

**Weathering Polarization: Corporate Sustainment of Stakeholders' Long-Term Trust Through**

**Values Alignment**

Final Capstone

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## **Abstract**

Polarization of sociopolitical issues is at an all-time high, which presents more challenges for corporations in managing the elevated expectations of multiple stakeholder groups. Society calls on corporations to expand their scope to matters outside everyday business operations and become involved in sociopolitical issues. Conservatives and liberals have differing views on how corporations should interact with sociopolitical issues. Public relations professionals must assist corporate management in making decisions based on the characteristics of their stakeholders and their brand purpose. Together, they must assess risks and opportunities that preserve reputation and financial solvency. Success is found when corporations prioritize long-term trust, even if that means short-term negative consequences. Corporations build trust when their values are congruent with stakeholders.

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## Background

Societal demand is driving corporations to engage outside their normal business functions. Corporations are often called to take a position on contentious social, political, and environmental issues (Villagra et al. 2021, 3). These demands are fueled by the public's increased ideological differences and decreased trust in mainstream media and government institutions (Tutton and Brand 2023, 1). Common controversial issues impacting companies include LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive healthcare, environmental sustainability, racial and gender inequality, immigration, elections, free speech, data privacy, religious freedom, foreign policy, and gun control. These issues are no longer isolated as societal problems and have transcended into business concerns (Doorley and Garcia 2021, 365). Polarization impacts corporations' engagement with these sociopolitical issues and creates an even finer line for them to walk in maintaining stakeholder relationships.

### Importance of Topic

Compared to government and nonprofits, the public has started to view corporations as more competent, trustworthy, ethical, and with better resources to tackle social problems (Villagra et al. 2021, 9; Edelman 2023; Doorley and Garcia 2021, 366). This shift in public expectations is changing the power dynamics of corporate-public relationships and favoring the influence of public opinion. Research from the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations indicates that 69 percent of consumers believe corporations should address societal problems (Cook and Farrell 2023, 7-45). Eighty percent of individuals under 30 believe that corporations should contribute to solving societal problems. Similar research by the Edelman Trust Institute (2023a, 29) shared that climate change, economic inequality, energy shortages, healthcare

access, trustworthy information, and workforce reskilling were the top societal issues that people felt businesses needed to put in more effort to resolve.

Reputation is considered an asset and a form of social capital, with the duty falling to public relations professionals to protect and enhance (Doorley and Garcia 2021, 2). “The dimensions of reputation include an organization’s perceived capacity to meet stakeholders’ expectations, the rational attachments that stakeholders form with the organization, and the overall net image that stakeholders have of the organization” (Bektaş 2018, 232). Although reputation is an intangible asset, scholars and professionals have advocated for teams to have the mindset that it is a tangible asset that can be measured and assessed.

#### Problem Statement

The traditional models of public relations, designed to please all stakeholders, are not conducive to this intense climate of polarization (Capizzo 2023, 7). In traditional strategies, corporations opted to remain neutral over contentious issues (Villagra 2021, 1). For many corporations, neutrality is no longer the safest option for protecting a brand’s reputation and stakeholder trust. Looking at corporate leadership communication on Twitter in Germany, one study found a steady decrease in neutral statements since 2016 and a simultaneous uptick in statements taking a position on controversial issues (Fröhlich and Knobloch 2021, 5). In many cases, silence or lack of action can upset stakeholders that believe corporations should engage with sociopolitical issues.

In contemporary public relations, practitioners must be more strategic, nimble, and sensitive to public expectations about sociopolitical issues. Managing polarization and guiding upper management has shifted to a designated task for public relations (Fröhlich and Knobloch

2021, 9). Public relations practitioners are challenged with helping organizations prepare and acclimate to external factors (Broom and Sha 2013, 149). A 2022 survey of public relations professionals indicated that 77 percent felt that polarization would make it challenging to achieve communication goals (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations 2022, 6-31). Ninety-three percent confirmed that they had to dedicate more time than in previous years to addressing social issues. Eighty-eight percent considered how corporate communication messages would be perceived in a polarized social climate.

Within the climate of intense polarization, choosing one side also poses risks of causing more scrutiny from those of the opposing viewpoint. With these stakeholders' expectations, many corporations must choose a stance on societal issues. Although polarization is a widespread problem, there is a lack of research that considers corporations' influence on society in connection with sociopolitical issues (Van Der Meer and Jonkman 2021, 1). How can organizations best weather the challenges of polarizing viewpoints, and what actions pose the least risk to brand reputation and stakeholder trust? What factors must they consider when making these types of decisions? Aligning to the viewpoints of stakeholders can help a corporation maintain long-term trust.

### **Approach**

This Capstone relied on secondary data to identify trends in public sentiment on corporate engagement of sociopolitical issues. Scholarly input came from textbooks required for University of Denver communication courses and articles from journals such as those published in *Public Relations Review*. Reports from prestigious public relations firms, such as Edelman, USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, and Ragan, were integrated to

complement the academic sources. The quantitative data from these reports provided a comprehensive look at public opinions and the everyday experiences of public relations professionals. For both source types, most references were published within the last three years, with none over ten years old to give an accurate depiction of contemporary public relations. Relevancy was critical to analyzing these trends because of influential events over the past few years: COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, BREXIT, the European refugee crisis, the murder of George Floyd, and the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol (Fröhlich and Knobloch 2021, 5; Edelman 2023). Sources published before 2019 were scrutinized for relevancy or only used because they offered a timeless concept of public relations.

