

**The Impact of Corporate Social Advocacy on Stakeholders' Issue Awareness, Attitudes,
and Voting Behaviors**

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Executive Summary

The concept of American democracy has conventionally been structured around voters receiving political information from government institutions, political parties, and news media sources. Today, corporations play a greater role in democratic society and represent a shift from traditional government to the inclusion of corporate engagement by taking public stances on controversial social-political issues, otherwise termed corporate social advocacy, or CSA (Dodd & Supa 2014, 2015). Companies are now considered central political actors that are reshaping the democratic system in ways they have never done before (Gower, 2006; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Today, companies face pressure from stakeholders to exercise their corporate power to effect social and political change. Often, in response to stakeholder pressure exercised through social media and boycotting/buycotting behaviors (Rim, Lee, & Yoo, 2020), companies take public stances and actions on divisive issues aimed at influencing government leaders to make meaningful policy changes. However, research has not addressed the potential reciprocal impact that corporate issues engagement has on the stakeholders, themselves, and resultant societal-level impacts.

Research about voting behavior addresses psychological factors to include one's political party identification, perceived knowledge, political socialization, information efficacy, and stances on critical issues (Kuhar, 2013; Wendel, 2012). The political environment of a voter affects these psychological factors through the forms of information they receive (Dalton, 2016; Lau & Redlawsk, 2000). Traditionally, voters gained political knowledge mostly from peers, news media sources, and campaign advertisements (Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). However, increased corporate engagement in controversial issues has expanded the information environment of individuals, perhaps adding additional external sources of information.

Political information efficacy is conceptualized as an individual's confidence in their own political knowledge to capably vote (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) theorized how voters receive political information through a number of messages and channels from various sources, and that information is processed differently depending on the source of information. The results of their study indicated that the source of political information did affect an individual's information efficacy, which in turn did determine the individual's voting behavior (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). For instance, when an individual is exposed to a corporate stance on a controversial social-political issue, it may influence their voting behavior by raising awareness or changing their attitudes and behaviors. Corporate engagement with controversial social-political issues can potentially influence individuals in their political environment; thus, becoming a new source of political knowledge with the potential to affect individuals' awareness, attitudes, and actions.

This study investigated voters' awareness, attitudes, and behaviors in the context of CSA. Voters in a major southeastern city were polled using an intercept survey method during the 2018 Midterm Election. Prompted with controversial corporate issues engagement, results found that some voters indicated that they were more aware of issues, attitudes toward issues had changed, and voting behaviors were also impacted. This research provides a basis for future studies on the impact of CSA on issues awareness, attitudes, and behaviors as societal-level outcomes. Practical implications highlight the evolving importance of authenticity and action for corporate issues engagement with an emphasis on long-term corporate commitments to addressing some of the most important issues facing society today.

Abstract

This study investigated how corporate stances on controversial social-political issues, termed corporate social advocacy (CSA), impacted voters' awareness, attitudes, and behaviors. Voters in a major southeastern city were polled using an intercept survey method during the 2018 Midterm Election. Results indicated that in the context of CSA, voters were more aware of issues, attitudes toward issues were changed, and voting behaviors were also impacted. This research provides a basis for future studies on the impact of CSA on issues awareness, attitudes, and behaviors as societal-level outcomes.

Keywords: activism, advocacy, corporate social advocacy, corporate social responsibility, political communication, strategic issues management, voting behavior

Introduction

The concept of American democracy was conventionally structured around voters receiving political information from government institutions, political parties, and news media sources. Today, corporations play a larger, politicized public role in democratic society and represent a shift from traditional government to the inclusion of corporate engagement by taking public stances on controversial social-political issues, otherwise termed corporate social advocacy or CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015). Companies are considered central political actors that are reshaping the democratic system in ways they have never been done before. Today, companies face pressure from stakeholders to exercise their corporate power to effect social and political change. Often, in response to stakeholder pressure exercised through social media and boycotting/buycotting behaviors, companies take public stances and actions on divisive issues aimed at influencing government leaders to make meaningful policy changes (Gower, 2006; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). However, research has not addressed the potential reciprocal impact that corporate issues engagement has on the stakeholders, themselves, and resultant societal-level impacts.

Voting behaviors in the United States are a widely researched topic. Research on voting turnout rates and demographics of voters are analyzed and reported after every primary presidential or midterm election. This research has stressed that sociological factors (age, race, income, family, etc.) influence voting behavior (Akhmetkarimov, 2008; Kedar & Defual, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center, the younger generations, Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X had a higher voter turnout rate than Baby Boomers and older generations in both the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterms (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019). Additionally, the 2018 midterm election was the most racially and ethnically diverse with higher voter turnout most evident among Hispanics and Asians (Krogstad et al., 2019). Research about voting behavior also addresses psychological factors to include one's political party identification, perceived knowledge, political socialization, information efficacy, and stances on critical issues (Kuhar, 2013; Wendel, 2012). The political environment of a voter affects these psychological factors through the forms of information they receive (Dalton, 2016; Lau & Redlawsk, 2000). Traditionally, voters consumed political knowledge from peers, news media sources, and campaign advertisements (Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). However, increased corporate engagement in controversial issues has expanded the information environment of individuals, perhaps adding additional external sources of information. Corporate engagement with controversial social-political issues can potentially influence individuals in their political environment; thus, becoming a new source of political knowledge with the potential to affect individuals' awareness, attitudes, and actions. This research explores the potential impact of CSA with regard to stakeholders' issues awareness, issues attitudes, and voting behaviors.

