

# Public Perceptions of Corporate Position-Taking on Abortion and Transgender Rights

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## Abstract

Corporations regularly express their preferences on questions of public policy. This can occur through a range of means that include costly actions like lobbying public officials to support one policy or another, contributing money to candidates for elected office whose preferences seem congruent with the firm's, and engaging in litigation to challenge policies already enacted. One historically less costly way of expressing policy preferences for corporations is issuing statements of support for or in opposition to a given law, policy, or government practice. In this article, we examine public perceptions of corporate position-taking to determine the partisan dimensions of how the mass public evaluates corporate expressions of policy preferences on divisive "Culture War" issues. Specifically, we use a series of pre-registered original survey experiments to examine how partisanship influences individuals' preferences regarding corporate position taking on abortion and transgender rights. We find that while corporate position-taking on abortion rights and transgender sports legislation shifts mass opinion on the role of corporations in politics, such expressions of corporate preferences do not change individual attitudes on the underlying policy questions themselves. In an age during which large firms play an increasingly influential role in the construction of public policy, this article sheds light on how corporate messages of support for certain policies related to polarizing social issues are consumed in the mass public.

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In 2022, shortly after a draft opinion of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* leaked, Jeremy Stoppelman — the CEO of crowd-sourced restaurant review website and app Yelp — published an op-ed entitled “Why Companies Need To Take A Stand On Reproductive Rights” in which he argued that “[r]emaining silent on abortion flies in the face of any public commitment to diversity and equity” (Stoppelman, 2022). The holding in *Dobbs*, of course, ultimately overturned the surviving rule from *Roe v. Wade* that a woman’s access to abortion services is a fundamental constitutional right. Meanwhile, just a few weeks later, Andrew Ward — a professor of management at Lehigh University — published another op-ed in *The Hill* maintaining that “companies can do more social good by not taking a stance on divisive issues” and should instead encourage balanced debate, which they are incapable of doing if they take political stands (Ward, 2022). Whereas Stoppelman contended that companies owe a moral obligation to their employees as well as society to support certain political aims, Ward saw such corporate social advocacy as detrimental to the achievement of other important goals. Neither, however, addressed directly the empirical truth of an assumption likely central to corporations choosing to take positions on contentious social matters: that there exists some constituency — either among elites or in the public generally — that expects and appreciates corporations announcing their policy preferences on issues of social import.

Some — most prominently Friedman (1962, 1970) in his account of the firm, who argued the only duties owed by companies to the non-shareholding public and broader community are those that tend to maximize returns to shareholders — contend that corporate social advocacy is a distraction from firms’ actual business activities, whether hosting an online platform for restaurant reviews, providing complex financial services, or just selling widgets. Other corporate theorists, while accepting that companies have an obligation to maximize profits, view the firm’s overall responsibilities as broader in scope: namely, proponents of stakeholder theory such as Freeman (1984, 1994), Philips (2003), and Post, Preston, and Sachs (2002), maintain that businesses should pay at least some heed to the consequences of their actions not only for financiers and shareholders, but also for customers, employees, suppliers, and communities more generally (i.e., the constellation of primary and secondary stakeholders in the firm’s decisions and outputs). In other words, firms have a purpose and values beyond mere profit maximization (Collins and Porras, 1997; Graves and Waddock, 1990) and “business is fully situated in the realm of humanity” (Freeman et al., 2010, 29). The forms of corporate social advocacy we examine here are likely an outgrowth of the growing expectation that firms should be mindful of at least some external stakeholders when determining their organizational strategy.

The ends sought by corporations taking positions on contentious social issues are likely varied. At a minimum, and most charitably, they may include promoting the company’s values related to equity and

justice. Likewise, corporate social advocacy may simply be a rational action taken to ensure a given firm remains competitive by conforming to an emerging social norm in the market and falls in line with many other companies expressing a similar policy position (see, e.g., [Jones, 1995](#)). Additionally, companies may even aspire that their expressions of policy preferences will have a persuasive effect on individuals in the public who trust the company’s brand and thus extend that trust to the company’s stance on social issues (see, e.g., [Spicer, 1978](#)).

