

**THE EMERGING POLITICAL ACTOR:  
AN ANALYSIS OF CORPORATE AMERICA'S  
INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER POLITICAL  
ENGAGEMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

An increasing number of companies are now participating in polarized political discourse. This new component of organizational activity has been studied to understand its impact on purchase intentions. Not yet examined is its impact on consumer political engagement. The increasing number of companies using new methods to engage in said polarized political discourse and the persistently low relative voter turn-out in the United States substantiate the importance of examining this unique phenomenon. Accordingly, this study examines the impact of organizational engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse and its impact on consumer political engagement. Likelihood of voting, a component of political engagement, receives an individual examination. Utilizing a two-context experimental design, this study examines the method of organizational engagement in polarized political discourse (direct, indirect, or silence), impact of the engagement (positive, negative, or no awareness of impact), and consumer and organization stance on divisive social-political issues (agree, disagree, or uncertain) to assess the impact on consumer political engagement. The results show that direct engagement increases the likelihood of consumer political engagement, one aspect of which is voting, irrespective of whether a consumer agrees with an organization's stance. Further, an organization's direct engagement that results in a positive/negative impact makes consumers more/less likely to vote. Indirect engagement and silence effectively have no impact on voting likelihood. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Political-Corporate Social Responsibility; Divisive issues; Consumer political engagement; Marketing communications

**INTRODUCTION**

American politics is currently experiencing an unparalleled phase of political polarization (Foran 2017). This era of divisiveness has given rise to an increasing

number of ideologically-diverse voices contributing to political discourse. In addition to the opinions of various political party representatives and individual citizens, companies themselves are emerging as participants in the political discourse arena by publicly taking stances on social-political issues via pointed and politically-positioned advertising. This activity and its impact on consumer purchase intentions has begun to draw attention in the literature (e.g. Dodd and Supa 2014, 2015; Supa and Dodd 2015; Frynas and Stephens 2015); however, the literature has not yet examined a related but unique phenomenon: whether company engagement in divisive social-political discourse impacts consumer political engagement. The current state of political polarization in the United States, coupled with persistently low voter turnout, necessitates further study of corporate America's influence on consumer behavior beyond those behaviors solely related to monetary outcomes.

Political division in the United States reached record levels during the Obama administration and have increased during the Trump administration (Foran 2017). Relatedly, in 2018, 64% of consumers indicated that a brand's position on a social-political issue influenced their decision to buy or boycott a brand ("Earned Brand" 2018). In contrast, in 2014 only 44% of consumers indicated the same influence was present ("Earned Brand" 2017).

During this time the number of organizations engaging in discourse related to divisive social-political issues increased. Communication vehicles used by organizations to engage in said discourse are, for example, commercials aired during a Super Bowl, social media posts, and/or decisions about serving a customer(s) by small organizations. Several specific examples include:

- Chevrolet's "The New Us" commercial aired during the 2014 Super Bowl in which Chevrolet advocates for LGBTQ inclusivity while also communicating about the Traverse.
- Audi's "Daughter" commercial aired during the 2017 Super Bowl in which Audi advocates for gender equality while also communicating about the S5.
- 84 Lumber's "The Journey Begins" commercial aired during the 2017 Super Bowl in which 84 Lumber advocates for humanizing the national immigration debate while recognizing the sacrifice and grit of many immigrants.
- Budweiser's "Born the Hard Way" commercial aired during the 2017 Super Bowl in which it raises awareness about its founder, an immigrant, and the sacrifice and grit necessary to emigrate and prosper in the United States.
- Penzey's Spices 2019 social media campaign calling for other companies to no longer advertise on Fox News while also spending more than any other company on Trump pro-impeachment ads run on Facebook.
- Coca-Cola's "Equal Love" advertisements in Hungary during 2019 in which the company advocates for same-sex couple acceptance while communicating about its product.

- Volkswagen's "There's Room for Everyone" commercial aired during 2019 in which it advocates for diversity while communicating about the Atlas.
- Nike's ongoing "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." campaign in which it makes clear its alignment with Colin Kaepernick's anti-racism initiatives.

