Riskier Business:
How Consumer Perceptions of Corporate Political Advocacy Have Evolved

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Historically, companies have largely avoided taking sides on political issues due to their risky polarizing nature and focused their efforts on business operations and controlling what impacts the bottom line. However, in the past decade companies have increasingly taken very public stances on politically charged social issues, referred to as corporate political advocacy (CPA). With the increasingly polarized political nature of the population coupled with consumers' desire for organizations to help drive social change, abstaining from CPA is becoming less of an option for organizations. The purpose of this research is to investigate how consumer perceptions of CPA have changed and which social issues have the strongest influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. Using comparative analyses from two datasets collected nearly 10 years apart, we find that CPA has had an increasingly significant impact on consumer purchase decisions but mostly when an organization takes a stand on a social issue consumers care about. The data revealed that COVID-19 and healthcare are the most influential social issues currently impacting consumer perceptions.

Keywords: corporate political advocacy, social issues, consumer behavior

INTRODUCTION

In the past, companies have largely avoided taking sides on political issues due to their risky polarizing nature and rather focused their efforts on business operations and controlling what impacts the bottom line. However, there has been a shift in the past decade where companies have increasingly taken very public stances on politically charged social issues despite the fact that these issues may have little to no bearing on business operations (Hydock, Paharia, & Weber, 2019). Indeed, examples from the past few years include the National Football League incorporating social justice messaging on professional athletes' apparel, Sephora launching a "We Love Pride" makeup collection, Walmart discontinuing sales of ammunition and handguns in stores, and most recently we have seen a barrage of organizations speaking out about their stances on the COVID-19 pandemic and support for or against mass vaccination.

These practices, referred to as corporate political advocacy (CPA), are a firm's very public and divisive demonstration of support for or against a sociopolitical issue. With the increasingly polarized political nature of the population coupled with the consumer's desire for organizations to help drive social change (Becker-Olsen & Cudmore, 2006; Kotler & Sarkar, 2017), abstaining from engaging in CPA is becoming

less of an option for organizations. While a business's success should revolve around the quality of their products and services, consumers are motivated to avoid guilt associated with their own consumption choices (Peloza, White, & Shang, 2013) and express their identity through purchases (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

Although firms are taking a risk when engaging in CPA, that is, they risk losing some customers while simultaneously gaining others, doing so may benefit them in the long run (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). This "risky business" approach to participating in CPA has only recently gained popularity among organizations and, thus, we do not fully understand the consumer response to these initiatives. While we know that consumer behavior is impacted by CPA, the recent wave of CPA is much more divisive and riskier than in the past (Hydock et al., 2019) and we do not have a clear understanding how consumer perceptions have evolved as a result.

Taken together, the current state of the literature and the continual dynamic nature of CPA activity among organizations in the United States give rise to the following research questions: How have consumer perceptions of CPA changed in the past ten years? Does CPA only impact consumer perceptions when organizations take a stand on social issues consumers personally care about? Which social issues do consumers care about the most? That is, which social issues have the strongest influence and impact on consumers' purchasing decisions? The purpose of this research is to investigate these questions and shed light on the evolving impact CPA has on consumer perceptions.

CORPORATE POLITICAL ADVOCACY

The general concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) focuses on how organizations can make ethical decisions to benefit society in addition to realizing profits (Davis, 1960). Carroll (1991) explains that organizations have four distinct responsibilities when it comes to CSR: economic, ethical, philanthropic, and legal. Economic responsibilities focus on maximizing owners' (shareholders) wealth; ethical responsibilities center on a firm's commitment to behave in a manner consistent with society's ethical expectations; philanthropic responsibilities focus on ways in which an organization can act to benefit philanthropies or charities; and legal responsibilities focus on an organization acting as a law-abiding corporate citizen. Through these different avenues of CSR initiatives, organizations strive to change society (Freidman & Miles, 2002). One such way that organizations do this is by taking political positions on social topics by either donating money to a cause (e.g. philanthropic) or publically supporting social causes (e.g. ethical) (Bebchuk & Jackson, 2010). While CSR, in general, has received considerable attention, the focus on organizations taking political positions is still somewhat limited. These practices, referred to as corporate political advocacy (CPA), are a firm's very public and divisive demonstration of support for or against a sociopolitical issue.

The overarching concepts of corporate ethics and social responsibility have been widely studied and debated (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2009). Business organizations over the past decade have increased their involvement in CPA for various reasons (Hydock et al., 2019). Mohr (1996) argues that organizations sometimes express political opinions on social issues to obtain political and business advantage. By gaining such advantages, an organization can be better positioned to compete in the market. This rational, however, is contingent that a firm must have socially responsible practices not just for the purposes of achieving short-term gains. Husted and Allen (2000) further underscore this reason when they explain that organizations allocate resources to obtain long-term social objectives and to produce a competitive advantage through their use of CSR programs dealing with political involvement.