Literature Review

Stakeholders are increasingly looking to companies to incite change in relation to social-political issues. For instance, the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Report revealed that both the informed public and the mass population trust business more than government and media. With trust in business continuing to surpass trust in traditional institutions, the impact of CSA on awareness, attitudes, and actions is more important to understand than ever before. Traditionally, companies refrained from engaging in high-risk behaviors like communicating about controversial sociopolitical issues because they have the potential to both isolate stakeholder groups and attract negative activist group attention. For instance, recent times find an abundance of corporate issues stances in opposition to President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change and in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) civil rights movement. More than two dozen major companies (e.g., Adobe, Apple, Facebook, Google, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Intel Corporation, Levi Strauss & Co., Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, Salesforce, Unilever and more) published full-page ads in *The New Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Post* telling the president to remain a full partner in the agreement. Likewise, following the police killing of George Floyd, activists and consumers called on companies to demonstrate their support for the BLM movement and diversity efforts within their organizations. Ben & Jerry's (2020) released a powerful statement, "Silence is NOT an Option," calling for the dismantling of white supremacy through manifestations of systematic racism, President Trump to disavow white supremacists and nationalist groups that overtly support him, and Congress to pass specific legislation that would create a commission to study the effects of slavery and discrimination from 1619 to present in order to provide appropriate remedies.

The political socialization process expands as sources of information are added to an individual's political environment. During the political socialization process, individuals develop political attitudes and positions on divisive social-political issues (Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). Today, companies are expanding the information environment as they increase their issues engagement efforts guided by public relations professionals and demanded by stakeholders. For instance, industry trend research using a nationally random sample from the U.S. population finds that 79% of Americans believe that companies should take action to address the most important issues facing society today, and 87% believe that companies have the power to influence change (Global Strategy Group, 2019). Indeed, public relations researchers have argued that today, there are shifting expectations about the roles of business and government in society – the implications of which may be societal-level outcomes (e.g., changes in awareness or attitudes toward issues and voting behaviors) (Dodd, 2018). Thus, companies that engage in CSA may become a contributing external source to the information environment.

Political Socialization and Information Efficacy

Political socialization is defined as a developmental process in which young adults develop awareness, attitudes, and behaviors about the political environment that they exist in (Atkin & Gantz, 1978). Agents of socialization include "the family, the school, peers, media, religion, work, the ethnic background, or political climate" (Genner & Süß, 2017, p. 1) and can all influence voters as social agents. The three major components that comprise the socialization framework are social structural variables, socialization agents, and attitude and behavioral outcomes (Bush et al., 1999). According to McLeod and O'Keefe (1972), both socialization

agents and social structural variables impact individuals' attitudes and behaviors through social learning theory (Bush et al., 1999). Genner and Süß (2017) explained how "Agents of socialization shape our norms and values regarding appropriate behavior and how we interact with others and highly influence our views and perspective on our community, our country, and the world at large" (p. 1). In a political context, interactions with various agents in an individual's information environment can influence their political views and voting behaviors.

Through the social learning model (Moschis & Smith, 1985), individuals engage in modeling and reinforcement processes after exposure to environmental forces, such as social agents in the socialization process (Bandura, 1969). Modeling refers to the way individuals shape their political attitudes and beliefs based on observations made from interactions with socialization agents, and reinforcement is a learning process initiated through rewards or punishments (Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). Additionally, various factors, such as an individual's stage of life, unique characteristics and attributes, and life experiences, influence how socialization agents affect individuals. For instance, the results of a study focusing on African American and Caucasian young adults surveyed on various consumer socialization variables indicated that parental communication, peer communication, mass media, gender, and race were all related to attitudes toward advertising (Bush et al., 1999). In a consumer context, consumer socialization is described as "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p. 2). Therefore, companies play a role in an individual's socialization process. However, the role of companies as socialization agents in a political context as they engage in controversial social-political issues has not yet been studied.

Bush et al. (1999) explained how people, institutions, and organizations may all be influential socialization agents. Likewise, Muralidharan and Sung (2016) argued that socialization agents may include external sources from an individual or group of people, as well as from an influential organization. Moreover, Muralidharan and Sung (2016) found that social agents, through the political socialization process, influenced voters' information efficacy levels. Political information efficacy is conceptualized as an individual's confidence in their own political knowledge to capably vote (Kaid et al., 2007) and the political information environment refers to an individual's collective access to news and political information from various social agents. Specifically, the political information environment can be defined "as the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources" (Esser et al., 2012). Kaid et al. (2007) theorized how voters receive political information through several messages and channels from a variety of sources, arguing that individuals process political information differently depending on the source of information. The results of their study found that the source of political information did affect an individual's information efficacy, which in turn did determine the individual's voting behavior (Kaid et al., 2007).

With the growth of social media platforms, individuals' political information environments now include both traditional and social media socialization agents of influence. More so, the amount of political information available to an individual voter can be overwhelming. It is often difficult for voters to know which sources of information to trust or how to evaluate source credibility, especially in the current climate where research indicates an erosion of trust in traditional institutions (e.g., government, media) (Brunner, 2017; Edelman, 2017). One way for a voter to sift through this vast amount of information quickly is to use

cognitive shortcuts, also known as heuristics (Lau & Redlawsk, 2000). Voters rely on heuristics to quickly come to conclusions about political information that will affect their voting behavior. The two most frequently used political heuristics are political affiliation and ideology (Dalton, 2016; Lau & Redlawsk 2000; Theodoridis, 2017). Individuals will generally vote according to the political information that is presented to them to the extent that it is congruent with their own political affiliation and ideology. Heuristics are employed during the political socialization process and can increase voters' political information efficacy.