Examples of small organizations include:

- Washington D.C. restaurant Red Hen's decision in 2018 to deny service to Sarah Sanders (former Trump administration White House press secretary) in protest of various Trump administration policies.
- Birmingham, Alabama restaurant Shu Shop's decision in 2019 to close for a day to avoid serving what was described as "MAGA racists" attending a nearby event.
- Atlanta, Georgia craft brewery Scofflaw's decision to offer free beer to Trump supporters in 2018; this prompted its Scottish craft brewery partner BrewDog to cancel a planned joint series of events to clarify their political positions were not aligned with Scofflaw's.

Relatedly, Duke University's *The CMO Survey* showed that in August of 2019, 26.5% of "top marketers" indicated they believe it is appropriate for their brand to take a stance on divisive social-political issues. In February 2018, the same survey showed that only 17.4% of respondents held that position (Mandese 2019). The increase from 2018 to 2019 appears consistent with the recent increase of observable activity demonstrating corporate engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse.

While companies typically have more reach when engaging in any form of public communication than the average consumer, consumers also have power that is exercised via voting behavior. However, this power is often not exercised by eligible voters in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center (Desilver 2018), only 56% of eligible voters cast ballots during the 2016 presidential election; this percentage has remained consistent over the past several decades. In 2016, the United States rate of voter turnout was ranked 26<sup>th</sup> out of 32 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development peer group.

The aforementioned environment of political polarization, new avenues for corporate engagement in political discourse related to divisive social-political issues, and low voter turnout drives the goal of this research: to explore whether consumers' political engagement is influenced by companies' political engagement, or lack thereof, in divisive social-political issues.

The focus of this study answers Frynas and Stephens' (2015) call for research that examines the Political-Corporate Social Responsibility (P-CSR) context. Frynas

and Stephens (2015) describe P-CSR as a nascent area of CSR in which, among other characteristics, companies act in a manner that may impact government regulation. These actions may have a global governance or national public regulation-type impact when existing government regulation does not address the social-political aspect of interest. Arguably, an organization's engagement in a polarized political environment may have the aforementioned impact. The outcome of interest in this study is whether consumer political engagement behavior changes due in part to company engagement in politically divisive discourse.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The recent increase of organizations publicly engaging in divisive political discourse is novel. However, the notion that organizations exert significant political influence is not. From an internal organizational perspective, an organizations' political influence on an individual's value and belief development can supersede the influence of family, church, schools, and one's community (Cheney and McMillan 1990; Deetz 1992). From a broader societal perspective, large corporations possess, and at times use, their resources, technology, and finances to influence public policy development (Cheney and Dionisopolous 1989). Most relevant for this study is that an increasing number of organizations are now wielding this power in arguably the most public way possible for an organization – mass communication. Except for a series of exploratory studies in which corporate social advocacy related to controversial social issues was found to influence consumer behavioral intentions (Dodd and Supa 2014, 2015; Supa and Dodd 2015), this area remains mostly unexplored in the literature (Supa and Dodd 2015).

The specific aspects of interest in this study derive from observing how organizations engage in divisive social-political issue discourse, the potential impact of said discourse, and consumers' political stances relative to an organization's stance on a social-political issue(s). These aspects are explored across a two-context study.

### Context 1: Social-political Issue Engagement Method and Impact

Direct engagement, indirect engagement, and silence represent three broad categories of organizational engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse. The three types of impacts associated with the type of organizational engagement are: positive impact, negative impact, or no consumer awareness of an impact.

### *Direct Engagement*

Direct engagement is exhibited by an organization communicating a position that establishes their stance on a social-political issue. Examples include the Chevrolet Traverse “The New Us” commercial in which Chevrolet makes clear that the company is LGBTQ inclusive. Another example is Nike’s unwavering support of Colin Kaepernick aligned social justice positions, which is made evident via commercials and product development decisions (e.g. 13-star U.S. Flag themed tennis-shoe cancelled launch in 2019).

Bank of America’s 2019 decision to cease lending to organizations that operate immigrant detention centers clearly demonstrates what Frynas and Stephens (2015) describe as organizational activity that seeks to address a specific social-political aspect when existing government regulation does not. Bank of America explicitly stated that its decision was driven in part by a sense of responsibility to de facto create public policy when needed reforms had not occurred via government (Telford and Merle 2019). In the context of persuasive speaking, a “powerful” communication style, or “direct engagement” as described in this study, leads to perceptions of the communicator as more influential (Erickson et al. 1978) and worthy of respect (see Fragale 2006).