In this article, we investigate some of these assumptions underlying corporate social advocacy. Specifically, we ask: (1) does corporate position-taking on contentious social issues change individuals’ minds on matters of public policy? (2) In what way does an individual’s partisanship affect their perceptions of corporate messaging on socially divisive policy issues? And (3) how does corporate social advocacy shape individuals’ overall assessments of corporate position-taking? We argue that corporate position-taking will reinforce existing partisan opinions on already polarizing issues, while persuading individuals of both parties to move closer to the company’s stated position on less polarizing issues. Further, we argue that corporate position-taking on divisive social issues will lead those who likely agree with the company’s position to view corporate social advocacy more favorably, while having the opposite effect among those who likely disagree with the company’s position. To investigate our expectations regarding public perceptions of corporate social advocacy, we employ a series of pre-registered traditional survey experiments with vignettes about corporate position-taking on abortion and transgender participation in organized sports. We find that while corporate social advocacy does not affect policy preferences in the public, it does affect public opinion on corporate political engagement generally.

## Corporate Social Advocacy and Public Opinion

Corporate decisions to publicly take positions on policy questions are likely a function of expectations created for corporations by the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement, which has “close ties to stakeholder theory” ([Pedersen, 2006](#), 138).<sup>1</sup> Though scholars of CSR do not share a coextensive conception of what precisely it takes for corporations to demonstrate responsibility to society, in general terms, advocates of CSR maintain that corporations should take active measures to foster goals related to social equity, justice, and public health (see, e.g., [Carroll, 1991](#); [Deetz, 2003](#); [Logsdon and Wood, 2001](#)). These demands are

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<sup>1</sup>While corporate social responsibility scholarship shares a number of features in common with stakeholder theory, discussed in the introduction, they differ markedly in both their orientations and prescriptions. As [Wood \(1991\)](#) notes, while stakeholder theorists accept the chief purpose of the corporation is profit generation but seek to situate the interests of other stakeholders alongside those of owners and shareholders, proponents of CSR challenge the central purpose of the corporation as a profit-maximizing entity altogether. Stakeholder theorists thus tend to see a narrower minimally acceptable role for “socially responsible” firms than CSR advocates, as stakeholder theorists maintain that “companies are tools for doing specific things” and not every firm has an obligation to address every social ill ([Freeman et al., 2010](#), 246).

generally justified by contending that corporations owe the public some compensation for the costs imposed by corporate activity (Narayanan, 2022).

Ample evidence suggests participation by large corporations in CSR initiatives is so widespread that it is essentially the norm in corporate America: even as long ago as 1998, one estimate provided that eighty percent of Fortune 500 company websites advertised those companies' CSR activity (Esrock and Leichty, 1998). More recent findings indicate that by 2011, about twenty percent of S&P 500 companies published a formal CSR report; by 2019, the same figure rose to ninety percent (Stobierski, 2021). Further, data suggest that CSR efforts may prove even more lucrative (if not constructively mandatory) as time goes on, since emerging customer segments in younger generations (Millennials and, especially, Gen Z) show particular concern that the companies whose products and services they consume demonstrate their commitment to socially responsible practices (Costa, 2019; Song, Qin, and Qin, 2020).

Actions companies take in service of fulfilling their CSR goals and obligations involve a range of legal, ethical, discretionary, and relational practices (David, Kline, and Dai, 2005; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Such actions include but are not limited to implementing environmentally sustainable business models, making access to the goods and services they provide more equitable for the communities in which they operate, instituting corporate organizational practices that promote values related to social equity, and issuing statements of support on public policies deemed of interest to both the companies and the public. Moreover, the universe of public policies consumers report as relevant for whether they patronize a given firm does not just include laws or rules related to economic regulation, or matters directly concerning that company's particular business. Rather, many consumers — and, once more, particularly those who have grown up since childhood seeing companies engaging in so-called “cause marketing” on behalf of newsworthy social movements — impose surprisingly broad obligations on firms to act consistently with those consumers' political preferences or face potential negative economic consequences (Bowman, 2014; Rim, Lee, and Yoo, 2020).