In the modern context of CSA, companies may be viewed as social agents providing additional political information for voters who process this external source along with other sources of information according to the extent of issue congruency or organizational identification, for instance. When companies engage in controversial social-political issues, they contribute to a democracy where non-state actors engage in political discourse and may impact societal outcomes, public policy, and voting behaviors (Dodd, 2018).

Strategic Issues Management and Organizational Legitimacy Theory

Central to our understanding of organizations in society, strategic issues management (SIM) has been widely researched among scholars and practiced by public relations professionals. SIM is the “the amalgamation of organizational functions and responsive culture that blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a supportive climate” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 8-9) between an organization and its stakeholders. Organizations use SIM proactively or reactively for various purposes, such as mitigating negative outcomes resulting from crises or preventing a problem entirely (Oliver & Donnelly, 2007). An essential component of SIM is an organization's ability to effectively communicate with stakeholders to understand how to meet or exceed their expectations; that is, it legitimizes the organization or allows it to exist by way of public permission. Through a process of dialogic communication, organizations seek to identify stakeholder expectations. Organizations may then earn and maintain legitimacy by engaging in behaviors that mirror stakeholder values (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). However, when organizations fail to consistently meet stakeholders' expectations, they face threats to their survival when stakeholders withhold resources and support, a great risk in the context of controversial issues engagement.

The SIM process enables organizations to participate in legitimate behaviors that meet stakeholder expectations. The concept of legitimacy refers to the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In other words, the organization's behaviors are deemed appropriate by its stakeholders when they adhere to social norms and, thus, legitimized. Necessary for an organization's survival, legitimacy is considered the heart of most public relations activities (Metzler, 2001) and gives organizations a license to operate (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Organizations desire legitimacy in order to operate without excessive government intervention (Gower, 2006) and to gain societal support (Suchman, 1995). Establishing and maintaining organizational legitimacy is primarily done by communicating with stakeholders, a public relations function (Gower, 2006). Violations of socially constructed norms result in the creation of “legitimacy gaps” (Heath, 2001) where organizations find it difficult to engage in transactional and social exchange processes. Organizations avoid legitimacy gaps because they give rise to conflict or crises. Central to an issues management approach to public relations, legitimacy gaps can result in the withholding of stakes (e.g., consumer boycotts) or

external regulation (e.g., government intervention), for examples. Ultimately, when an organization experiences legitimacy gaps, its ability to exist as a legitimate societal entity is challenged.

Organizations that engage in “socially acceptable goals in a socially acceptable manner” (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 177) are perceived as legitimate entities. However, perceptions of legitimacy change as societal goals and expectations change. Typically, organizations employ strategic approaches to legitimacy, such as engagement in corporate social responsibility, by communicating symbolic messages to stakeholders (Suchman, 1995) to illustrate “certain highly visible and salient practices that are consistent with social expectations while leaving the essential machinery of the organization intact” (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 181). Today, the transition toward moral legitimacy is apparent due to a shift in societal expectations of organizations’ behaviors (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) to do more than ‘talk the talk’, but ‘walk the walk’ through justified actions. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) defined moral legitimacy as “conscious moral judgments on the organization’s output, procedures, structures and leaders” (p. 73). They state, “Moral legitimacy is socially constructed by giving and considering reasons to justify certain actions, practices, or institutions” (p. 73). Stakeholder expectations of organizations’ legitimacy efforts have evolved to include engaging in dialogue where organizations justify their politicized actions and receive feedback to guide future behaviors.

Traditionally, business has occupied an apolitical role in society (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). However, a shift toward the politicization of organizations in an effort to meet stakeholder expectations has once again brought public relations professionals to the forefront of the legitimation process. Thus, legitimacy provides a theoretical framework for understanding society’s evolving expectations of business, the emergence of CSA, and the role of public relations professionals as issues managers (Bronn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009; Devin & Lane, 2014; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Public relations professionals are well equipped to represent public interests and communicate corporate stances toward controversial issues. A corporate approach that ignores the role of strategic communication risks the creation of disastrous legitimacy gaps that may impact resources, both tangible, as in the case of financial resources, and intangible, as in the case of reputational damage. These resources, facilitated by public relations professionals through CSA, are necessary components of legitimation.

Corporate Social Advocacy

Companies today engage in issues that were once perceived as government responsibilities, such as human rights protections, public health, education initiatives, and more, blurring the lines between government and business roles in society. According to Palazzo and Scherer (2006),

Today, corporations assume an ever-expanding set of social responsibilities including more and more activities that were formerly regarded as activities of the political system. In such contexts the clear division of labor between the political and business actors as it is included in both the pragmatic and the cognitive concept of legitimacy becomes highly disputable. (p. 78)

As an outgrowth of the evolving corporate responsibilities to society, public relations researchers argue that organizations are increasingly taking stances on controversial social-political issues (CSA) that transcend the particular interests of a single organization and the potential foregoing of financial profits for a perceived betterment of society (Austin, et al., 2019; Miller, et al., 2018; Korschun, et al., 2016), and that CSA messages impact stakeholder attitudes

and behavioral intentions (Heffron, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Overton et al., 2020; Parcha & Westerman, 2020; Rim, Lee, & Yoo, 2020). For instance, Nike's 30th anniversary "Just Do It" campaign released in September 2018 featured controversial black activist and NFL free-agent quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick had ignited national controversy by kneeling during the national anthem in protest of police shootings of unarmed black men, a factor that many believe contributed to the player going unsigned for the 2016-17 season. The ad included the tagline, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." Kim, et al. (2020) studied the campaign, concluding that perceptions of Nike's motives for CSA impacted attitudes toward the company, as well as word of mouth behaviors. Similarly, DICK'S Sporting Goods had been a major retailer of AR-15 assault rifles until a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting in March 2018 took the lives of 17 people (Isidore, 2018). Following the tragic event, the company removed all assault rifles from their shelves in a process of self-regulation where a lack of government legislative action exists. In a case study of DICK's engagement in CSA, researchers concluded that the company authentically sought to spur change, and the public response via Twitter analyses positively highlighted the company's values and leadership, as well as indicated public intentions to take action (Gaither, Austin, Collins, 2018).