This analysis took key academic findings and statistical data and interpreted them for the practical application of corporate public relations versus other institutional public relations. Filtering for a corporate perspective was necessary as circumstances vary among institution types. It was also found that the public's trust in institutions varies greatly in comparing corporations, governments, and nonprofits (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, 3). A corporate perspective was chosen due to the growing volume and timeliness in which corporations must communicate regarding sociopolitical issues (Tutton and Brand 2023, 2).

Evidence from successful examples and prior studies was collected to understand strategic reasoning and tactics. Likewise, recent brand crises and poor decision-making were evaluated to know how and what mistakes could have been avoided. Financial data for all examples was researched to understand how successes and failures impact corporate stock prices and revenue. A primary goal was to compile theories that could be used as tools in public relations decision-making. Three visual frameworks were explored to offer methods of



determining corporate actions and predicting possible public responses. These methods connected potential risks and benefits to taking a public stance on sociopolitical issues. The research delved into when and why it is advantageous for corporations to align with stakeholder values. Requirements and best practices for aligning company viewpoints were combined to contribute to public relations management.

### Limitations

During the research and drafting process, current events and reputation crises relevant to sociopolitical polarization and corporate actions were unfolding. Because of this constant change, scholarly sources were not always available. In addition, as some events unfolded, the specific corporate actions contradicted past behavior. An example is research pulled about Chick-fil-A. News media described new corporate tactics of Chick-fil-A that indicated a departure from conservative values alignment. Because this information was too new, there was no substantial information for determining if such events impacted this research. It also made it challenging to provide a complete and current picture of Chick-fil-A's stakeholder strategy. Chick-fil-A was still included to provide an example of a corporation that aligns its values with conservative stakeholders. In general, corporate values alignment to conservative viewpoints was scarce except for information on Chick-fil-A, making it the ideal example at the time.

### Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on public relations management in the context of intensifying sociopolitical polarization and public response. Previous studies on trust and identifying the existence and evolution of implied social contracts are represented for

understanding the societal expectations that impact corporations. Credibility, authenticity, accountability, relevancy, and transparency are fundamental aspects of trust that must be prioritized when dealing with any stakeholder relationship. Corporate social responsibility and activism are strategic aspects that further a corporation's relationship with compatible stakeholders. Conservative and liberal opinions on corporate values alignment differ and affect the type of action corporations should take in aligning their viewpoints.

Levels of consensus, issue type, public awareness, brand purpose, stakeholder traits, and ideological leaning can help determine actions that best fit the corporation. Some companies, such as Nike and CVS, enhanced their brand identity by engaging in well-aligned corporate activism efforts. Others, such as Target and Bud Light, have had major setbacks with compatible stakeholders due to poor analysis and indecisiveness. As seen with these two brands, there are serious repercussions generated from public backlash.

### Trust and Social Licenses

Trust is central to public relations and achieving a positive corporate reputation. In this context, trust is earned over time and can be defined as the ongoing public expectation that institutions remain truthful and respectful of societal norms (Valentini 2020, 86). Social media and globalization diminished boundaries that once existed between corporations and external stakeholders (Bektaş 2018, 230). Corporations are held to ever-changing and higher social expectations as they engage with the public online. These expectations have led to the development of interchangeable terms such as “social license to operate” or “implied social contracts” and their critical influence on public relations strategies (Tutton and Brand 2023, 3; Russell, Russell, and Honea 2016, 759). Social licenses to operate are common constructs that

require corporations to “meet and engage with expectations of society and avoid activities that are deemed unacceptable in the eyes of societies” (Van Der Meer and Jonkman 2021, 3).

Behaving according to those expectations factors into the health of its reputation and grants a corporation abstract permission from the public to conduct business and make a profit.

Adherence to these social licenses contributes to the trustworthiness of a corporation. In aligning their beliefs and values, corporations can consider the demographics and behaviors of stakeholders influencing their implied social contract.

### Compatible Stakeholders

Stakeholder theory is a part of the fundamentals of public relations as it aims to consider who can influence or is influenced by corporate actions (Martin and Wright 2016, 137). Stakeholder groups range from internal to external; categorization examples include active, latent, employees, potential employees, investors, industry-related, legislators, nonprofits, etc. The list of stakeholders within a corporation’s sphere of influence can be extensive, making it challenging to suit the needs and expectations of each group. Stakeholder compatibility must be weighed to build advantageous relationships and maximize trust (Bundy, Vogel, and Zachary 2017, 476). Stakeholder compatibility ensures corporations prioritize relationships with the most motivated and engaged groups. Compatible stakeholders are the corporation’s primary, ideal, most influential, or targeted audiences. Likewise, corporations can determine stakeholder compatibility based on which stakeholders have the most impactful social contracts. In a study evaluating stakeholder theory by Jonathan Bundy, Ryan M. Vogel, and Miles A Zachary, they identified two antecedents for compatible stakeholder relationships: value congruence, shared beliefs and viewpoints, strategic complementarity, and the ability to

fulfill corporate endeavors.

### Attributes of Trust

Trust is viewed as so valuable to public relations that renowned firms such as Edelman have created measures for monitoring the state of trust through the Edelman Trust Barometer (Griffin 2014, 11). In 2023, the Edelman Trust Institute (2023b, 9) reported that 71 percent of respondents believed that trusting a brand is a greater priority than in the past. Understanding how stakeholder alignment impacts business results involves looking at trust. When stakeholders perceive an organization as authentic, credible, accountable, relevant, and transparent, trust can be established (Villagra et al. 2021, 1; Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 27).

#### *Credibility*

Credibility is earned with competency, due diligence, responsibility, and levels of experience in conducting business (Villagra et al. 2021, 3; Doorley and Garcia 2018, 378). Due diligence involves putting in the appropriate effort to benefit stakeholders (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 371). Activities that exhibit due diligence include research, feedback, assessments, or risk mitigation.