### *Indirect Engagement*

Indirect engagement is exhibited by an organization that does not take a position on a specific divisive social-political issue. Rather, indirect engagement is described in this study as an organization seeking to elucidate commonalities amongst individuals or to provide an example of a more sympathetic or empathetic way to interact. Examples of this include McDonald’s “We have more in common than we think” commercial aired in 2018, Jeep’s 2017 “Free to be you” Super Bowl commercial aired in 2017, and Marriot’s “Human: The Golden Rule” commercial aired in 2017.

Notably, these types of efforts are occurring during a time in which consumer behavior is increasingly influenced by an organization’s stance on a social-political issue(s) (see “Earned Brand” 2017, 2018). Though organizational communication efforts described in this study as “indirect engagement” are well intentioned, they are notable for not directly addressing any specific divisive social-political issue. The lack of direct engagement is arguably sufficient to explore whether it influences consumer political engagement (in)consistent with other communication approaches.

### *Silence*

Silence is exhibited by an organization that neither directly nor indirectly engages in divisive social-political issues. Silence is included in this exploratory study due

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to the changing nature of the impact of organizational activity on consumer behavior (e.g. “Earned Brand” 2017, 2018) and the current context of social-political divisiveness. Additionally, a lack of engagement by organizations in this P-CSR context may be notable, due at least in part to the increasing engagement in the P-CSR context by other organizations.

### *Impact*

In this study impact refers to possible outcomes associated with organizational engagement, or lack thereof, in P-CSR activities. The deontological and teleological moral philosophy of ethics, which is grounded in the normative theory of ethics (Hunt and Vitell 1986) guide the inclusion of impact in this study. In ethics studies, this foundation helps determine the basis of judgment that leads one to perceive an act as right or wrong (Shaw 2008). The basis of judgment is determined by understanding whether the judgment of an act is influenced by the outcome it produces (teleological) or if the method used to produce an outcome (deontological) is the more influential component. Understanding the basis of this judgment helps to better understand the antecedent(s) of the behaviors and/or behavioral intentions associated with various actions and outcomes.

Though ethical judgment is not the focus of this study, this study includes impact as one key variable to observe; thus, impact is the teleological component. Specifically, this study assesses whether differences in consumer responses occur due in part to organizational engagement in divisive social-political issues that results in a positive or negative impact on a social-political issue or if a consumer has no awareness of an impact. Combining the method of engagement with impact for observational purposes allows for assessing the extent to which any influence on consumer political engagement intentions is based on perceptions of the action taken by organizations (deontological) or the impact (teleological) of said action on the issue.

### **Context 2: Issue Stance**

Dodd and Supa (2015) found that a consumer’s agreement/disagreement with the stance taken by an organization pertaining to a controversial social-political issue positively/negatively influences purchase intentions. The influence was found to be stronger when consumers disagree with a pro-stance (e.g. pro-LGBTQ) an organization takes and when both the organization and consumer take an anti-stance (e.g. anti-LGBTQ). These intriguing findings, and the social-political issue context in which they were found, support the relevancy of issue stance in this study.

Further, in the context of P-CSR, some organizations are motivated to impact government regulation in relation to social-political issues. While government relations are a more traditional avenue for this type of influence, a novel and

intriguing area of organizational and societal life is the notion of organizations potentially influencing electorate behavior by taking stances on divisive social-political issues via marketing communication. Accordingly, the specific aspect of interest in this study is whether a social-political issues stance advocated by an organization impacts consumer political engagement. This type of influence would suggest that organizations have the potential to impact government regulation indirectly via influencing consumer political engagement.

### **Control variables: Perceived Political Self-Efficacy and Demographics**

Perceived political self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that their political engagement can impact political outcomes; this perception is positively related to political engagement (Vecchione et al. 2014). Age, education, gender (Verba et al. 1995), and ethnicity (Krogstad and Lopez 2017) correlate with variations in political engagement. These variables were controlled for in this study.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

The aspects of interest in this study were operationalized using a two-part experimental design consisting of the following two contexts: (1) three (direct/indirect engagement and silence) x three (positive/negative/no awareness of impact) and, (2) three (stance agreement/disagreement or stance uncertainty) x one (direct engagement that includes communication of stance). Utilizing this approach enables a more precise manipulation operationalization and control of potentially unmanageable variables (Bitner et al. 1990).