Organizations may participate in the political socialization process by diversifying the information environment when communicating issues stances and engaging in CSA efforts. Corporate social advocacy communication may provide a great amount of information about issues, prompting greater public awareness about an issue. More so, stakeholders may employ cognitive shortcuts to process mass amounts of information more quickly by way of pre-established positive identification with a company. In other words, organizational identification may serve as heuristic for issues attitudes in the context of CSA. Indeed, research has found that under certain circumstance, engagement in CSA is effective in changing individuals' attitudes toward an issue (Parcha & Westerman, 2020). In addition, stakeholders may perceive an organization's political affiliation and ideology as congruent with their personal values and, therefore, support its advocacy efforts through their voting behaviors (and vice versa).

When an organization engages in CSA, it has the potential to impact voter's political information environment and efficacy through heuristic processing of information. Previous research has shown that the political information efficacy of voters has a direct influence on their voting behaviors (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). Thus, this study sought to examine how corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues may impact issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors during the 2018 midterm election. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1: In the context of CSA, what is the relationship between corporate stances and stakeholder issues awareness?

RQ2: In the context of CSA, what is the relationship between corporate stances and stakeholder issues attitudes?

RQ3: In the context of CSA, what is the relationship between corporate stances and stakeholder voting behaviors?

RQ4: In the context of CSA, what is the association between perceptions of increased issue salience (awareness) with (a) changes in opinion toward issues (attitudes); (b) likelihood of voting (behaviors); and (c) influence on voting (behaviors)?

RQ5: In the context of CSA, what is the association between changes in opinion toward issues (attitudes) with (a) likelihood of voting (behaviors); and (c) influence on voting (behaviors)?

Method

In order to answer these research questions, voters in a major southeastern city (city population 280,000; county population 1.35 million) were polled at multiple voting sites, at multiple times throughout election day - November 6, 2018 - using an intercept survey method during the 2018 midterm elections. After having cast their votes, researchers asked participants to respond to seven poll questions related to corporate issues engagement. Participants were asked to respond to questions related to issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors. Due to the unique in-person polling method used to capture real-time voter responses, descriptive data and crosstab analyses are used to report results of the research. The frequencies of “yes, no, and prefer not to answer,” are reported for each item. Crosstab analyses and chi square tests were performed to better understand the relationships between relevant awareness, attitude, and action items.

Sample and Procedure

As of November 2018, the county had 810,661 registered voters, of which 345,317 registered as Democrat; 212,856 registered as Republican; 6,897 registered as Other/Minor Party; and 245,591 registered with no party affiliation. The following demographic information is reported: American Indian (n = 2,230); Asian/Pacific (n = 29,950); Black (n = 134,457); Hispanic (n = 199,444); White (n = 374,472); Other (n = 15,590); Multi-Racial (n = 7,892); and not given (n = 34,339). The county recorded 475,071 votes for the 2018 midterm election (177,641 participated in early voting, 140,428 voted by mail, and 157,002 voted on election day).

Collected at multiple polling sites during multiple times on 2018 Midterm Election Day, 291 voters participated in this research. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling as they were exiting the polling locations. Participants were first asked if they voted in the election and, if yes, then they were asked to participate in the research. After providing verbal consent, voters were asked to respond to seven items related to corporate issues engagement as it may have served to impact issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors. Items were asked verbally, and responses were recorded on a printed copy of the questionnaire. For efficiency purposes required by the intercept method, respondents could answer each closed-ended question with “yes,” “no,” or “prefer not to answer.” The prefer not to answer option allowed respondents to opt out of responding if they felt unsure or preferred not to respond to a question.

Measurement

The researchers tested for issues awareness, attitudes, and action using seven closed-ended questions. Researchers first asked, “Are you aware of any companies that have taken stances on controversial issues?” to gauge if respondents were familiar with CSA. The majority of participants indicated an awareness of corporate issues engagement. It is perhaps worth contextualizing here that the 2018 midterm elections in November directly followed both the release of Nike’s campaign that featured controversial figure Colin Kaepernick (September, 2018), as well as DICK’S Sporting Goods self-regulation response to the Marjory Stoneman

Douglas High School shooting (March, 2018). Both of these companies' issues engagement received widespread publicity and were the focus of much debate on social media.

If participants indicated they were not aware of any corporate stances, they were offered the example of Nike's involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement, citing the company's recently released ad featuring black activist and NFL free-agent quarterback Colin Kaepernick. The researchers further sought to assess awareness by asking the question: "After considering a company's stance... do you feel like any issues became more important to you?". The researchers sought to assess attitudes by asking the question: "...do you feel like your opinions toward any issues have changed?". Next, the researchers sought to test behavior by asking the questions "... do you feel like you were more likely to come out to vote today?" and "...do you feel like the way you voted was influenced in any way?". For further analyses, researchers assessed perceptions of authenticity ("Do you believe corporations authentically care about the issues that they take stances on?") and general perceptions of corporate issues engagement ("Do you think companies should take stances on social-political issues?").