Drumwright and Murphy (2001) claimed organizations take political positions on social topics for another reason. This alternate theory states organizations can utilize their CPA as a marketing tool referred to as cause-related marketing (CRM). Ptacek and Salazar (1997) define CRM as the act of an organization leveraging its financial resources to support a charity, or by utilizing its resources as a way to promote a social cause. Varandarajan and Menon (1988) describe CRM strategies as CSR initiatives that "do better by doing good." Consumers have been found to respond very positively to CRM, sometimes without even knowing it (Nan & Heo, 2007). When CRM is used properly to communicate an organization's political

position on a social topic, it can lead to achieving long-term competitive advantage (Collins, 1993) by bolstering a firm's reputation (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001).

Regardless of reason, organizations that participate in CPA practices, specifically the explicity expression of political opinions on social topics, ultimately impact the brand reputation (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Creyer, 1997; Hydock et al., 2019; Hydock, Paharia, & Blair, 2021). Corporate reputation has been widely studied in the marketing literature (Page & Fearn, 2005) and it has been found that an organization's brand reputation is derived from an organization's ability to successfully fulfill multiple stakeholders' expectations (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder's expectations are not simply traditional business functions such as providing a product or service. Branco and Rodrigues (2006) outlined that an organization's CSR and CPA initiatives may have a pivotal impact on brand reputation with nearly every single stakeholder of the organization. Therefore, the effect of CPA as communicated through CRM, is one of the most important factors in determining corporate reputation (Worcester, 2009).

The link between reputation and consumer behaviors is well researched demonstrating that an organization with a positive reputation is more likely to be supported by consumers (Ross, Stutts, & Patterson, 2011; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Creyer, 1997). Further, the literature on socially responsible consumption argues that some portion of the population considers an organization's political position when making purchases (Micheletti & Stolli, 2012). Boycotts and buycotts are commonly used terms to describe the collective action of a group to either support or oppose a company's products. Although liberals have a greater propensity to boycott, conservatives also experience an impact on their purchasing intentions when company actions are inconsistent with their values (Swimberghe, Flurry, & Parker, 2011). Therefore, we know CPA induces an impact and influence on consumer purchasing behaviors but we do not fully understand how consumer perceptions have evolved as CPA has become much more risky in recent years.

Altogether, the current state of the literature and the continual dynamic nature of CPA activity among organizations in the United States give rise to the following research questions: How have consumer perceptions of CPA changed in the past ten years? Does CPA only impact consumer perceptions when organizations take a stand on social issues they personally care about? Which social issues do consumers care about the most? That is, which social issues have the strongest influence and impact on consumers' purchasing decisions? Using analyses from two datasets collected nearly 10 years apart, the purpose of this research is to answer these questions.

METHODS

Data and Samples

Using data collected in 2013 and 2022, we examined if and to what extent consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions changed in the past decade due to CPA. We also wanted to know the impact on consumer perceptions of an organization's reputation for engaging in CPA and if that has changed at all since 2013. Further, we investigated whether the specific social issue matters when determining perceptions and purchasing behaviors as well as gauged the relative importance and impact of numerous social issues.

In 2013 we collected data from 264 employees at a large Midwestern service organization. Respondents were 52% male with an average age of 33. The majority of respondents were White and held at least a Bachelor's degree. Based on a review of the CPA research, we identified potential survey items to assess the degree to which a taking a political position on a social topic will impact customer perceptions and behaviors. To develop our survey instrument, we queried a panel of four experts (defined as academic researchers actively involved in studying CPA and CSR) to match potential survey items. The final survey items can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1
VARIABLE NAMES AND ITEMS

Variable Name	Survey Item
1. Purchase	My purchasing decision is influenced when an organization takes a political position on a social issue.
2. Responsibility	I think that organizations have a social responsibility to express political opinions on social topics.
3. Reputation	I think that an organization's reputation is affected by its expression of political opinions on social topics.
4. Influence	When making a purchasing decision, I consider the organization's political position on social topics.
5. Impact	My purchasing decisions are impacted when an organization takes a political position on a social topic.
6. Agree	I am MORE likely to purchase products/services from an organization when I AGREE with its political position on social topic.
7. Disagree	I am LESS likely to purchase products/services from an organization when I DISAGREE with its political position on social topic.