One natural consequence of burgeoning efforts by major firms to engage in socially responsible practices is to inquire what, if any, returns corporations see based on their investments in CSR. There is a welter of empirical evidence suggesting, in the main, modest but positive results associated with the implementation of CSR efforts. These results include positive outcomes related to public perceptions of corporate image, corporate reputation, and corporate credibility. For instance, survey data provide that 84% of Americans indicated their willingness to change their consumption habits to support brands associated with good causes (holding price and quality constant), and that 79% of Americans report taking corporate citizenship into account when deciding whether to pay for a given product or service (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). Self-reported willingness to modify consumer behavior, however, of course does not translate to actual changes

in consumption patterns in the mass public. On that dimension, the findings are more ambiguous and convincing data harder to come by, though there is limited evidence suggesting an attenuated link between exposure to CSR activity and purchase behavior (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Keller and Aaker, 1998), as well as between exposure to CSR activity and consumer purchase decisions (but only if those consumers support the issue or cause in question already, and holding equal price and quality) (Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun, 2006). What extant scholarship has not explored, and what this study seeks to investigate, is the extent to which ideological congruence or divergence between individuals in the public and messages of corporate position-taking on public policy influence either (1) those individuals’ own preferences; or (2) those individuals’ perceptions of corporate social advocacy more generally.

## Public Perceptions of Corporate Position-Taking on Contentious Social Issues

In this article, we examine the effect of corporate advocacy messages regarding contentious social issues on several forms of political attitudes. Specifically, we consider the effect of expressions of social policy preferences by corporations on public opinion in two contexts. First, we analyze the potential for corporate social advocacy messaging to cause a *policy preference shift* for respondents, i.e., to change individuals’ own preferences regarding the policy in question (conditional on whether they agree with the corporation’s position). Second, we analyze whether corporate expressions of opinion on public policy cause a *corporate advocacy preference shift*, i.e., whether such messaging affects individuals’ preferences regarding corporate expressions of support for policy generally.

Most prior empirical research on corporate social responsibility has tended to focus on the effect of CSR efforts on returns to the firm and consumer behavior, or on public opinion regarding CSR efforts broadly without precisely specifying the ideological content of CSR messaging (e.g., press releases, social media statements, etc.), though there is scholarship suggesting that certain forms of corporate social advocacy — such as Starbucks and Budweiser responding to President Trump’s 2017 immigration ban — may have bivalent network effects (among opponents and proponents of the relevant policy) in the public with respect to subsequent boycotts and advocacy (Rim, Lee, and Yoo, 2020).<sup>2</sup> By contrast, and as discussed in greater

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<sup>2</sup>We conceive of such messaging as less costly than other efforts corporations might take to impact politics. Cases such as the backlash against Bud Light upon airing an advertisement featuring a transgender woman that cost InBev 395 million USD in losses attributed to conservative protests of the beer indicate there may be circumstances in which corporate social activism incurs important costs (though arguably, featuring actors from certain identities in video advertisements may be theoretically more likely to engender objections than mere messaging). As a general matter, though, we believe that firms *believe* such messaging is less costly than lobbying, campaign donations, or litigation as evidenced by Bud Light’s abandoning the diversity effort as soon as the controversy erupted. Not only did the company cut ties with the star of the controversial commercial, they shifted gears and released a new advertisement that featured fishermen, beachgoers, and cookout attendees in a more “traditional” advertisement. Further, backlash tends to be short lived, with InBev reports indicating that sales had recovered

detail in our subsequent presentation of the methods and analyses employed, we examine mass opinion on public policy and corporate social advocacy when survey respondents are confronted with experimental language describing an instance of corporate position-taking in which a firm expresses a policy preference that maps clearly onto the contemporary ideological divide in American politics. This allows us to analyze whether public attitudes toward corporate social engagement are filtered through the alignment of individual policy preferences in the public on the one hand, and corporate policy preferences on the other.

In the analyses that follow, we examine the effects of public engagement by a large, American multinational corporation (Amazon) in two highly salient policy areas: (1) abortion and (2) transgender participation in sports. The choice of Amazon is useful in that Amazon is a highly visible company operating ubiquitously in the global economy, and which is highly popular among members of both parties. For instance, in the 2018 American Institutional Confidence Poll, Democrats on average trusted Amazon more than any public or private institution, including universities, nonprofits, and the media, while Republicans on average trusted Amazon more than any public or private institution other than the military and the local police (Ladd, Tucker, and Kates, 2018). Our argument motivates different expectations regarding whether corporate social engagement will result in a policy preference shift across the two issue areas among Democrats and Republicans, respectively. Contrarily, our argument results in comparable expectations regarding whether corporate social engagement will result in a corporate advocacy preference shift among members of each party.