#### *Accountability*

Corporate accountability means facing the consequences of their actions (Broom and Sha 2013, 121). It involves taking responsibility for errors and shortcomings that impact stakeholders. In Edelman's 2023 report (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 28), 69 percent of participants viewed that "owning mistakes" was effective at building trust.

#### *Authenticity*

Authenticity is "the perceived consistency of a brand's behavior, in a way that reflects its

core norms and values, being true to itself, without undermining its essence or nature” (Villagra et al. 2021, 4). In Edelman’s 2023 reports (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 27), 51 percent of respondents shared that they would disengage with a brand if they felt it lacked authenticity.

### *Relevancy*

In this sense, relevancy is exhibiting cultural awareness, being inclusive, being unobtrusive, and being aware of other stakeholders’ thoughts and feelings (Villagra et al. 2021, 4). In Edelman’s 2023 reports (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 27), 76 percent indicated that they would disengage with a brand if they felt a brand was irrelevant.

### *Transparency*

Corporations must exhibit transparency by communicating their purpose, beliefs, and actions to be perceived with these qualities. Transparency means providing adequate information for the public to make proper judgments (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 381). Edelman shared that showing transparency for corporate actions about climate change, sustainability, and diversity, equity, and inclusion was 63 percent more effective in building trust (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 28).

## Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a broad concept with a definition that is often debated among scholars and professionals (Russell, Russell, and Honea 2015, 760). At its core, CSR is a set of morals within a corporation, going a step above philanthropy and legal compliance (Gower 2018, 9; Doorley and Garcia 2018, 363). Corporations must serve as good citizens by looking outside their business and financial duties (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 209). CSR can show benevolence or goodwill, ranging from charitable giving, volunteerism, or

partnerships with other institutions or nonprofits. In many cases, implied social contracts and the level of social consciousness of associated stakeholders influence CSR strategies (Russell, Russell, and Honea 2015, 759).

### *Corporate Activism*

Corporate activism (CA) is an additional layer of CSR in which companies advocate for matters of public concern (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 366). The inherent potential for controversy separates CA as its own segment within CSR (Wang and Bouroncle, forthcoming). Public statements about sensitive issues, designated investment funds, lawsuits support, or operating adjustments are examples of CA. As public trust in government and other institutions wanes, people look more at corporations to address social issues as business concerns (Bektas 2018, 232).

Taking a stance and engaging in CA have financial and reputational advantages. In a survey of public relations professionals by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2022, 31), after implementing CA strategies, 47% saw an improvement in brand reputation, 43% saw a boost in employee satisfaction, and 31% saw an uptick in new consumers. CA can grant brands a competitive edge, grow relationships with compatible stakeholders, and deepen trust (Wang and Bouroncle, forthcoming).

### Polarization

In almost all cases with polarization, conservatism and liberalism are the dominant ideologies impacting corporate stakeholder relationships. Not only do these ideologies stand in opposition to one another on common sociopolitical issues, but their trust and responses to CA are also different. The political ideology of a corporation's stakeholders should be considered to

manage alignment, as viewpoints are often formed based on political ideology (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations 2021, 10; Villagra et al. 2021, 1).

### *Liberals*

Liberal stakeholders are likely to trust and approve of CA efforts if those actions align with liberal viewpoints (Villagra et al. 2021, 1). In the 2023 USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations report, liberal individuals were more inclined to believe that corporations should be involved in societal issues (Cook and Farrell 2023, 7). Silence or a lack of effort may be viewed as a corporation being complicit with the problem. Consumers with liberal viewpoints are prone to choose brands based on uniqueness and values-driven personas.

### *Conservatives*

Conservative stakeholders are less likely to embrace CA efforts and public statements on issues (Villagra et al. 2021). It is a common conservative belief that companies should not be involved in sociopolitical issues. Although conservatives are less likely to approve of CA, an Edelman study showed that conservative Americans were willing to engage with brands with social responsibility efforts that support workforce reskilling and healthcare accessibility (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 24).

### *Wokeness*

Wokeness is a key term in analyzing conservatives' attitudes toward CSR and often accompanies some of the most divisive topics seen in CA. Although inconsistent in its meaning, the term "woke" is now a pervasive, stigmatized term in describing modern sociopolitical issues (Warren 2022, 170). In most cases, "woke" is used to disparage CA. Regardless of political ideology, "woke-washing" describes inauthentic CSR efforts that are inconsistent with

communicated values and implemented to be trendy (Capizzo and Harrison 2023, 5).

When conservatives describe corporations as woke, it can have additional negative connotations besides a jab at corporate authenticity (Cammaerts 2022, 733). For example, woke can be used to denounce a deviation from hegemonic norms. Conservative groups often call for anti-woke corporations in a “war on woke,” expressing their belief that corporations should stay out of sociopolitical debates.

### Corporate Activism and Alignment Strategies

Public relations scholars developed theories on contentious issues for better decision-making in sociopolitical matters. The following topics are various decision-making frameworks considering public behavior in response to CA.

#### *Public Attention-Support Framework for Social Issues*

Using public attention and support as variables, public relations practitioners can anticipate responses to CA (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, 1-10). In this instance, attention is the public dialogue surrounding a particular issue, such as social media, news coverage, and government debate. Support is weighed by public expectations and the level at which people agree or disagree. Figure 1, created by Tsai, Yuan, and Coman, plots controversial topics based on these variables and creates a four-quadrant approach to predicting the type of public reaction.