We also asked a question on respondents' political preference using a 10-point scale where 1 indicated highly liberal political views and 10 indicated highly conservative political views. The mean score for this item was 4.95, which suggests a relatively balanced, although slightly more liberal, sample in terms of this metric.

In early 2022 we again collected data from 367 employees at a large Midwestern service organization. To best answer our research questions and have comparative data, we asked employees the same items in the 2022 survey as in the 2013 survey. The participants in the 2022 survey were 52% female, 81% White, with an average age of 36 and the majority holding at least a Bachelor's degree or higher. The mean score for the political view item was 5.8, which suggests a relatively balanced, although slightly more conservative, sample in terms of this metric. The 2013 and 2022 descriptive statistics and correlations can be seen in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively.

TABLE 2
2013 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Purchase	3.31	1.16											
2. Responsibility	2.38	0.98	.28**										
3. Reputation	4.05	0.81	.38**	.10									
4. Influence	2.87	1.18	.74**	.30**	.40**								
5. Impact	3.14	1.14	.81**	.27**	.42**	.83**							
6. Agree	3.36	1.06	.65**	.27**	.32**	.61**	.65**						
7. Disagree	3.43	1.15	.71**	.26**	.32**	.71**	.70**	.68**					
8. Gender	0.52	0.48	.18**	.09	.04	.08	.18**	.14*	.10				
9. Age	3.17	1.09	.21**	.05	.09	.24**	.26**	.18**	.22**	.02			
10. Education	3.76	0.95	.17**	.09	.07	.21**	.20**	.18**	.17**	.02	.24**		
11. Income Level	2.42	1.42	.19**	.01	.11	.18**	.22**	.12	.17**	-.10	.50**	.29**	
12. Political Stance	4.95	2.29	-.24**	-.01	-.07	-.17**	-.18**	-.10	-.16**	-.09	.01	-.05	.08

N=264
*p<.05; **p<.01

TABLE 3
2022 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Purchase	3.35	1.17											
2. Responsibility	3.04	1.29	.62**										
3. Reputation	3.84	0.98	.50**	.31**									
4. Influence	3.31	1.25	.82**	.64**	.46**								
5. Impact	3.46	1.14	.84**	.58**	.47**	.80**							
6. Agree	3.76	1.10	.66**	.43**	.41**	.67**	.65**						
7. Disagree	3.56	1.17	.36**	.16**	.35**	.37**	.43**	.53**					
8. Gender	0.48	0.50	.03	-.05	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.06	-.05				
9. Age	3.58	1.23	-.03	-.10	.08	-.02	-.03	.06	.16*	.01			
10. Education	3.84	1.01	.13*	.13*	-.03	.15**	.12*	.06	.07	.07	.04		
11. Income Level	2.63	1.50	.05	-.04	-.08	.04	.01	.04	-.01	.61	.03	.36**	
12. Political Stance	5.80	2.92	.11*	.04	-.04	.06	.08	.02	-.09	.07	.01	.15**	.15**

N=367
*p<.05; **p<.01

The comparative response frequencies for the 2013 dataset and 2022 dataset are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4
2013 VS. 2022 RESPONSE FREQUENCY IN PERCENTAGES

	Variables													
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	2013	2022	2013	2022	2013	2022	2013	2022	2013	2022	2013	2022	2013	2022
Strongly Disagree	8.0	9.3	18.8	16.1	1.1	3.5	13.7	12.5	8.0	9.0	3.4	5.2	6.1	5.4
Disagree	21.2	17.4	39.5	19.9	5.7	7.1	29.4	14.4	26.7	12.3	13.3	8.2	18.3	15.0
Neutral	14.4	14.4	28.7	21.3	6.5	15.3	19.8	18.3	16.8	15.8	20.8	19.6	20.2	21.8
Agree	44.7	46.9	10.7	30.0	60.5	50.4	30.5	39.2	40.1	49.6	42.0	39.2	38.0	33.2
Strongly Agree	11.7	12.0	2.3	12.8	26.2	23.7	6.5	15.5	8.4	13.4	20.5	27.8	17.5	24.5

In addition to the same data we collected in 2013, we collected additional survey items in 2022 to assess if consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions are only impacted if the consumer cares about the social issue on which an organization takes a stand. That is, if the consumer does not care about a particular issue, are their purchasing behaviors impacted? These additional social issue items can be found in Table 5 and their respective response frequencies can be found in Table 6.