Results

The survey data collected was used to measure issues awareness, attitude, and voting behaviors associated with CSA. Due to the intercept method and, therefore, nominal level of data collected, frequencies and crosstabulations were conducted to find any significant patterns in responses. Frequencies of each item are reported to understand the survey data (see Table 1 for the full frequency table). RQ1 sought to understand the relationship between corporate issues engagement and stakeholder issues awareness. Thus, Item 1 (Are you aware of any companies that have taken stances on controversial issues?) and Item 2 (After hearing about a company's stance, do you feel like any issues became more important to you?) were used to measure awareness. The majority of participants indicated that they were aware of a company that had taken a controversial stance on an issue ($n = 215, 73.9\%$). Participants were less confident as to whether issues had become more important to them upon hearing a company's stance; however, a number of participants did report that an issue had become more important: yes ($n = 123, 42.3\%$) and no ($n = 167, 57.4\%$).

Next, RQ2 sought to understand the relationship between corporate issues engagement and stakeholder attitudes toward issues. Item 3 (...do you feel like your opinions toward any issues have changed?) was used to measure attitudes. The majority of participants felt that their opinions towards issues had not changed after learning about the company's stance on the issue ($n = 211, 72.5\%$). However, it is noteworthy that nearly one-third of participants ($n = 80, 27.5\%$) did, in fact, indicate that their opinions toward some issue had changed after exposure to a corporate issue stance.

RQ3 sought to understand the relationship between corporate issues engagement and stakeholder action in the form of voting behaviors. Thus, item 4 (... do you feel like you were more likely to come out to vote today?) and item 5 (...do you feel like the way you voted was influenced in any way?), were used to measure behavior. Although the majority of participants were not more likely to come out to vote during the midterm elections because of a company's stance on an issue ($n = 199, 68.4\%$), it is important to note that a large number of participants indicated that they were more likely to come out to vote in the context of CSA ($n = 92, 31.6\%$). Similar results were reported when participants were asked if they felt their voting was

influenced in any way: no ($n = 225, 77.3\%$) and yes ($n = 66, 22.7\%$). In other words, although not the overwhelming majority, it is again noteworthy that nearly 32% of participants did indicate that they were more likely to come out to vote and nearly 23% indicated their voting was influenced when considering controversial corporate issues engagement.

Additional items for analysis were included to better understand how issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors surrounding corporate issues engagement may be related to general beliefs about corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues and perceptions of authenticity. Item 6 (“Do you think companies should take stances on social-political issues?”) measured voter perceptions on CSA more generally. The majority of participants believed companies should take stances on social-political issues ($n = 222, 76.3\%$), reflecting the results of previously cited industry studies. Item 7 (“Do you believe corporations authentically care about the issues that they take stances on?”) was used to measure perceptions of authenticity. Participants were evenly split as to perceptions about whether companies authentically care about the issues, they take stances on: yes ($n = 145, 49.8\%$) and no ($n = 144, 49.5\%$).

Next, in order to address RQ4-5, crosstabulations and chi-square tests were used to explore interesting intersections of awareness, attitudes, and behaviors in the context of CSA. Importantly, in chi-square tests for 2x2 tables, phi represents a strength of association between independent variables in the columns and rows. In other words, phi is an indicator of association, not causality. Thus, upon being prompted to consider a company’s stance toward a controversial social-political issue, results found that 21.6 percent ($n = 63$) of participants felt like those issues became more important to them and that their opinions towards them had changed (see Table 2). A chi-square was conducted to assess the relationship between participants who indicated that an issue had become more important to them and participants who indicated that their opinion toward an issue had changed in the context of CSA. The single outlier “prefer not to answer” was excluded in order that the 5-count minimum assumption for chi-square tests was not violated. There was a significant association between perceptions of increased issue salience and changes of opinion toward issues ($X^2(1) = 59.72, p < .000$). A post-hoc test measured the phi coefficient: $\phi = 0.45, p < .000$, which is considered a strong positive relationship (Yule, 1912; Goodman & Kruskal, 1972).

Similarly, with regard to increased issue salience, 22 percent ($n = 64$) of participants in this research indicated that issues became more important to them and that they were more likely to vote in the midterm election in consideration of a controversial corporate stance (see Table 3). A chi-square was conducted to assess the relationship between participants who indicated that an issue had become more important to them and participants who indicated that their likelihood of voting was influenced. The single outlier “prefer not to answer” was excluded in order that the 5-count minimum assumption for chi-square tests was not violated. There was a significant association between perceptions of increased issue salience and likelihood of voting in the context of CSA ($X^2(1) = 40.67, p < .000$). A post-hoc test measured the phi coefficient: $\phi = 0.37, p < .000$, which is considered a moderate positive relationship (Yule, 1912; Goodman & Kruskal, 1972).

A smaller number of participants ($n = 45, 15.5\%$) felt that issues became more important to them and influenced their voting behavior (see Table 4). A chi-square was conducted to assess the relationship between participants who indicated that an issue had become more important to them and participants who indicated that their voting behavior was influenced. The single outlier

“prefer not to answer” was excluded in order that the 5-count minimum assumption for chi-square tests was not violated. There was a significant association between perceptions of increased issue salience and specific voting behaviors in the context of CSA ($X^2(1) = 23.23$, $p < .000$). A post-hoc test measured the phi coefficient: $\phi = 0.28$, $p < .000$, which is considered a weak positive relationship (Yule, 1912; Goodman & Kruskal, 1972).