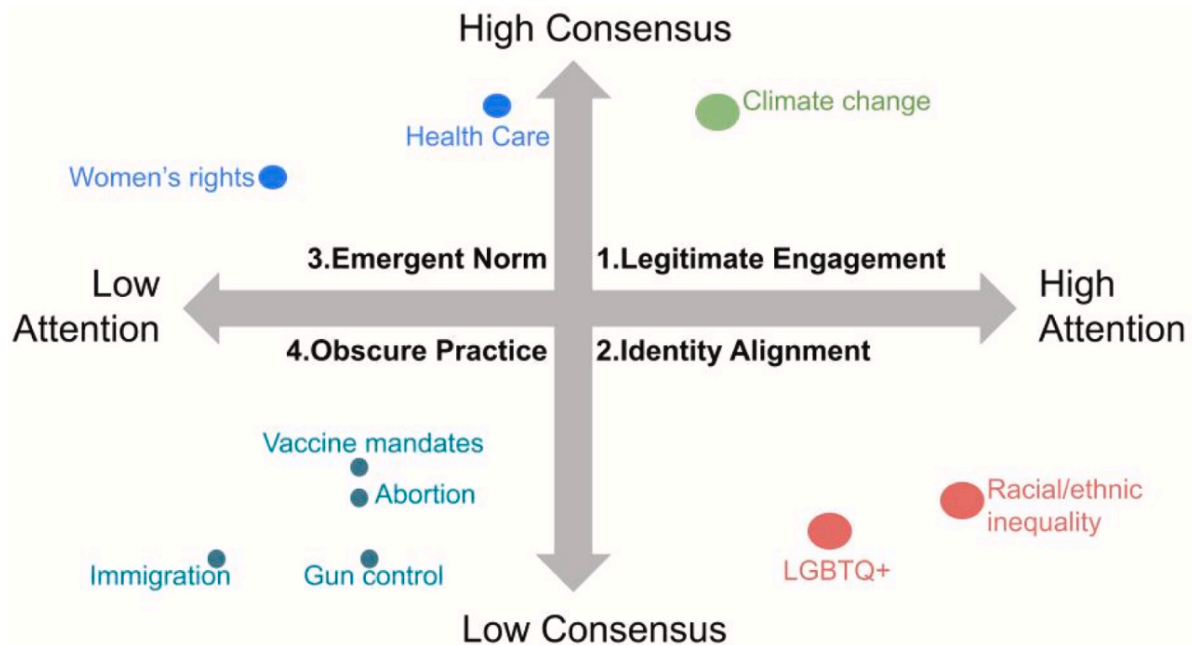


Figure 1: Consensus-Attention Framework. Data from Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, figure 2.

Predicting the type of public reaction can assist corporations in choosing what CA efforts suit compatible stakeholder and business needs. High attention and support provide the ideal circumstances for corporations to exercise legitimate engagement, the first quadrant (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, 9). Topics in this category pose less risk of scrutiny and may be advantageous for CA.

The second quadrant characterizes high attention and low consensus as identity alignment. The identity alignment category is where the side-taking element comes into play. Taking a stance on an issue with low public agreement indicates to a corporation's compatible stakeholders that the corporation is committed to the same values (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, 9).

Emergent norms, issues with high consensus but low attention, can be viewed as opportunities to demonstrate initiative and be one of the few or first to support a cause (Tsai,

Yuan, and Coman 2023, 9).

Obscure practice, the final category, means that the issue may stir considerable criticism due to low consensus and lacks of overall public awareness and understanding (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023, 9).

### *Consensus-Engagement Framework for Tactics*

Traditional public relations strategies prioritized consensus, but as controversy has become more prevalent, accommodating disagreement is accepted (Capizzo 2023, 8). Figure 2 depicts a study by Luke Capizzo, which outlines a social issues management (SIM) engagement framework with four types of engagement: collaborative engagement, acceptance, engaged agonism, and quiet agonism. Like Figure 1, Figure 2 evaluates public consensus and uses a four-quadrant structure, but instead, it plots tactics for managing contentious issues.

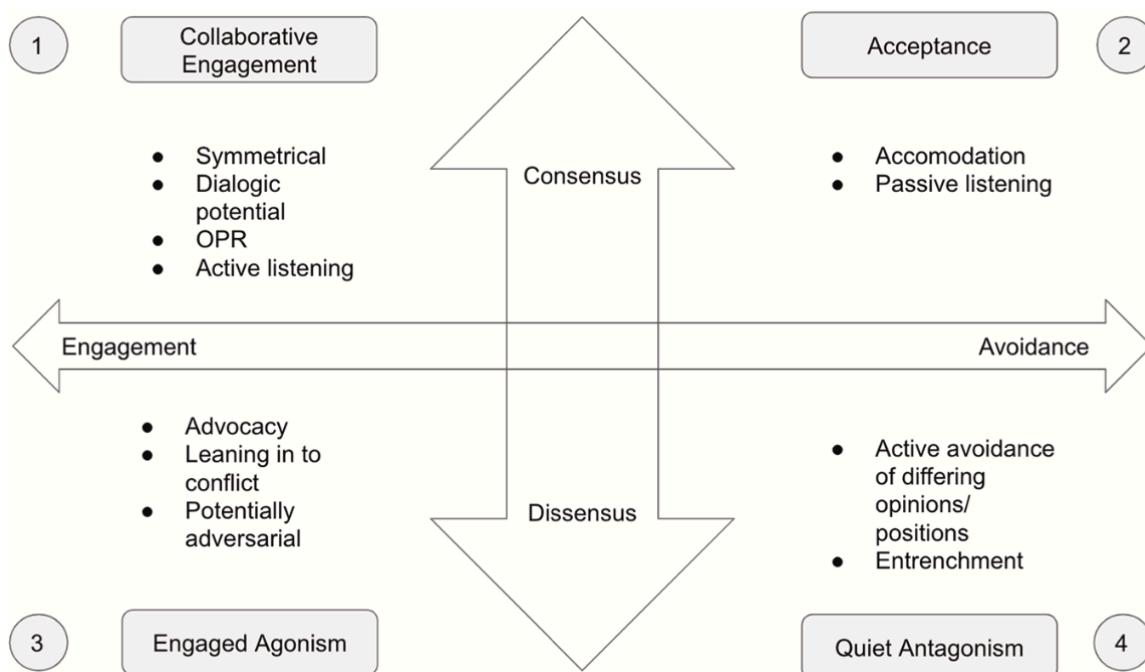


Figure 2. Consensus-Engagement Framework. Data from Capizzo 2023, figure 1.

