire to sweep away the **debris of** racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics **off-limits**, certain expression **off-limits**, and even certain gestures **off-limits.**”

## Pros and Cons

Advocates of the process of political correctness argue that our perception of other people is greatly influenced by the language we hear used about them. Language, therefore, when used carelessly or **maliciously**, can reveal and promote our **biases** against various identity groups. In this manner, the strict use of politically correct language helps to prevent the marginalization and social exclusion of those groups.

Persons opposed to political correctness regard it as a form of censorship that **quashes freedom of speech** and dangerously restricts public debate on important social issues. They further accuse advocates of an extreme PC culture of creating offensive language where none had existed before. Others argue that the very term “political correctness” can be used in ways that can actually **hinder** attempts to stop hate and discriminatory speech.

Opponents point to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey which showed that 59 percent of Americans felt “too many people are easily offended these days over the language that others use.” According to Pew, while most people naturally try to avoid using language that offends others, extreme examples of politically correct terms tend to **devalue** the English language and lead to confusion.

Finally, those opposed to political correctness argue that telling people that it is socially wrong for them to express their feelings and beliefs in certain ways will not make those feelings and beliefs go away. Sexism, for example, will not end by simply referring to salesmen and saleswomen as “salespersons.” Similarly, referring to the homeless as “temporarily displaced” will not create jobs or **wipe out poverty**.

While some people might swallow their politically incorrect words, they will not abandon the feelings that motivated them. Instead, they will hold those feelings inside to **fester** and become even more **toxic** and harmful.