In the context 1 scenarios, a fictitious company was described as having engaged directly, indirectly, or not at all in divisive social-political issue discourse via a commercial. This was followed by describing the impact of said action as positively/negatively contributing to an outcome related to the social-political issue. No mention of impact was incorporated in the "no awareness of impact" condition. In the context 2 scenarios, a fictitious company was described as taking a direct approach to communicating its stance on a controversial social-political issue via a commercial. This was followed by stating that the respondent agreed/disagreed with the stance or was uncertain of their stance.

In contexts 1 and 2 scenarios, the focus on a specific divisive social-political issue was determined by which of eight pre-selected issues the respondent ranked as the most important to them. The eight issues that were ranked are based on the 2019 Pew Research list of the most divisive contemporary political issues (Bialik 2019) and the respondents' rankings occurred prior to scenario exposure. Perceived divisiveness of the issue was then measured. For context 2, whether a respondent could proceed in the experiment was determined by which condition they were



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exposed to and whether they indicated that they did or did not have a stance on their top-ranked issue. Thus, for example, the respondent must have a stance on their top-ranked issue to proceed in the “agree/disagree with issue stance” condition.

## Sample

A sample of 672 (57% male) responses were collected via Qualtrics with each of the 12 scenarios having between 51 and 60 responses (see Table 2 or 3). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70 years ( $M = 33.7$ ;  $SD = 9.6$ ). Qualtrics identified and obtained samples from individuals who have lived in the United States for at least 10 years. The 10-year minimum was established to increase the likelihood that respondents were aware of the state of political polarization occurring during the past two presidential administrations (Foran 2017) and the unique context of organizations using mass communication vehicles to address various divisive social-political issues.

## Measurement

Political engagement was measured using a six-item scale where one is significantly more likely to engage and seven is significantly less likely (Vigoda-Gadot 2006). A four-item perceived political self-efficacy scale (Vecchione et al. 2014), one-item perceived scenario realism scale (Dabholkar and Bagozzi 2002), and one-item perceived divisiveness measure all utilized a seven-point Likert measure(s) where one is “strongly disagree” and seven is “strongly agree.” A manipulation check was used to ensure the distinctions associated with the operationalized variables were accurately understood.

## Results

Scenario realism scores ranged from 5.14 to 6.13 and perceived issue divisiveness ranged from 5.15 to 5.81. Factor analysis of political engagement and perceived political self-efficacy, respectively, led to excluding likelihood of “becoming a candidate for public office” from the political engagement scale. The remaining political engagement items pertain to likelihood of political party membership, voting in general elections, and engaging in political protests or discussions. Subsequent analysis deemed political engagement and perceived political self-efficacy, respectively, suitable for analysis based on the following (Hair et al. 2010; Pallant 2010): Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) (.921; .819), Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $p=.000$ ;  $p=.000$ ), standardized factor loadings (.787-.858; .829-.869), variance explained (69.11%; 71.62%), and Cronbach's Alpha (.930; .910).



## Group Analysis

Analysis of the 12 groups' responses to the various conditions reveals intriguing

Conditions	Conditions Description
1. Direct, No Impact	Specific issue stance taken, no knowledge of impact
2. Direct, Positive Impact	Specific issue stance taken, positive impact on issue resolution
3. Direct, Negative Impact	Specific issue stance taken, negative impact on issue divisiveness
4. Indirect, No Impact	Emphasize general societal commonalities and/or advocate for kindness, no knowledge of impact
5. Indirect, Positive Impact	Emphasize general societal commonalities and/or advocate for kindness, positive impact on reduction of general political divisiveness and issues resolutions
6. Indirect, Negative Impact	Emphasize general societal commonalities and/or advocate for kindness, negative impact on general political divisiveness and issues resolutions
7. Silence	No engagement in divisive social-political discourse environment
8. Silence, Positive Impact	No engagement in divisive social-political discourse environment, positive impact on reduction of general political divisiveness and issues resolutions
9. Silence, Negative Impact	No engagement in divisive social-political discourse environment, negative impact on general political divisiveness and issues resolutions
10. Direct, Stance Agreement	Specific issue stance taken, agreement with stance
11. Direct, Stance Disagreement	Specific issue stance taken, disagreement with stance
12. Direct, Stance Uncertainty	Specific issue stance taken, uncertain of stance position

differences. The 12 different conditions are briefly explained in Table 1. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the statistical differences pertaining to political engagement and likelihood of voting in general elections, respectively, across the 12 conditions.