First, we contend that corporate expressions of a liberal policy position on abortion will further polarize public opinion on abortion policy among Democrats and Republicans. We base this expectation on the established finding that preferences on abortion are already, and have been for decades, highly polarized between the two parties (Jelen and Wilcox, 2003; Adams, 1997), such that even advocacy by a popular company like Amazon will not change Republicans’ minds.<sup>3</sup> Thus, corporate expressions of liberal policy positions on abortion should reinforce existing preferences for members of each party, given the effect of elite position-taking in a polarized environment (Druckman et al., 2013).

In contrast to public preferences on abortion — which has been a polarizing issue emphasized by elites by the quarter following the Bud Light imbroglio. Additionally, the messaging corporations seem most engaged with — press releases or statements from CEOs or other leadership — are probably less likely to trigger a backlash than advertisements like videos on social media. Finally, along the lines of the foregoing discussions of stakeholder theory and CSR, corporations may decide that socially activist messaging is important for employees, customers, and community members, and thus provides greater returns on balance than saying nothing.

<sup>3</sup>We concede that there is not perfect correspondence between partisan identification and abortion policy preferences. That said, we believe there is reason to believe this should not create issues for our experiment. At most, we think this strong, but not perfect correlation will dampen the magnitude of the estimated effect. That is, we expect our experiment run on a sample that does not remove anti-abortion Democrats and pro-abortion Republicans will lead to more conservative estimates of the magnitude of the effect. Given these individuals are few in number and likely to not have strong preferences on abortion and/or to not be aware of party differences on abortion (Carsey and Layman, 2006), we do not think including such individuals in our survey will be damaging to the inferences we draw. We explore this question in greater detail in the SI, section B.3.

in both parties for several decades now — the issue of transgender individuals’ right to participate in sports as a member of the gender with which they identify does not map as cleanly onto the standard two-party ideological divide (Baldassarri and Park, 2020; Ridenour, Schmitt, and Norrander, 2019; Brewer, 2003). That said, the parties have very quickly polarized on this issue over the past few years and it is now a highly polarized policy (Block, 2022). While we expect similar dynamics as with partisan responses to Amazon statements on abortion policy, we include this second policy dimension as it is more recently polarized and thus the public may not be as aware of their party’s stance on the issue. Further, we think that a corporation’s stance on policies could influence public support because corporations, especially ones like Amazon, are trusted agenda-setters (*Confidence in Institutions*, 2023; Bullock, 2011; Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; McCombs and Shaw, 1972).<sup>4</sup> As such, we anticipate similar results from both policy treatments, while being able to compare differences for established, and more recent polarized policies. This motivates our first two hypotheses:

**H<sub>1a</sub>:** Democrats will be more likely to express a more liberal position on abortion and transgender sport participation policies when Amazon expresses a liberal position.

**H<sub>1b</sub>:** Republicans will be more likely to express a more conservative position on abortion and transgender sports participation policies when Amazon expresses a liberal position.

As regards the potential for corporate position-taking to induce a corporate advocacy preference shift, we see no difference in the effects of Amazon taking a position on either abortion or transgender rights for how respondents evaluate corporate expressions of policy preferences. Namely, we expect that — whether Amazon takes a position on abortion or trans rights — members of each party will either approve of corporate social engagement either more or less based on whether Amazon’s expressed policy preferences align with their own. Thus, we argue that Democrats will more strongly approve of corporate engagement in contentious social politics after exposed to the information that Amazon advocated for liberal positions on both abortion and trans rights. Likewise, we contend that Republicans will less strongly approve of corporate political engagement after receiving information that Amazon advocated for liberal positions on the two social policies in question. This argument informs our final two hypotheses:

**H<sub>2a</sub>:** Democrats will more strongly prefer political engagement by corporations when Amazon expresses a liberal position on either abortion or transgender rights.