Finally, RQ5a-b sought to understand the association between participants who indicated that their opinion toward an issue had changed and voting behaviors. Upon being prompted to consider a company’s stance toward a controversial social-political issue, results found that 18.9 percent ($n = 55$) of participants indicated that their opinions towards an issue had changed and they were more likely to vote that day (see Table 5). A chi-square was conducted to assess the relationship between participants who indicated that their opinion toward an issue had changed and participants who indicated that their likelihood of voting was influenced in the context of CSA. There was a significant association between opinion change and likelihood of voting in the context of CSA ($X^2(1) = 70.37$, $p < .000$). A post-hoc test measured the phi coefficient: $\phi = 0.49$, $p < .000$, which is considered a strong positive relationship (Yule, 1912; Goodman & Kruskal, 1972).

Similarly, with regard to changes in opinion toward issues, 14.4 percent ($n = 42$) of participants in this research indicated that their opinion toward an issue had changed and that their voting behavior had been impacted in consideration of a controversial corporate stance (see Table 6). A chi-square was conducted to assess the relationship between participants who indicated that their opinion toward an issue had changed and participants who indicated that their voting behavior was influenced in the context of CSA. There was a significant association between opinion change and voting behavior in the context of CSA ($X^2(1) = 55.95$, $p < .000$). A post-hoc test measured the phi coefficient: $\phi = 0.44$, $p < .000$, which is considered a strong positive relationship (Yule, 1912; Goodman & Kruskal, 1972).

Discussion

This study is the first of its kind to examine the relationship between corporate engagement with controversial social-political issues and stakeholder awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors in the 2018 midterm election. With companies increasingly engaging in CSA, this research concludes that although not overwhelmingly, corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues may be contributing to the public’s information environment. Therefore, companies engaging in controversial social-political issues may be considered significant ‘social agents’ that have the potential to impact voters’ behaviors. This study contributes to previous literature on political socialization and information efficacy, strategic issues management, and corporate social advocacy theory and practice. The study also provides empirical support that the public’s issues awareness, issues attitudes, and voting behaviors may be affected by CSA in the 2018 midterm election. In chi-square tests for 2x2 tables, phi represents the percent difference between the independent column variable and the independent row variable. Phi is the mean percent difference between the column and row variables with either considered as causing the other. In other words, the researchers should be cautious in interpreting results as causal, when they are measures of association.

With regard to issues awareness, the large majority of participants (74%) required no prompting when asked if they were aware of any controversial corporate issues stances. It was

especially noteworthy to find that 42% of participants indicated that an issue had become more important to them in the context of CSA. The widespread publicity and social media debate surrounding corporate issues engagement, such as with DICK'S and Nike, is a likely contributor to the awareness and increased importance of issues at the time. For instance, had it not been for DICK'S widely publicized and debated decision to self-regulate with the removal of AR-15 assault rifles, the issue of gun violence may have added to the voters' political information environment, and more so, the issue of assault rifles as a central narrative in the prevention of gun violence may not have been so prevalent. Voters consume political information that influences their voting behaviors through a variety of sources, such as peers, media, and campaign advertisements (Muralidharan & Sung, 2016). Thus, when companies engage in social-political issues by taking public stances, their messages are disseminated on multiple sources that may enter a voter's political information environment. In the DICK'S example, voters may have engaged in an online discussion or interpersonal communication with peers over DICK'S controversial actions (Gaither et al., 2018) or viewed the message via traditional media sources that reported on DICK'S involvement with the gun violence issue. In other words, corporate issues stances and actions may occupy many sources and channels that comprise a voter's political information environment.

Further, research has found that individuals' voting behavior is impacted by the source of political information, which influences their information efficacy and how they process that information (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Therefore, exposure to political information across multiple channels from a company as the social agent (source) may impact how individuals process that information and voting. The political environment also affects voting behavior through psychological factors (e.g., political party identification, political socialization, and information efficacy) (Kuhar, 2013; Wendel, 2012). Research linking the form of political information a voter receives to how these psychological factors impact an individual's political information environment demonstrates the importance of understanding how different information sources may impact outcomes, such as voting behaviors (Dalton, 2016; Lau & Redlawsk, 2000). That said, CSA, as a new source of political information may yield similar effects on voter's information environments. With increasing amounts of information from new and traditional sources, voters rely on certain psychological factors, such as political identification and political ideology (Dalton, 2016; Lau & Redlawsk 2000; Theodoridis, 2017), as political heuristics to help them promptly filter through information during the political socialization process (Lau & Redlawsk, 2000). Generally speaking, when political information aligns with individuals' political identification and ideology, their voting behaviors follow suit. With this in mind, voters may use organizational identification as a political heuristic when making decisions regarding controversial social-political issues (e.g., attitudes and voting behaviors). For instance, if an individual identifies with Apple and Apple supports LGBTQ+ rights, the individual may support LGBTQ+ rights. On the other hand, organizational identification may occur as part of the socialization process. Now that companies are engaging in controversial issues, the company stance may serve as a political heuristic.

In comparison to the aforementioned issues awareness, participants did not evaluate their issues attitudes as highly. Nearly 28% of participants, however, did indicate that their opinion toward an issue had changed in the context of CSA. This finding is not to be dismissed because it does not reflect the majority; rather, it is noteworthy that this number of participants indicated that their attitude toward an issue had changed in the context of controversial corporate issues

stances. For instance, participants may have had negative perceptions toward Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem. Indeed, President Donald Trump made several statements and posted numerous Tweets about Kaepernick and others who kneeled, including: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired. He's fired'" (BBC, 2018). However, the characterization of Kaepernick as a hero-figure in Nike's advertisement may have had the potential to change attitudes toward Kaepernick and perceptions of the issue of police violence toward the Black community. By communicating corporate issues stances and actions to stakeholders, companies may become social agents that affect voters' political socialization processes by expanding their information environment. Researchers have linked instances of CSA to changes in individuals' attitudes toward an issue (Parcha & Westerman, 2020), indicating that individuals' values and beliefs may align with perceptions of the company's political identification and ideology. Thus, an individual may demonstrate their support of corporate advocacy efforts through voting. Additionally, by providing political information to voters from a new source – social agent – companies generate more issue awareness surrounding social-political issues, serving to impact their political information efficacy.