Integrating flexibility and choice, this framework gives options for how corporations can respond to social issues and assesses how involved corporations are with controversial topics. The SIM styles in quadrants 1 and 2 are collaborative engagement and acceptance, meaning that the corporation is less intertwined with controversial issues. In contrast, quadrants 3 and 4 represent SIM styles linked closer to conflict. Corporations can assess how active or passive their actions are on the scale of engagement versus avoidance. In quadrants 1 and 3, collective engagement and engaged agonism indicate high engagement and public involvement. In quadrants 2 and 4, acceptance and quiet agonism are passive and less visible to the public.

### *Political-Ideology Framework*

In determining CA efforts, public relations practitioners can make decisions by evaluating the homogeneity of their stakeholders' ideologies in conjunction with the corporation's political ideology (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming). Figure 3 also presents its strategies in a four-quadrant approach.

		Are the company's values strongly political?	
		YES	NO
Is the company's target customer base homogenous or heterogeneous in terms of their political identity?	<b>HOMOGENEOUS</b>	<p><b><u>Cell A: Convergence</u></b></p> <p>Company can engage in direct political activism.</p> <p>e.g., Myillow.com; Let's Go Brandon; ALLRIOT; Patriot Mobile; Cornerstone Payment System</p>	<p><b><u>Cell C: Depoliticized But Supportive Stance</u></b></p> <p>Company need not engage in direct political activism. If needed, they can support non-political causes important to their stakeholder base.</p> <p>e.g., Many small family-owned businesses</p>
	<b>HETEROGENEOUS</b>	<p><b><u>Cell B: Selective Engagement</u></b></p> <p>May engage in selective political activism at owner, founder, or corporate level, but not at brand level.</p> <p>e.g., Hobby Lobby</p>	<p><b><u>Cell D: Divergence</u></b></p> <p>Company does not engage in political activism. Use careful stakeholder research and long-term strategy to diverge.</p> <p>e.g., Costco Wholesale; See's Candies, Chick-fil-A; Microsoft</p>

Figure 3: Political-Ideology Framework. Data from Mittal and Jung, forthcoming, figure 3.

When stakeholders' ideologies are homogenous and the corporation has evidential political leanings, corporations can use a convergence strategy and take a greater stance on an issue. The convergence strategy is optimal when consuming the product or service can contribute to the consumer's political identity (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming).

Divergence strategy, the opposite of convergence strategy, abstains from political involvement because its stakeholders' ideologies are diverse, and it is not a part of the corporate identity. This strategy aims not to alienate anyone and maintain neutrality (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming).

Selective engagement is ideal for corporations with a political leaning and diverse stakeholders. Selective engagement allows corporations choices in issues they get involved with while being considerate of multiple viewpoints (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming).

Depoliticized but supportive stance is the final strategy. When a corporation does not have a strong political identity, but its stakeholders' ideologies are homogenous, corporations can support nonpolitical causes (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming).

#### Examples of Successful Stakeholder Viewpoints

##### CVS

In 2014, CVS removed tobacco products from its stores as a rebranding initiative. The brand renamed itself to "CVS Health" to demonstrate the company's purpose of "helping people on their path to better health" (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 8). CVS Health was committed to its values and serving the public's best interest, even if it meant a loss of revenue. Three years later, the *American Journal for Public Health* associated CVS Health with declining cigarette usage. States, in which CVS Health had a 15 percent or greater market share, saw a

reduction of at least 100 million cigarette packs.

### *Nike*

Nike's brand transformed into a powerhouse for social justice issues. Their current reputation is in stark contrast to problems that plagued the brand in the 1990s when Nike was synonymous with human rights violations due to poor labor practices with Asian "sweatshop" labor (Waymer and Logan 2021, 1). Gender, cultural, and racial equality were integrated into Nike's brand identity because of initiatives like the "Dream Crazier" campaign, a line of athletic hijabs, and support of statements on racial inequality made by Colin Kaepernick, an NFL quarterback. Nike's example is successful because of its brand identity transformation, ability to maintain trust by listening to its stakeholders, and remaining steadfast with its purpose and commitments. Throughout their partnership with Kaepernick, they have continued to listen to his and other stakeholders' concerns about racial equality and respond by making changes to their business operations. A prime example is when Nike pulled a product featuring an early American flag associated with racism. Nike has benefited from their supportive actions by being seen as a positive force in the public dialogue of social justice. Their strategy demonstrates how engaging in these issues is an upheaval in brand identity with broader implications outside a corporation's industry.