TABLE 5
2022 SOCIAL ISSUE ITEMS

	Survey Item
1	My decision to purchase a product/service from a particular organization is only influenced when that particular organization takes a political position on a social issue I care about.
2	When an organization takes a political position on a social issue I don't care about, it does not impact my purchasing decision with that organization.
3	When an organization takes a political position on a social issue I do care about, it does impact my purchasing decision with that organization.
4	I am more satisfied with my employer when I work for an organization where I agree with its political position on social topics.
5	I am less satisfied with my employer when I work for an organization where I disagree with its political position on social topics.

TABLE 6
2022 RESPONSE FREQUENCY FOR SOCIAL ISSUE ITEMS IN PERCENTAGES

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Items	1	6.5	9.7	24.7	48.4	10.8
	2	4.3	7.5	28	36.6	23.7
	3	1.1	9.7	25.8	51.6	11.8
	4	2.2	5.4	24.7	46.2	21.5
	5	1.1	11.8	29	38.7	19.4

Finally, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which eight different social issues were important to their purchase decision or to what extent an organization taking a stance on each issue impacted their purchasing decisions. We measured responses using a 5-point scale where 1 indicated "Very unimportant/no impact" and 5 indicated "Very important/serious impact". We chose these social issues because they are considered some of the most important and visible social issues currently affecting the American population. The response frequencies for these social issues are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
2022 RESPONSE FREQUENCY FOR SOCIAL ISSUES IN PERCENTAGES

		Very unimportant/no impact	Not very important/not much impact	Neutral	Somewhat important/some impact	Very important/serious impact
Social Issues	COVID-19	3.2	8.6	19.4	32.3	36.6
	Marriage Equality	6.5	3.2	34.4	36.6	19.4
	Gender Equality	7.5	4.3	23.7	34.4	30.1
	Gun Violence	6.5	7.5	31.2	32.3	22.6
	Voting Rights	8.6	4.3	24.7	31.2	31.2
	Climate Change	4.3	6.5	26.9	39.8	22.6
	Racial Injustice	8.6	4.3	22.6	33.3	31.2
	Healthcare	2.2	6.5	22.6	31.2	37.6

RESULTS

Our correlation analysis in 2013 supports conclusions from previous research that liberals report greater intention to boycott in response to company actions that are inconsistent with their values. Political Stance had significant negative correlations with the Purchase (-0.24, p<.01), Influence (-0.17, p<.01), Impact (-0.18, p<.01), and Disagree (-0.16, p<.01) survey items (see Table 2). Interestingly, Political Stance was not significantly associated with the Agree survey item which suggests a negativity bias among consumers. That is, consumers' purchasing decisions are impacted when they disagree with an organization's political position on a social topic but not when they agree. This makes sense because negative information, i.e. the

negative response to disagreeing with an organization's political position, is more salient and, thus, more impactful in any human decision-making process (Kahneman, 2011). However, we did not find the same result in the 2022 data. Correlation analysis in 2022 suggests that Political Stance is only significantly associated with Purchase (0.11*, p<.05; see Table 3) but with conservatives' purchasing behaviors being influenced. These results suggest that between 2013 and 2022 consumer political views have a weaker, if nonconsequential, influence on consumer purchasing decisions. In other words, there is not a significant difference between the impact of liberal versus conservative views on consumer perceptions of CPA.

Table 4 shows the comparative response frequencies in percentages for the 2013 survey data and 2022 survey data. There was a significant increase in the frequency of responses that Agree or Strongly Agree with the items among six of the seven variables. Only one item demonstrated a decrease in the frequency of Agree or Strongly Agree responses: Reputation. When considering, "I think that an organization's reputation is affected by its expression of political opinions on social topics," 86.7% of respondents either Agreed or Strongly Agreed in 2013 compared to 74.1% in 2022. This significant change in response suggests that the impact on an organization's reputation for engaging in CPA has softened in the past decade as organizational participation in this realm continues to increase.

Although six of the seven items show increases in Agree or Strongly Agree responses, three items in particular show significant increases between 2013 and 2022. The most dramatic increase, 13% in 2013 to 42.8% in 2022, is seen in participants' responses to Responsibility. That is, there is a substantial increase in the number of consumers who think that organizations have a social responsibility to express political opinions on social topics. Put differently, more consumers expect organizations to engage in CPA. The item demonstrating the second largest change in response is Influence. Of respondents in 2022, 54.7% compared to 37% in 2013, indicated that they consider the organization's political position on social topics when making a purchasing decision. Finally, the third largest change is seen in response to Impact: "My purchasing decisions are impacted when an organization takes a political position on a social topic." 63% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree in 2022 compared to 48.5% in 2013. Overall, these data suggest that in the past decade, consumer perceptions and reactions to CPA have significantly and consistently changed across all variables. Specifically, there has been an increasingly significant response in the influence and impact on consumer purchasing decisions between 2013 and 2022. Furthermore, while consumers may have felt CPA had a stronger impact on an organization's reputation in 2013, those sentiments are steadily changing as more organizations engage in CPA in 2022.