Behaviorally, participants reported that they were likely to come out and vote (32%) and that their vote was influenced by a company stance (23%) in the context of CSA. Past research has not addressed companies as an actor or social agent in the political information environment or as potential primary sources of information for individuals to gain political knowledge. This research demonstrates how companies may now be a significant source of information that people are using in the process of their voting behaviors. It is striking that about a third of participants reported that they were more likely to participate in the election because of a corporate stance. More so, nearly one quarter of participants indicated that their vote was influenced by CSA. To process political information from companies as social agents to make voting decisions, individuals may have employed heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) developed from preexisting feelings of strong organizational identification. Voters may support a company's CSA efforts when they perceive their political views as congruent with its values and issue stances, which is further recognized in other forms, such as boycotting and advocating for companies and their CSA efforts on social media (Rim et al., 2020).

Future research may focus more closely on corporate influence on issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors by further considering the extent to which individuals are able to self-report about the impact of CSA in light of theory and research surrounding political information environment, political efficacy, and cognitive shortcuts or heuristics. Self-report poll measures may not be the ideal method for future research in this area and may introduce bias into participant responses. Experimental research would lend validity to the associations identified by this study and initiate causality of awareness, attitudes, and (voting) behaviors in the context of CSA.

Despite participants reporting nearly split responses (50% each) as to whether companies do or do not authentically care about the issues, they take stances on, most participants indicated that companies should be taking stances on controversial social-political issues (76%), in line with previous research by Austin et al. (2019). This research finds that stakeholders do want companies to engage in divisive issues, even if they are unsure of the authenticity of their engagement. Although previous research has looked at how perceptions of corporate motivations for CSA impact attitudes and behavioral intentions (Kim et al., 2020; Korschun et al., 2016),

future research about perceptions of authenticity for issues stances in varying contexts would provide valuable information for companies to appropriately model engagement in CSA efforts.

Furthermore, crosstab analyses revealed interesting intersections of the voter data with regard to the associations between awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors in the context of CSA. While these figures are not overwhelmingly large, results generally demonstrated upwards of 20% of participants' issues attitudes, issues awareness, and voting behaviors (and the intersections among them) may have been influenced by CSA. In particular, this research finds a strong positive association between issue salience and opinion change, as well as between issues opinion change and both likelihood of voting and impact on voting behavior in the context of CSA. Put differently, awareness in the form of issue salience shares a strong positive association with attitudes in the form of opinion change, similar to findings by Parcha and Westerman (2020) and Overton et al. (2020), who found that issue relevance impacted attitude change. Likewise, attitudes in the form of opinion change share a strong positive association with voting behaviors in the form of likelihood of voting and influence on the vote. The data obtained in this study does not allow for suggestions of causality or more sophisticated multivariate analyses; however, traditional public relations theory and practice suggest that awareness precedes attitudes precedes actions. There is clearly a need for more research on the impact that corporate issues engagement has on the stakeholders, themselves, and issues for societal impact, particularly employing a generalizable sample and higher-order levels of data that may be capable of establishing such causal relationships.

Practical Implications

The results from this study have important implications for understanding the influence of CSA on issues awareness, issues attitudes, and voting behaviors. Individuals' awareness surrounding social-political issues may continue to increase depending on how active companies are on taking stances in the future, and which issues become most salient during the Presidential Election. Instances such as the Paris climate agreement and the Black Lives Matter civil rights movement do not show corporate issues engagement slowing down anytime soon. Indeed, since the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes, corporate America has widely intensified its social justice efforts by donating millions of dollars to organizations to fight racial injustice or making internal organizational policy changes to be more diverse and inclusive (Friedman, 2020). After the wave of Black Lives Matter protests erupted as a result of the killing of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter civil rights movement is now considered one of the largest movements in the history of the United States. In part through corporate America's support, the massive Black Lives Matter protests led to policy changes in police institutions across the nation.

That said, companies wishing to engage in CSA must do so authentically. The term 'woke washing' has emerged to indicate stakeholder skepticism of the true motives of corporate issues engagement (Kim et al., 2020), specifically for the Black Lives Matter movement (Dowell & Jackson, 2020). More than releasing a statement, stakeholders increasingly expect companies to take meaningful action on the issues, driven by government inaction on some of the most important issues facing society today. For instance, consumers and employees looked to company diversity statistics following corporate issues statements in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, often to find hypocrisy (Korschun et al., 2016) in many forms to include: lack of

diversity in leadership; lack of internal policies or objectives supporting diversity; records of discrimination in the workplace; and so on. Public relations professionals must consider perceptions of authenticity as related to a company's history with an issue; the extent of the company's current engagement with an issue (e.g., financial donations v. internal policy changes v. pressure applied to politicians and government); and an audit of the company's current progress toward addressing the issue with a plan on how to continue moving forward with CSA efforts aimed at the betterment of society. Corporate issues engagement should, of course, be concerned with outcomes for the company; however, it has become increasingly apparent that companies will need to demonstrate authenticity (Heffron, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Korschun, et al., 2016; Vasquez & Dodd, 2019) and action on the issue for societal-level outcomes. Uniquely qualified, public relations professionals are situated in a prime location to strategically manage and communicate CSA efforts.