### *Chick-fil-A*

Chick-fil-A is a key example in juxtaposition to Nike as it shows the effects of aligning to conservative stakeholder viewpoints. Chick-fil-A prioritizes its Christian and community values over normal business operations and is well-known for being one of the few food-service franchises closed on Sundays. Although Chick-fil-A makes up for it in loyalty and brand equity,

one study indicated that the brand would produce an additional \$1.2 billion per year if it operated on Sundays (Manko 2022, 120-21). In the mid-2010s, knowing he would alienate liberal consumers, the brand's CEO made a controversial statement against same-sex marriage. Of course, supporters of same-sex marriage and liberal consumers responded with anger and boycotts. Still, his statement led to more support and sales from conservative consumers (USC Center for Public Relations 2022, 28). After one instance of speaking out in 2012, sales spiked 30 percent from conservative consumers (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020, 772). Chick-fil-A's example demonstrates that the benefits from stakeholder alignment are not isolated to liberal viewpoints but can also occur with conservative viewpoints.

#### Examples of Failure to Align with Stakeholder Viewpoints

##### *Target and Bud Light*

In 2023, Bud Light, owned by Anheuser-Busch InBev, partnered with a transgender influencer, Dylan Mulvaney (Mayer 2023). This partnership spurred backlash from conservative consumers leading to negative social media chatter, boycotts, and even a rap diss of Bud Light. Bud Light's behavior worsened the situation as liberal consumers felt betrayed by Bud Light's lack of defense for Mulvaney, viewed Bud Light's support as disingenuous, and believed Bud Light was rainbow-washing for profit. Bud Light failed to manage its compatible stakeholders and make decisions that aligned with that audience's thoughts and feelings. If Bud Light's primary stakeholder group was more conservative, Bud Light needed to reevaluate its partnership with Mulvaney. If its leading stakeholder group was more liberal, then Bud Light needed to stand firm on its position. If their stakeholders were diverse in their political ideologies, Bud Light needed to implement strategies to balance polarization influences. It is

difficult to appease both sides with polarization, but Bud Light put itself in a worse spot by angering both sides.

When Target released its annual Pride Month Collection, a “tuck-friendly” swimsuit became the center of controversy as false information spread about the suit being targeted to children (Kolade 2023). Anti-LGBTQIA+ individuals were knocking over displays and threatening employees. Across social media, many conservatives were calling for boycotts of Target. In response, Target said they planned to pull the collections from select locations to keep employees safe. Target’s response broke its track record of supporting LGBTQIA+ issues, thus damaging its relationship with liberal consumers. The argument was that if Target were sincere in supporting LGBTQIA+ issues, Target would have stood against anti-LGBTQIA+ backlash and taken more meaningful action to ensure employee safety.

Both brands needed to align with compatible stakeholders but responded to opposition by flipping their stances. These crises continue to unfold with financial and reputational repercussions. Target's stock value dropped \$10 billion over the ten days following the incident (Google Finance n.d.). As of June 2023, Bud Light sales were down 23 percent from the previous year, and it was no longer the top beer in the United States (Chartr 2023). Bud Light announced company layoffs in July due to poor performance (Mayer 2023).

## Risks and Understandings

### *Backlash and Boycotts*

A range of public backlash can occur when a corporation takes a stance on contentious issues. In this climate of intense polarization, backlash from those with opposing views is inevitable (Capizzo 2023). In understanding the types of punitive measures, the opposition

might take, it is also essential to evaluate those same measures as methods compatible stakeholders might take if they feel violated by the corporation. Resentful publics can damage a corporation's reputation, operating abilities, and financial well-being. Punitive action can come from collective or individual behavior (Russell, Russell, and Honea 2015, 759). Organized group efforts to punish a corporation, such as large-scale boycotts, petitions, and protests, constitute collective behavior. Individual behavior includes personal decisions to cease patronage or voice a negative opinion of a brand.

Different levels of stakeholder consciousness must be considered (Russell, Russell, and Honea 2015, 770). Of course, those with active investments and ardent beliefs regarding a corporation will react more to any violation, but less conscious, latent stakeholders can also be rattled. Research has shown that those less aware of the issue can still be triggered by the mere violation, widening the scope of any reputational collateral damage.

It is understandable that the financial implications of boycotts from resentful consumers would be a top worry for corporate management. However, multiple research studies suggest boycotts should be less feared (Fröhlich and Knobloch 2021, 8). In general, boycotts are short-term consequences due to corporate actions (Warren 2021, 34). After supporting Kaepernick's activism, those opposing Nike's stance boycotted the brand (Van Der Meer and Jonkman 2021). The impacts were short-lived, and the actions strengthened Nike's rapport with compatible stakeholders. Nike became valued at \$32.4 billion, a \$6 billion brand equity increase from prior years, and sales later increased by 30 percent (Warren 2021, 34).

### *Investor Reactions*

A study endorsed by the *American Marketing Association* observed factors influencing



investor reactions to taking a public stance through CA efforts. The most influential factor was the degree to which CA strayed from the corporation's identity and customers' beliefs versus other stakeholder groups like employees or government (Bhagwat et al. 2020, 1). The greater the deviation from stakeholder values and brand, the more concern investors had for the CA efforts. The second factor influencing their reactions was based on corporate resources devoted to the initiative. This factor stems from financial concerns that there should be value in devoting resources to an effort that is not a direct profit-generating effort.

### Conclusion

Trust is vital to corporate stakeholder relationships. Corporations must look outside business matters to be perceived as credible, accountable, authentic, relevant, and transparent. In doing so, they fulfill the implied social contracts that allow them to execute normal operations and grow as a business. CSR can be leveraged to show goodwill, enhance brand reputation, and reach communities. CA goes one step further in siding with stakeholders on a sociopolitical issue. The heightened state of ideological polarization can make CA matters more contentious and prone to backlash from the opposing side. Evaluating a problem in terms of consensus level can help corporations plan their efforts and predict responses from liberals and conservatives. With any corporate action, there are risks and rewards, that must be assessed, that influence corporate outcomes. The positive and negative consequences are represented in the stakeholder management of brands such as Nike, Chick-fil-A, CVS, Target, and Bud Light.