**H<sub>2b</sub>:** Republicans will less strongly prefer political engagement by corporations when Amazon expresses a liberal position on either abortion or transgender rights.

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<sup>4</sup>See section A of the SI for further explanation.

## Empirical Strategy

To test these hypotheses, we employ a series of traditional survey experiments with vignettes through the survey firms *Lucid Theorem* and *YouGov*, which we pre-registered.<sup>5</sup> Study I was fielded May 10-16, 2022 among a national sample of U.S. residents through *Lucid Theorem* and uses quotas of age, gender, ethnicity, and region to mimic the U.S. population based on census estimates. Studies II and III were both probability samples with post-stratification weighting to approximate nationally representative samples through *YouGov*, fielded August 26-30 2022. Study I has 1,512 respondents and studies II and III have 1,000 respondents each.

Our original survey experiment investigates two issue areas: abortion policy and transgender sports participation. The control condition for the abortion half of the experiment provides respondents with a vignette (figure B.1 in the SI) about how 28 states will ban or restrict abortion access if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the Supreme Court. The control condition for the transgender sports half of the experiment provides a vignette (figure B.3), which explains how 30 states are considering bans on transgender sports participation. Both vignettes contain factual information compiled from existing news stories and information from Lambda Legal’s and the American Psychological Association’s tracking of such bills. In these vignettes, therefore, external validity is high as these draw so heavily from existing news stories and real-world events.

The treatment conditions are identical to the control conditions, but include text indicating that Amazon takes a position on the legislation. In the treatment vignettes (figures B.2 through B.4), we add a clause to the title that “Amazon condemns legislation” and additional text in the body of the article that Amazon called the legislation “discriminatory and unsafe,” and that the corporation condemns the legislation for targeting their workers, customers, and clients. Given that Amazon has actually publicly condemned both anti-abortion and anti-transgender legislation, we borrow text from actual statements Amazon has made on these exact issues. We do not include corporate position-taking in both liberal and conservative directions for two reasons. First, we wanted to maximize external validity by using actual examples of corporate position-taking by a well-known corporation on a policy question respondents would be likely to know about and have opinions on. Amazon takes positions publicly, frequently, and typically in response to policy questions well-known to the public. For a variety of factors, they have often done so on contentious social issues in a liberal, Democratic direction.<sup>6</sup> Second, we elected to maximize statistical power by not excessively dividing up the sample. As such, our analyses will only be able to test in one direction — what happens

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<sup>5</sup>The studies were determined exempt by the authors’ academic institution under IRB protocol 22-05-7229. Study I was preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/ZJN\\_ZZF](https://aspredicted.org/ZJN_ZZF) and Studies II and III were preregistered at [https://aspredicted.org/9PD\\_LWK](https://aspredicted.org/9PD_LWK).

<sup>6</sup>One potential explanation is that Democrats are more skeptical of corporations and thus corporate communications strategies have utilized CSR as a means to quell Democratic suspicion, while Republicans are more likely to trust corporations and thus do not need such symbolic signaling. But, this strategy may be shifting the baseline positions — e.g. Bud Light or Disney’s LGBTQ+ CSR stances.



when corporate position-taking benefits Democratic policy positions against Republican policy positions. We believe that given the dynamics of negative partisanship, these effects should mirror each other, but future studies should test the effects in the other direction.

To identify the effects of treatment on attitudes and preferences for corporate position-taking, we utilize OLS regression. Our outcomes of interest are the abortion items used on the American National Election Studies surveys and by Pew and an adaptation of these items for transgender sports participation. Full text of the survey instruments can be found in the supplementary information, section B. Studies I and II use the ANES/ANES-inspired items and study III tests the Pew/Pew-inspired items. Given that we find consistent results across studies I and II and study III, we are confident that both items measure preferences reliably, despite differences in cognitive demand.

## Results

Looking across our three studies, we find evidence that corporate position-taking does not influence policy preferences among the mass public, but it does influence mass preferences on corporate position-taking more generally. Figures 1 and 2 plot the estimated effects of treatment on abortion and transgender sports policy preferences and preference for corporate political engagement, respectively. We find first, in figure 1, that there are no significant effects of corporate position taking on respondents' attitudes on abortion or transgender sports policy in any study, regardless of partisan identification. We do not find evidence, therefore, that corporate position-taking impacts public opinion of the mass public on these contentious social policies, on which the corporation takes a position.