### Table 1: Conditions

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to assess whether differences in political engagement are observed based on the method of organizational engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse and its associated impact. There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level:  $F(11, 660) = 6.045, p = .000$ . A medium-large effect size of 0.09 was found using eta squared. For reference, an effect size of 0.01 is considered small, 0.06 medium, and .14 large (Cohen 1988; Pallant 2010). Specifically, as Table 2 illustrates, the direct, stance agreement condition is the one in which the highest

degree of political engagement was likely. This condition also has the most significant differences in said engagement across all conditions. Of the 11 comparison condition groups, the direct, stance agreement condition differs significantly in its impact on political engagement from nine groups. The two condition groups it does not differ from are (a) direct, stance disagreement condition and (b) direct, positive impact on issue resolution condition. The only other unique significant differences occurred with the direct, negative impact on issue condition (direct, positive impact; direct, stance disagreement) and the direct, stance disagreement condition (indirect, no awareness of impact).

Table 2 -

**Political Engagement: Descriptive Statistics and Multiple Comparisons**

Conditions	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	*Significant Differences by Conditions Mean Difference, p-value
1. Direct, No Impact	52	23.08	7.21	11.00	38.00	<b>10:</b> 6.98, p=.000
2. Direct, Positive Impact	56	20.04	7.22	6.00	35.00	<b>3:</b> -5.75, p=.006
3. Direct, Negative Impact	51	25.78	7.26	11.00	40.00	<b>2:</b> 5.75, p=.006 <b>10:</b> 9.68, p=.000 <b>11:</b> 6.33, p=.001
4. Indirect, No Impact	59	24.12	7.48	8.00	39.00	<b>10:</b> 8.02, p=.000 <b>11:</b> 4.67, p=.042
5. Indirect, Positive Impact	54	22.57	7.31	9.00	40.00	<b>10:</b> 6.47, p=.000
6. Indirect, Negative Impact	58	22.40	7.97	7.00	40.00	<b>10:</b> 6.29, p=.001
7. Silence, No Impact	56	22.18	8.00	8.00	42.00	<b>10:</b> 6.07, p=.001
8. Silence, Positive Impact	53	23.23	8.05	6.00	40.00	<b>10:</b> 7.13, p=.000
9. Silence, Negative Impact	55	21.78	7.54	7.00	40.00	<b>10:</b> 5.68, p=.005
10. Direct, Stance Agreement	58	16.10	7.30	6.00	37.00	9 group differences; please reference groups <b>1, 3-9, and 12</b>
11. Direct, Stance Disagreement	60	19.45	7.60	6.00	41.00	<b>3:</b> -6.33, p=.001 <b>7:</b> -4.67, p=.042
12. Direct, Stance Uncertainty	60	21.63	7.32	6.00	39.00	<b>10:</b> 5.53, p=.005
TOTAL	672	21.80	7.83	6.00	42.00	(Effect Size = .09)

\* Condition number indicates which comparative condition results are reported; condition number corresponds with conditions column

The political engagement results are the first of the two outcomes-based foci of this research. The second is whether any of the conditions of interest impact voting behavior specifically. Accordingly, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore whether differences in intentions to vote in general elections are observed depending on the method of organizational engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse and its associated impact. There was a statistically significant difference at the  $p < .05$  level:  $F(11, 660) = 7.412, p = .000$ .