## Solution

In examining the complexity of social issues management and stakeholder expectations, corporations must align with their stakeholders while remaining mindful of other factors. Strategies must reckon with intense sociopolitical polarization and consider the possible reactions from conservatives, liberals, and even those in between. Depending on the situation, inciting controversial dialogue is acceptable in public relations (Capizzo 2023). A sufficient grasp of stakeholder perceptions and characteristics is essential for determining corporate actions (Wang and Bouroncle, forthcoming). Public relations practitioners can implement routine evaluation methods and frameworks. Still, each topic, stakeholder type, and initiative requires a separate, equal, and critical review, as there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. To assess the specific issue, public relations teams must deliberate on variables such as public dialogue, ideological leaning, awareness, divisiveness, and miscellaneous factors that may be relevant (Tsai, Yuan, and Coman 2023; Capizzo 2023; Mittal and Jung, forthcoming). To evaluate stakeholders, public relations teams must weigh many of those same variables but discern the ideological diversity of their stakeholders. If ideological diversity is prevalent, cautious planning is needed to minimize ramifications such as financial loss, backlash, or devastation of trust. For planning initiatives, the actual tactics need to undergo the same scrutiny. Public relations teams must also decide on their level of engagement and how those actions fit the business purpose.

Alignment with stakeholder viewpoints does not necessarily mean taking a more prominent activist role. Instead, it can build trust with stakeholders by supporting uncontroversial issues (Adjer 2017). Corporations must decide if their relationship with stakeholders will benefit from CA or if it is better to focus on less contentious CSR initiatives

(Wang and Bouroncle, forthcoming). If stakeholders are more liberal, because liberals respond favorably to CA, a corporation can look to align their viewpoints with CA efforts. If stakeholders are more conservative, because conservatives sometimes dislike CA, CA may not benefit the corporate stakeholder relationship and generate distrust in the brand. In this scenario, strategies must lean more on CSR and avoid the perception of being woke. Once something is deemed woke by conservatives, it can be more challenging to remove the stigma associated with wokeness (Warren 2022, 170-71).

Committing to stakeholder values requires upholding attributes of trust: credibility, authenticity, accountability, relevancy, and transparency. Corporations must follow through on their commitments and make those efforts known to the public. Communicating proper motives and values will generate trust and mitigate public skepticism (Wang and Bouroncle, forthcoming).

Sociopolitical factors are ever-changing, furthering the need for public relations teams to keep an active pulse on current events and prioritize stakeholder metrics (Hsu, Byeon, and Von Buchwaldt 2021). Research from entities such as the Edelman Trust Institute, USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, and academia can aid public relations teams in making informed decisions and recommendations to executive leadership. Together, public relations teams and executive leadership can review possible benefits and consequences and decide what is best for the company.

### **Discussion**

Managing reputation and CA is not getting easier due to heightened polarization and increasing public expectations. These circumstances complicate corporate matters,

necessitating more involvement from public relations teams to help brands weather the effects. With public relations at the helm, more methods, data, and research are needed for successful intervention and quick decisions. While only scratching the surface, concepts and observations in this analysis can be used as tools for making decisions that align corporations with the viewpoints of their stakeholders.

### Decision-Making

Because of polarization, there is a fine line between what is and is not a contentious issue. Public relations teams should seek data on the divisiveness of the issues. Referring to the Polarization Index by USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2022, 20-21), public relations teams could understand that they must avoid the most controversial topics: racial inequality, voting reform, police authority, immigration, and gun control. Instead, they could lean into less controversial issues that resonate with all audiences, such as advocating for healthcare access and workforce retraining for individuals impacted by the advancement of robotic and artificial intelligence (Edelman Trust Institute 2023b, 24-51).

If the stakeholder base has mixed ideologies, public relations teams should conduct careful stakeholder analysis before engaging in public advocacy (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming). A corporation should be choosy in which issues they engage in to avoid alienating a segment of their stakeholder base. Again, this is where public relations teams could propose engaging in less controversial topics.

### *Frameworks*

Figures 1-3 offer a visual approach to weighing influential variables and deciding corporate tactics. Because polarization has two distinct sides, aspects of polarization translate

well with visual representations, making it simpler to see where various issues, ideologies, stakeholders, and corporations stand in relation to one another. Once judgments are made, public relations teams can bring their insights, including visual representations, to executive leadership and advise them of possible next steps. Using multiple frameworks, whether they are ones in Figures 1-3 or from elsewhere, ensures that the appropriate factors are weighed, and nothing is missed.

Under imaginary circumstances, say Bud Light had used similar frameworks to determine engagement on LGBTQIA+. Through the consensus-attention framework in Figure 1, Bud Light could have seen that engagement in LGBTQIA+ initiatives has high public attention, low consensus, and falls under Tsai, Yuan, and Coman's (2023) identity alignment category. Plotting their tactic using the consensus-engagement model in Figure 2, Bud Light could have determined that their actions fall under the category of engaged agonism (Capizzo 2023). With both identity alignment and engaged agonism, there is a potential for some stakeholders to perceive ideological bias and have critical responses. For the political identity framework in Figure 3, Bud Light could have distinguished their customer base as heterogeneous in their beliefs and that their political identity is not apparent, therefore putting themselves in the divergence category (Mittal and Jung, forthcoming). Combining all frameworks, Bud Light could have foreseen fragmentation in its consumer base and the possibility of damaging backlash.