More so, practical implications for this study consist of better understanding the modern-day strategic issues management function of public relations. For instance, when public relations professionals involve a company – perhaps, a company that stakeholders already identify with – in the conversation surrounding a social-political issue, stakeholders may identify with that issue; thus, making the issue more salient to stakeholders, adding to their political information environment. Further, results demonstrate that corporate engagement on divisive issues may have a lasting impact on societal-level issues outcomes. Public relations professionals should anticipate the expectations of activist publics with social-political issues and, in doing so, drive social change through active participation. Companies may find value in incorporating consistent communication on a day-to-day basis with internal stakeholders, such as employees, and external stakeholders, such as activist organizations and public figures, to engage in meaningful action toward social justice issues. Additionally, after observing how corporate engagement on a divisive issue can expand nationwide social justice movements, public relations practitioners may consider the magnitude of corporate power and influences, beyond financial campaign donations, for American democracy. Indeed, researchers have argued that public relations, as part of shifting expectations about the roles of business and government in society, must embrace new theories and concepts for scientific revolution that describe the role of public relations in democracy (Austin et al., 2019; Dodd, 2018; Rim et al., 2020). This research demonstrates the increasingly important and central role of public relations professionals as issues managers who may be, through CSA, driving issues awareness, attitudes, and voting behaviors. This responsibility is not to be taken lightly. Ultimately, this research indicates that public relations professionals, as key communicators for increasingly politicized corporations, influence societal-level impacts.

Limitations

Despite the importance of this early research on the societal-level impacts of CSA, this study is not without limitations. It is first important to note that the nature of the intercept method and ordering of questions may have introduced error in the form of the progression of questions, leading participants from awareness to attitudes to behaviors. Next, the research collected from the survey was nominal level data due to the nature of the intercept method and closed-ended survey questions. Nominal level data only provide descriptive statistics. Given the important implications of this study, the groundwork has been laid for more powerful interval-level data to be obtained in the future, perhaps using a nationally representative survey method. Likewise, the convenience sampling method used in this research does not allow for the researchers to

generalize or make inferences about the population. The broad questions of the survey limited the researchers' understanding of specific issues that may be most salient to voters. Future research may seek to focus on specific issues as it serves to impact voters' awareness, attitudes, and behaviors.

Last, this research was conducted during the 2018 midterm elections. This research could have had varying results if data was collected during a major presidential election. Throughout presidential elections, voter turnout is higher and more diverse (Domonoske, 2018), thus potentially increasing or decreasing the end results of potential CSA influences on issues awareness, issues attitudes, and voting behaviors. Future research can better illuminate the impact of CSA, particularly during presidential elections.

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Appendix A

Table 1
 Frequency Distribution Awareness, Attitudes, and Actions in the Context of CSA

	<i>Variables/Items</i>	Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
1	<i>General Awareness: Are you aware of any companies that have taken stances on controversial issues? (awareness)</i>	215 (73.9%)	76 (26.1%)	0
After considering the company's stance...				
2	<i>Increased Issue Salience:...do you feel like any issues became more important to you? (awareness)</i>	123 (42.3%)	167 (57.4%)	1 (.3%)
3	<i>Opinion Change...do you feel like your opinions toward any issues have changed? (attitude)</i>	80 (27.5%)	211 (72.5%)	0
4	<i>Likelihood to Vote...do you feel like you were more likely to come out to vote today? (behavior)</i>	92 (31.6%)	199 (68.4%)	0
5	<i>Influence on Vote...do you feel like the way you voted was influenced? (behavior)</i>	66 (22.7%)	225 (77.3%)	0
6	<i>CSA Beliefs: Do you think companies should take stances on social-political issues?</i>	222 (76.3%)	62 (21.3%)	7 (2.4%)
7	<i>Authenticity: Do you believe corporations authentically care about the issues that they take stances on?</i>	145 (49.8%)	144 (49.5%)	2 (.7%)

Appendix B

Table 2

Crosstabulation Analysis of Increased Issue Salience and Opinion Change (% of overall sample)
Opinion toward issue changed

		Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
Issue became more important	Yes	63 (21.6%)	60 (20.6%)	0
	No	17 (5.8%)	150 (51.5%)	0
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	1 (.3%)	0

Table 3

Crosstabulation Analysis of Increased Issue Salience and Likelihood to Vote (% of overall sample)
More likely to vote today

		Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
Issue became more important	Yes	64 (22%)	59 (20.3%)	0
	No	28 (9.6%)	139 (47.8%)	0
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	1 (.3%)	0

Table 4

Crosstabulation Analysis of Increased Issue Salience and Influence on Vote (% of overall sample)
Voting was influenced

		Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
Issue became more important	Yes	45 (15.5%)	78 (26.8%)	0
	No	21 (7.2%)	146 (50.2%)	0
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	1 (.3%)	0

Table 5

Crosstabulation Analysis of Opinion Change and Likelihood to Vote (% of overall sample)

		More likely to vote today		
		Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
Opinion toward issue changed	Yes	55 (18.9%)	25 (8.6%)	0
	No	37 (12.7%)	174 (59.8%)	0
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	0	0

Table 6

Crosstabulation Analysis of Opinion Change and Impact on Vote (% of overall sample)

		Voting was influenced		
		Yes	No	Prefer Not to Answer
Opinion toward issue changed	Yes	42 (14.4%)	38 (13.1%)	0
	No	24 (8.2%)	187 (64.3%)	0
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	0	0