**Table 3 - Voting: Descriptive Statistics and Multiple Comparisons**

Condition	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	*Significant Differences by Condition Mean Difference, p-value
1. Direct, No Impact	52	3.63	1.572	1	7	<b>10:</b> 1.32, p=.000
2. Direct, Positive Impact	56	2.91	1.180	1	5	<b>3:</b> -1.58, p=.000 <b>4:</b> -1.07; p=.008
3. Direct, Negative Impact	51	4.49	1.362	2	7	5 group differences; please reference groups <b>2</b> and <b>9-12</b>
4. Indirect, No Impact	59	3.98	1.420	1	7	<b>2:</b> 1.07, p=.008 <b>10:</b> 1.67, p=.000 <b>11:</b> .983, p=.020
5. Indirect, Positive Impact	54	3.54	1.476	1	7	<b>10:</b> 1.23, p=.001
6. Indirect, Negative Impact	58	3.59	1.697	1	7	<b>10:</b> 1.28, p=.000
7. Silence, No Impact	56	3.59	1.474	1	7	<b>10:</b> 1.28, p=.000
8. Silence, Positive Impact	53	3.57	1.474	1	7	<b>10:</b> 1.26, p=.001
9. Silence, Negative Impact	55	3.45	1.608	1	7	<b>3:</b> -1.04, p=.021 <b>10:</b> 1.14, p=.003
10. Direct, Stance Agreement	58	2.31	1.353	1	6	8 group differences; please reference groups <b>1</b> and <b>3-9</b>
11. Direct, Stance Disagreement	60	3.00	1.687	1	7	<b>3:</b> -1.49, p=.000 <b>4:</b> -.983, p=.020
12. Direct, Stance Uncertainty	60	3.20	1.614	1	7	<b>3:</b> -1.29, p=.000
TOTAL	672	3.42	1.580	1	7	(Effect Size = .10)

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**\* Condition number indicates which comparative condition results are reported; condition number corresponds with conditions column**

A medium-large effect size of 0.10 was found using eta squared. Specifically, and generally consistent with political engagement, Table 3 illustrates that the direct, stance agreement condition is the one in which the highest degree of general election voting participation was likely.

The direct, stance agreement condition also has the most significant differences for voting across all conditions. Of the 11 comparison condition groups, the direct, stance agreement condition differs significantly in its impact on voting likelihood from eight groups. The three condition groups it does not differ from are (a) direct, stance disagreement condition, (b) direct, stance uncertainty condition, and (c) direct, positive impact condition. The direct, negative impact condition resulted in significant differences between five of the 11 comparison condition groups. Notably, the direct, negative impact condition is the only condition of all 12 in which there was a reported decrease in likelihood of voting in general elections. The remaining 11 ranged from no impact to more likely to vote.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The present research builds on pioneering work on P-CSR (Frynas and Stephens 2015) and corporate social advocacy (Dodd and Supa 2014, 2015). Our empirical study delves further into the nascent P-CSR context in part because it is increasingly evident that customers want companies they support to act more like citizens (Mandese 2019). Influencing the electorate via mass communication related to divisive social-political issue discourse appears to be how some in corporate America believe organizations should act within the P-CSR context. Nike founder Phil Knight is unequivocal on this matter: “You can’t try to go down the middle of the road. You have to take a stand on something...” (Beer 2019).

This study provides interesting findings related to the impact of organizational engagement in divisive social-political issue discourse on consumers. Results for political engagement and voting behavior were similar, thus allowing for a closer examination of the likelihood of voting in general elections. The conditions in which direct engagement was utilized resulted in the highest relative impact on likelihood of voting. These results appear consistent with Erickson et al. (1978), which posits that the use of a powerful communication style, described in this study as akin to direct engagement, leads one to be perceived as more influential. Interestingly, the positive correlation holds regardless of whether a consumer agrees, disagrees, or is uncertain whether they agree with an organization’s social-political issue stance.

In Erickson et al. (1978) a powerful speaking style was established as a factor that increases the likelihood of a message receiver accepting an advocated position. In this study one manipulation introduces the explicit disagreement with a position.

In this condition the results show the impact of direct engagement on likelihood of voting is similar, regardless of an organization's or individual's social-political issue stance. Thus, the social-political issue position being advocated is less influential than the direct method of engagement when likelihood of voting is the outcome of interest. These findings differ from those of Dodd and Supa (2015), in which stance agreement/disagreement had a positive/negative impact; however, it is important to note that the context of Dodd and Supa (2015) involved exploring the influence on purchase intentions.

The results also showed that neither an indirect nor silent approach impact voting likelihood. This suggests that the method of engagement (the deontological component of the scenarios) is the basis of an individual's judgment that drives their response in the context of this study. However, a negative impact associated with a direct approach is the only condition in which voting likelihood decreased; this suggests a teleological-type judgment and response occurs when the impact is known in direct engagement conditions. This finding is particularly intriguing when considering the potential impact of this type of organizational P-CSR activity on consumers and how emphasizing different aspects (e.g. engagement method, issue stance, and/or impact) via marketing communication influences the likelihood of voting.