### *Taking a Stance*

In Warren's (2021) study on boycotts and buycotts, Warren concluded that when CA aligned with the viewpoints of main stakeholders, sales and stock prices increased. Nike continues to be a prime example of the positive effects of using CA to align with stakeholder

viewpoints. The positive results are evident in its financial data and brand popularity. Nike is not the only company to achieve financial success after engaging in CA. Chick-fil-A saw a boost in sales when its CEO spoke out in support of conservative values (Mukherjee and Althuisen 2020, 772). When Lyft, the rideshare service took a stance against abortion bans in Texas, its stock prices jumped by 5 percent (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations 2022, 16). These financial victories in conjunction with gains in brand equity and positive reputations give corporations a competitive edge.

Although speaking out has many benefits, there are considerable risks (Adjer 2017). Some risks may be worthwhile, and as Warren's (2021) study on boycotts pointed out, repercussions from boycotts are short-term. In looking at Target's crisis, instead of bending to the pressures of conservative backlash, Target could have used the uproar to its advantage and showed unwavering support for its LGBTQIA+ stakeholders. While taking a short-term hit from conservative boycotts, showing support would have deepened the trust between Target and LGBTQIA+ and liberal stakeholders. This move would have diminished the blow to Target's stock prices, revenue, and reputation. Target could have also seen a similar boost in sales, a boycott, that Nike saw from compatible stakeholders when it supported Kaepernick.

### Trust

With any alignment decision, corporations are responsible for upholding all attributes of trust: credibility, accountability, authenticity, relevancy, and transparency. The combination of these attributes plus values alignment leads to long-term trust that secures business success. Due diligence develops credibility (Doorley and Garcia 2018, 378). Accountability is absent when the corporation does not fulfill its promises or show its support when needed.

Authenticity is lost when corporate actions deviate from the brand's purpose. Relevancy is impossible if a corporation does not pay attention to timely influences. Transparency is lost when there is a lack of open communication.

Actions speak louder than words, and speaking of values is not enough for stakeholders to view the corporation as legitimate (Ashby-King 2023, 8). Villagra et al. (2021, 1) point to relevancy, credibility, and authenticity in CA. Wang and Bouroncle (2023, 18) emphasize the importance of authenticity, accountability, and transparency when engaging in sociopolitical issues. The USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations highlights transparency and accountability as the top behaviors that stakeholders look for in deciding whom to trust (Cook and Farrell 2023, 12). Edelman Trust Institute looks at all five aspects in its Trust Barometer. Proper alignment with stakeholder values includes these aspects and leads to long-term trust between stakeholders and corporations.

### **Recommendations**

Information in this Capstone is best suited for communication, public relations, public affairs, marketing, and executive leadership. Chapters within the Public Relations Society of America or the American Marketing Association could also benefit from these findings. The data and insights can assist decision-making and the development of robust, stakeholder-centric strategies.

During the Capstone process, it became clear that this topic remains an emerging issue and needs additional research. With constant change, public relations professionals need the latest data to guide corporate strategies. Public relations professionals must implement monitoring methods to measure stakeholder trust, sentiment, and brand equity levels. Defining

key performance indicators can signify the strength of corporate reputations and the health of stakeholder-corporation relationships (Hsu, Byeon, and Von Buchwaldt 2021).

There is more clarity on how companies can align with liberal viewpoints. However, more information is needed to support conservative brands and understand conservative stakeholders' behaviors. Recent trends linked to conservative brands may accelerate the need for further examination. Conservative-oriented brands such as Chick-fil-A and Cracker Barrel have engaged in liberal-leaning initiatives. Chick-fil-A hired a vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Zhou 2023). Cracker Barrel celebrated Pride Month with rainbow rocking chairs (Allen 2023). The sentiment about both brands from conservatives was mixed with confusion and comments about the brands turning woke. These anomalies may signify a diversion away from aligning with conservative viewpoints and bring into question if there are advantages to aligning with liberal viewpoints over conservative viewpoints.

Researchers must also look for solutions on how corporations should balance aligning their viewpoints to both present and future stakeholders with polarized ideologies. To sustain corporate well-being, current and future business operations must be considered. Balancing present and future stakeholders is relevant when considering changes in demographics. Edelman Trust Institute (2023b, 10-14) reported that Gen Z's expectations of corporate sociopolitical involvement are much higher. There is no clear path forward when a corporation looks to appeal to Gen Z, a generation with a higher inclination to CA, but has a current stakeholder base of older generations with conservative viewpoints. The challenging question remains whether to align with an emerging stakeholder market or cater to loyal, existing stakeholders.



## Conclusion

The societal pressure for corporations to get involved with sociopolitical debates has increased. Stakeholders have forced corporations to align with a side amidst intense polarization. This demand has proved a need for additional research examining the effects on corporate well-being and public relations. Public relations practitioners have been burdened with the difficult task of guiding corporations through the turbulent backlash. This Capstone relied on existing studies and analyzed the problems of polarization to contribute information that can aid corporate decision-making. Stakeholder trust has proved to be vital to corporate success and must be prioritized.

Alignment strategies integrating aspects of CSR and CA have paid off in increasing brand equity, financial performance, investor reactions, and positive societal contributions, as seen in examples with Nike, CVS, and Chick-fil-A. Some brands have not been so fortunate because of mistakes that deviated from the interests of their compatible stakeholders. Failing to align with stakeholder values has left brands like Target and Bud Light with the repercussions of polarization and hardships of earning back stakeholder trust.

When elements of trust have been upheld, values have been connected to brand identity, and stakeholder characteristics have been accounted for, strategies have been more successful in aligning corporate values to stakeholder viewpoints. Long-term trust has made short-term losses from boycotts and backlash worthwhile. Stakeholder trust has proved to be a vital source of corporate well-being.

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