The results from the additional survey items collected in 2022 are seen in Table 6. Collectively, the results seen in Table 6 show that consumer's purchasing decisions are largely influenced or impacted when an organization takes a stand on a social issue they personally care about. Specifically, responses to items 1 and 3 show that 59.2% and 63.4%, respectively, of respondents' purchasing decisions are influenced or impacted when a particular organization takes a political position on a social issue they care about. Similarly, 60.3% of respondents indicated that when an organization takes a political position on a social issue they don't care about, it does not impact their purchasing decision with that organization.

Finally, the results in Table 7 indicate the relative importance and impact that various specific social issues have on consumers' purchasing decisions. Not surprisingly, the two social issues that have the strongest impact on consumers are COVID-19 (68.9%) and healthcare (68.8). "Very important/serious impact" was the most chosen response when considering an organization's political stance on COVID-19 and healthcare (36.6% and 37.6%, respectively) thus indicated just how impactful CPA is with regard to these two issues. This result is likely due to the proximal nature of the two issues. That is, most individuals are personally impacted by these two issues during their normal day-to-day life and, thus, most people have a personal stake in the nature of these social issues. Behind COVID and healthcare, the most impactful social issues are gender equality (64.5%) and racial injustice (64.5%).

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation uncovered an interesting story regarding consumer reactions to CPA. Taken together, we found that CPA has had an increasingly significant impact and influence on consumer

purchase decisions over the past ten years. Not only do consumers believe organizations have a responsibility to express their political position on social issues, their purchasing decisions are influenced and ultimately impacted depending on whether they agree or disagree with the stance taken by the company. More specifically, consumers particularly care when they disagree with an organization's political position on a social topic and are less likely to purchase those products or services. Indeed, it seems that organizations need to worry more about losing customers who do not share similar political views than gaining customers who do. Our finding is supported by recent research that suggests firms are more likely to lose an existing misaligned customer than to gain a new aligned customer (Hydock et al., 2021).

Although organizations are taking a risk when declaring their political position on social issues, our results indicate that consumers are slowly becoming more forgiving about the impact CPA has on organizational reputation. Whereas historically companies refrained from engaging in CPA as doing so could undermine their reputation, it seems that consumers expect organizations to express political views on social topics and doing less has less impact on firm reputation. Thus, in the long run it may be more beneficial for an organization to take a stand on the political scene than to refrain from political involvement.

Interestingly, our results suggest that between 2013 and 2022 consumer political views have a weaker, if nonconsequential, influence on consumer purchasing decisions. In other words, there is not a significant difference between the impact of liberal versus conservative views on consumer perceptions of CPA. This change in result may be due to differences in the sample, with 2022 yielding slightly more conservative views. However, it may be that all consumers, whether liberal or conservative, are similarly impacted by CPA.

The biggest contribution from this study comes from the additional data we collected in 2022. Frequencies revealed that consumer's purchasing decisions are largely influenced or impacted only when an organization takes a stand on a social issue they personally care about. In other words, the social issue matters. Furthermore, we discovered that not all social issues are deemed equally important in influencing and impacting consumer purchase decisions. Ultimately, the data revealed that COVID-19 and healthcare are by far the most influential social issues impacting consumers, with the majority of respondents indicating these issues were very important and had serious impact on their purchase decisions.

Overall, organizational leaders should proceed cautiously and consider the potential risks of taking a political stand on social issues. An organization may experience increased support from consumers who agree with the political position taken by the organization, but our data show it seems much more likely that an organization may simultaneously experience a decrease in support from the consumers who disagree with the political position taken by the organization. However, we also learned that most consumers expect organizations to participate in CPA and in doing so, the impact on firm reputation is softening as more companies engage in CPA. Organizational leaders should also be conscious of which social issues they decide to take a political stand on because consumers do not consider all social issues equally. Currently the two main issues influencing and impacting consumers are COVID-19 and healthcare. Considering the enduring state of the pandemic, leaders can expect to continue to navigate these issues for the foreseeable future. Managers must navigate their positions on these issues carefully or they risk losing large segments of their consumer market. It seems that as time goes on, it is not enough for companies to rely on their old ways and keep it strictly business; consumers have an expectation for companies to join the conversation on political issues and subsequently make purchasing decisions around the stances taken by those companies. With the increasingly divisive nature of the population, an expectation to engage in CPA, and a seemingly zero-sum game to play, business certainly is riskier than ever.

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