Also noteworthy is that two of the three conditions in which direct engagement occurs have a positive associated aspect (stance agreement or positive impact) and these two conditions positively impact likelihood of voting. Developing a preliminary understanding of this outcome may begin with Press (2018) in which it is posited that perceived social ties with like-minded coconspirators are an antecedent of individual acts of moral courage. In other words, in this study seeing organizations take a like-minded stance or having a positive impact on divisiveness reduction and issue resolution may have an empowering effect on consumers. Interestingly, the results also suggest that a direct stance disagreement condition increases voting likelihood. The stance disagreement condition, which essentially establishes a barrier between the organization and a consumer based on the social-political issue stance, motivates a consumer to vote.

Several notable limitations and future research avenues exist for the current research. First, a real brand was not used in this study thereby leaving unaddressed the influence of brand perception on political engagement. Future research can investigate the impact of, for example, brand equity perceptions in the context of this study to assess its relative impact on political engagement. Second, political candidates also use marketing communication to make clear their positions on various social-political issues during general election seasons. Thus, future research can examine the relative influence of political candidate messaging and organizational messaging when each occurs concurrently to better understand the impact of these messages on consumers. Third, in this study only one exposure to an example of the phenomenon of interest occurred followed by an immediate

response measurement. This leaves the question of, for example, whether the affect measured in this study holds constant if a general election occurs at different points of time in the future. Finally, we were not able to measure actual voting behavior. A pre- and post-general election study can better assess whether the self-reports provided by respondents in this study reflect actual voting behavior.

## Implications

Whether one cites the previously noted Duke University *The CMO Survey*, the development of P-CSR, the most recent Edelman Earned Brand studies, or Phil Knight, it is apparent that organizations can no longer avoid political issues as has occurred in previous decades. Consumers are increasingly demanding that organizations act as citizens and more organizations are responding as such through, for example, advertising efforts. In this capacity, organizations should be aware of the potential to influence the electorate and the conditions in which that influence occurs.

The findings are relevant to the influence on the electorate in that they show organizations can make it more or less likely that consumers, who are citizens first, will vote in general elections. For organizations choosing to enter this realm of society, the results suggest it should contemplate its purpose deeply before engaging in this P-CSR role. Whether or not the intention is to influence how these divisive social-political issues are legislated, this outcome can occur due to its impact on the electorate's likelihood of voting. This seems potentially more likely when considered simultaneously with the persistently low voter turn-out in the United States.

Specifically, the results suggest that direct organizational engagement in divisive social-political issues via marketing communication leads consumers of these messages to be more likely to vote. This effect occurs regardless of whether they agree with the organization's stance on the issue. Thus, for example, an organization should be aware of potentially unintended outcomes if the organization seeks to influence a social-political issue by directly taking a stance on the issue. The unintended outcome is that directly taking a stance also invigorates those who hope for the issue to be addressed in a manner different than what the organization desires. This outcome can be further compounded if, for example, by invigorating both sides of a divisive debate the degree of divisiveness related to the issue increases. Should this type of negative impact be presumed to be due in part to an organization's actions, then the electorate becomes less likely to vote.

Relatedly, if an organization determines that its political engagement has contributed to a positive outcome such as the resolution of an issue or improvement of the environment pertaining to a politically divisive issue, then the organization should consider communicating about that outcome. Consumers are more likely

to vote when they are aware that direct organizational engagement in politically divisive issue discourse contributed to a positive impact on said issue. Conversely, consumer awareness of a negative impact has the opposite effect. This suggests that organizations should seek to gauge the likelihood of a positive or negative impact when engaging directly in divisive social-political issue discourse. Though this suggestion appears obvious given the findings of this exploratory study, it should be considered in the broader context of shifting general consumer expectations that organizations engage in discourse pertaining to social-political issues and the current lack of guidance for organizations in this context.

Finally, if part of the reason an organization engages in social-political issue discourse is to influence how those issues are ultimately legislated via influencing electorate voting behavior, then indirectly engaging in this realm of society is not advisable. Though seeking to illuminate more positive aspects of society as the indirect engagement approach does is well-intentioned, it does not impact one's likelihood of voting. This outcome occurs regardless of any potential positive or negative impact associated with indirect engagement. Thus, the results suggest it is not advisable to communicate about a positive impact if that impact is coupled with an indirect approach. This contrasts with it being advisable to communicate about a positive impact if that impact is coupled with a direct approach. Silence evidences no discernable impact in this study.

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