

COMPANY POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Considerations for how corporations can best handle election season and other hot-button national and world news events

Overview

The ongoing nature of our current political and societal debates through modern news and social media means there is truly no offseason. We anticipate that moments like a national presidential election will concentrate emotions with the potential to inflame conversations.

This guide is intended for business leaders, providing context for communicating to their organizations and teams with resilience and circumspection.

“Republicans buy sneakers too.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

TAKE INVENTORY OF YOUR STAKEHOLDERS.

Consider the impact to and positions of shareholders, customers, and employees. For example, customers of Ben and Jerry's are well aware of the company's long-held, vocal support for progressive causes and candidates. As a result, the company's decision to wade into political waters may actually bolster its brand reputation. However, the same can't be said of other companies. Prime examples include Bud Light, Target, and Disney. All three companies have faced sustained negative consequences to their brand reputation, profitability, and market share because their approach to merchandising, advertising, and political involvement conflicted with the overall perspective of their respective customer bases.

TAKE A STRONG STANCE OF NON-PARTISANSHIP.

Rather than communicating indecision and causing your workforce and customer base to wonder if or when your company will take a stance on a cultural hot-button issue such as an election or current event, take the initiative. In the thick of 2020, Coinbase CEO Brian Armstrong [shared a public letter](#) addressed to his workforce that not only asserted his company's political neutrality. Armstrong emphasized that his company's political neutrality was in service to its broader goal of excellence and contribution to a flourishing society: "In short, I want Coinbase to be laser focused on achieving its mission, because I believe this is the way that we can have the biggest impact on the world," he [wrote](#).

TRUE DIVERSITY ALLOWS FOR DISSENTING VOICES.

The most innovative people are often dissenters. They drive growth and change precisely because they're not afraid to challenge the status quo. But instead of welcoming people who inspire change, some major corporations adversely impacting employees for the opinions they voice, even in their personal time. Global Brand President at Levi's Jennifer Sey [was forced to resign](#) for opposing school COVID lockdown policies affecting her own children, on her own time and in her personal capacity. Companies should prepare for and accommodate a vocal and diverse set of opinions rather than demanding that employees remain silent. Companies should respect their employees' freedom of speech and encourage them to exercise their constitutional rights.

RESOURCES

TAKING STOCK

- **CONTEXT:** Leaders need to ask, “What is the right thing to do *for my company?*” and must consider long-term impacts vs appealing loud voices in the short term.
- **BALANCE:** In today’s political climate—with the country divided in half on important issues—the best a company can hope to accomplish by taking a political stand is to *alienate half the country*, including customers, employees, shareholders, and more.
- **COST:** Century-long brands can be tarnished in an instant. Consider Bud Light, Target, and Disney, which have all suffered economically from ill-fated steps.
- **MOTIVATION:** Research [indicates](#) that employees aren’t motivated to work harder or stay longer at a company that takes unnecessary political stances. Employees who disagree with a company’s public stance are demotivated and feel isolated.
- **AUDIENCE:** Too often, companies take divisive political stances based on what activists demand rather than what their customers, workforce, and shareholders want. Before issuing statements, business leaders should ask themselves: How central is this issue to our core business? How important is it to our customers, workforce, and shareholders?

TALKING POINTS

- “We are focused on excellence for our customers, employees, and shareholders. This excellence comes with all types of viewpoints and ideas, which we value. By staying focused on what our mission is here at our company, we can truly unify around making the world a better place through our products and services.”
- “We all want to change the world—and that’s exactly what we’re doing by providing excellent products and services that improve people’s lives.”
- “We answer to our shareholders, customers, and employees, not outside political influencers. Shareholders invest in businesses expecting growth and profitability, not political advocacy. Let’s keep the focus on excellence in everything we do and leave the politics at the ballot box.”

QUOTABLES

- “Do not assume that all of your employees, customers or investors share your view.” Zenos Group ([Source](#))
- “Republicans buy sneakers too.” Michael Jordan ([Source](#))
- “Both Republicans and Democrats—far left, far right—all buy golf clubs. Why hit the beehive with a stick?” Bob Parsons, founder of Parsons Xtreme Golf and GoDaddy.com ([Source](#))

APPENDIX

KEY DATA

1. A 2024 Gallup-Bentley University poll [found](#) that just **38% of employees** think businesses should take a stand on current events:
 - That's down **10% from a 2022 poll**, indicating that employees' appetite for their companies to speak up politically is on a definitive downswing.
 - The sharpest decline has taken place among Democrats, with a **decrease of 22%** since 2022.
 - Among the least-desired topics on which employees want their companies to take a public stand include **candidates for office** [17%], **abortion** [20%], **international conflicts** [24%], **immigration policy** [31%], and **gun laws** [32%].
 - The poll also shows **more than six in 10** Democrats (68%) and Republicans (61%) say they would be less likely to purchase from a company that endorsed a candidate from the opposing party.
2. A Weber Shandwick Collective survey [found](#) that **71% of employees** felt employers should keep the workplace politically neutral. Chief examples of backfiring corporate activism are Bud Light (InBev), Disney, and Target. All three have taken affirmative stances on the transgender issue in recent years and have yet to recover from the backlash. One 2024 analysis [found](#):
 - All three companies "suffered significant erosion of brand value," with Target losing roughly \$1.2 billion and Disney losing roughly \$2.8 billion in brand value.
 - "[C]ompanies suffer when they take divisive stands on contentious political and social issues because they alienate large portions of their stakeholders."
3. Vanessa Burbano of Columbia University suggests in her [2021 research](#) that corporations may in fact have **little to gain and much to lose** by taking a stance on a hot-button issue.

Among [the study's] conclusions, Burbano says: "Employees who disagree with a political stance taken by their companies are demotivated—they do less extra work and do lower quality work." On the flip side, **"Those who agree with a political stance taken by their companies are not motivated—they behave no statistically differently than a control group."** There's similarly a downside in regard to wooing consumers, as they are likely to boycott over a political position they don't like but are not likely to 'boycott' over stances they agree with."

4. The [Freedom at Work survey](#), conducted by Ipsos and released through Viewpoint Diversity Score, found that **57% of customers** say they are likely to stop purchasing products or cancel subscriptions from brands that do not respect their values.

5. The [Freedom at Work survey](#) found that companies' public stances on hot-button issues are often at odds with their workforce and customers.

- **55% support or strongly support**—compared with only 14% who oppose or strongly oppose—bills (like Florida's 2022 Parental Rights in Education bill) described as those that “aim to protect the freedom of parents to decide what their kindergarten through 3rd-grade children are taught in the classroom about sex and gender identity by limiting what teachers can discuss and requiring notification and consent of parents before sensitive topics can be addressed.”
- Despite high public support for such laws, **284 large corporations**, including The Walt Disney Corporation, Starbucks, Target, Apple, and financial institutions including Deutsche Bank and PNC Financial Services Group, signed the Human Rights Campaign's statement opposing such state-level legislation.

OTHER RESOURCES

- [Model Policy: Off-Duty Civil Rights Policy](#) (Viewpoint Diversity Score)
 - This resource ensures that a company respects the freedom of all employees to exercise their civil rights of freedom of speech, free exercise of religion, freedom of association, peaceable assembly, and protest, outside of work.
- [Model Policy: Viewpoint Diversity Policy](#) (Viewpoint Diversity Score)
 - This resource can be used to foster a workplace culture where freedom of thought is welcomed, and all people are valued and respected, regardless of their religious or ideological views.

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