



Special Issue:

Navigating sociopolitical polarization: How consumers, companies, and brands interact in a divided age

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Special Issue Information

Today's intensifying sociopolitical polarization is contributing to increased divergence (Weber et al., 2021) and hostility between groups with opposing ideological identities (Barber & Blake, 2024). This divided environment is having a direct impact on companies that are facing complex social dilemmas that they are trying to address through changes and adaptations (Mohliver et al., 2023). Specifically, the growing social visibility of companies today, brought by mediatization processes, pressures them to become involved in these social problems that are part of broader political discourses, prompting them to adopt strategic positions and decisions with a high impact on their stakeholders (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). A clear example of this occurred in 2021, when Netflix faced criticism from its employees when it decided to include a controversial comedy special that some workers and external stakeholders found objectionable, leading them to demand the company to add warnings to such content (DeBode et al., 2024). In response, Netflix made the strategic decision to reject these claims. Instead, they updated their labor policies and negotiated to extend the relationship with the comedian at the center of the controversy.

Beyond this, some companies have gone to the extreme of locating their new facilities in geographic areas ideologically akin to their current operations in order to minimize ideological discrepancies among their employees (Barber & Blake, 2024). These types of decisions are observed in companies where polarization is eroding labor relations and reducing the ability of teams to achieve their goals (Javidan et al., 2023). In the field of strategic brand management, there are also companies modifying their definition of brand purpose, adapting it to the new political and social realities of the context in which they operate, in many cases turning down principles and values aligned with social and environmental commitment.

In relation to the latter aspect, companies have been adopting an important role in society by responding to political and social crises through brand activism (Mohliver et al., 2023), which has involved using digital platforms to advocate for social causes, integrating them into their brand identity and marketing policies (Scalvini, 2024). Although the literature recommends social responsibility should focus on issues with little room for controversy (Weber et al., 2023), the growing gap in public opinion and the partisan divide on relevant sociopolitical and ethical issues such as social responsibility, sustainability and diversity, is pushing companies to (re)define and (re)position themselves on these issues (Ordabayeva et al., 2023). This may imply contradicting the opinion and expectations of consumers and other stakeholders, with the harm that this may cause to brand perception (Weber et al., 2023), image and reputation and, with it, commercial interests. Thus, the tension and potential conflict that can be generated by taking or changing positions on issues traditionally linked to corporate activism raises serious questions for companies about the wisdom of engaging in corporate social action in these polarized times (Dhanesh, 2024; Weber et al., 2021). In this sense, there is evidence that, for issues highly polarized, when companies—or CEOs—make pronouncements or decisions aligned with a particular political position, changes in the profile of their customer base can be expected. This shows how the polarization of political ideology extends to consumers' preferences, intentions and purchase decisions (Hou & Poliquin, 2023; Schoenmueller et al., 2023).

Polarization affects consumers through the reinforcement of their political or social identity, which generates greater support and affection for like-minded groups and causes, but also greater rejection and detachment toward out-groups, giving rise to important cognitive and motivational biases (Weber et al., 2021). Thus, the greater the polarization on the issue on which a company speaks out, the more likely it is that consumers will use it as a means of expressing their support or rejection of a particular political stance, with cases where boycotts (purchase avoidance) and buycotts (purchase to offer support) occur simultaneously for the same company (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). At the international level, consumers may decide to reject a company's products as a

way of punishing the policies developed by the company's country of origin, which is known as "proxy boycott" (Tachkova & Coombs, 2024). A recent example of this can be seen in the emergence of various anti-US movements, which seek to avoid buying US products while promoting the search for alternatives from other countries (Bradshaw & Kjeldgaard, 2025). It is pertinent, then, to raise this question already considered a priority research topic by the Marketing Science Institute (2022): how can brands avoid alienating consumers who might stop purchasing them, perceiving that they do not align with their values and political views, especially when companies define their brand purpose in relation to socio-political issues?

Although corporate activism has contributed to social awareness and support over the years, it has also raised ethical questions about the instrumentalization of social causes by brands for commercial gain (Scalvini, 2024) that add to this current of polarization. In this sense, multinational companies have been pointed out and criticized for applying their corporate responsibility policies inconsistently across countries to adapt to the dominant political mentality in each place (Minefee & Yue, 2025).

In the expression of these consumer concerns and divided opinions about social realities and phenomena, social media are playing a key role. The possibility given by digital platforms to users to create and share content makes these media key when it comes to articulating campaigns of support or rejection of companies and brands (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). This has eroded brand narratives on the Internet and has articulated a new space for relationships between consumers and brands (Blackston, 2025), in which the latter can be exposed to criticism on social networks when try to communicate their brand activism (Batista et al., 2022).

The objective of this special issue is to provide a space for knowledge generation and critical debate on the complex relationship between sociopolitical polarization, company strategic behavior (with special emphasis on brand management) and consumer and other stakeholder behavior. It is expected that the articles published will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by companies in this context, and to the identification of new strategies and behaviors that exemplify a paradigm shift.

Therefore, this special issue invites academics, practitioners and experts in marketing, communication and public relations, strategic management, corporate social responsibility and social sciences, in general, to submit original research, case studies and theoretical analyses that stimulate debate around sociopolitical polarization and its business, strategic and behavioral implications. Interdisciplinary contributions and diverse methodological approaches are particularly valued.

Specifically, the topics suggested for this special issue include (but are not limited to):

- Corporate actions and reactions to increasing polarization, including corporate social responsibility and brand activism.
- Effects of changes in corporate positioning on consumer evaluations.
- Corporate *washing* practices and consumer reactions.
- Adoption of political consumption (including anti-consumption).
- Effects of political consumption on its targets.
- Sociopolitical polarization and country effects.
- Role of social networks, consumer communities and opinion leaders in polarization and depolarization.
- Susceptibility to the effects of polarization and evaluation of environmental or social responsibility.
- Case studies of brands successfully navigating sociopolitical polarization.
- The role of public relations in the context of the politicization of companies and their environment.

Keywords: Sociopolitical polarization, corporate social responsibility, brand activism, depolarization, washing, political consumption.

Manuscript Submission Information

Open for submissions: October 1st, 2025.

Closing date for new submissions: January 31th, 2026.

The Special Issue is open to all work related to the call.

Please indicate that your paper is intended for this special issue. Manuscripts should be submitted in MS Word format by e-mail to the following address (revista.cuadernosdegestion@ehu.eus). Accepted papers will be published in the journal and will be listed together in the special issue section. Original empirical research, theory development and meta-analytic reviews are all potentially appropriate for inclusion in the special issue.

All contributions to this research topic must be within the scope of the section and journal to which they are submitted, as defined in their mission statements.

Articles can be submitted in English or Spanish. However, if an article is accepted, the authors should send the final version in English.

Submitted manuscripts should not have been previously published, nor be under consideration for publication elsewhere (except conference proceedings papers). All manuscripts will be reviewed by at least two expert referees. Please

visit the [Instructions for Authors](http://www.ehu.eus/cuadernosdegestion/revista/en/submitting-papers) page before submitting a manuscript (<http://www.ehu.eus/cuadernosdegestion/revista/en/submitting-papers>).

Further Information

For questions regarding this special issue's content, please contact the guest editors.

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