Looking at the effects of corporate position-taking on mass opinion regarding corporate engagement in politics, we find a different story. In figure 2, we provide evidence that corporate position-taking impacts Democrats' views of corporate engagement in politics. In studies I and III, for respondents given the abortion and transgender sports treatments, we find statistically significant effects of the treatment (Amazon's corporate position-taking) on Democrats' views towards corporate political engagement. In study I, this effect is about one-third a standard deviation of the dependent variable, in study III the effect is equal to nearly one half a standard deviation for abortion and one standard deviation for transgender sports. We also find a statistically significant effect of the treatment among Democrats who received the transgender sports treatment in study II equal to about one standard deviation. This fits with previous findings on the difficulty in moving public opinion on highly contentious Culture Wars issues.

Among Republican respondents, we find less consistent evidence of any effect of corporate position-taking. We find that in the case of transgender sports corporate position-taking, Republican respondents

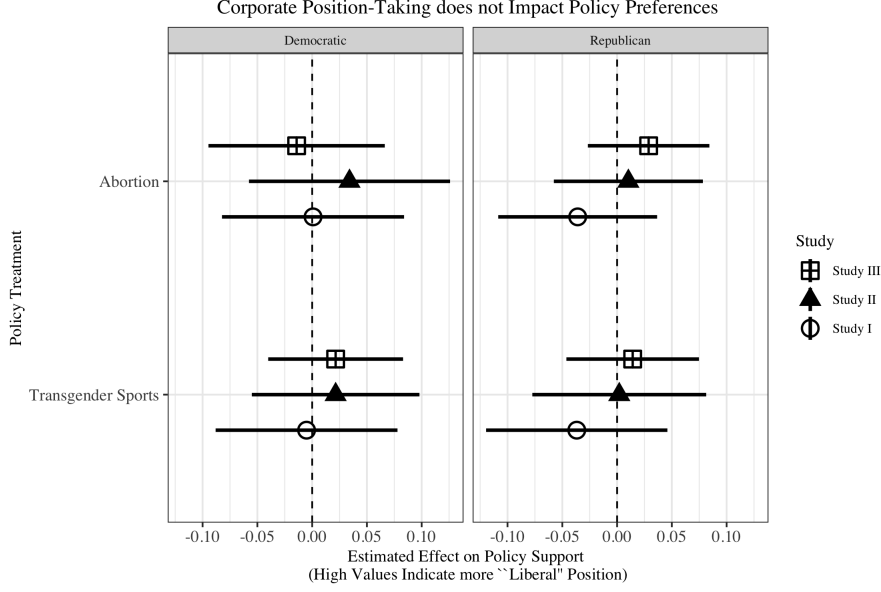


Figure 1: Effective of Corporate Position-Taking on Mass Policy Preferences by Study

are less supportive of corporate engagement in politics, but we identify no other statistically significant (or substantively significant) differences.

Importantly, there are large partisan differences at baseline that may be important in interpreting the magnitude of these effects. As expected, Democratic-identifying respondents have much more liberal positions on abortion and transgender sports policies than Republican respondents. In all three studies, the average support among Democrats is over one standard deviation more liberal than Republicans on abortion policy and transgender sports-participation policy, though the difference is quite a bit larger in absolute terms for abortion (as we discussed in developing  $H_{1a}$ ,  $H_{1b}$ , and  $H_2$ ).

When it comes to public opinion on corporate involvement in politics, however, we find some unexpected baseline differences. Typically, the public, elites, and academics view Republicans as being more supportive of corporate involvement in politics.<sup>7</sup> In all three studies, however, we find that in the control condition, Democratic respondents are consistently about half a standard deviation more supportive of corporate engagement in politics than are Republican respondents.<sup>8</sup> This unexpected finding may be a feature of the timing of these surveys in which corporate involvement in contentious social politics was largely in support of Democratic policies and against Republican policies. This question is beyond the scope of the present project and scholars should pursue this question in future research.

<sup>7</sup>See the debate over *Citizens United v. FEC*, e.g. [Pew Research Center \(2012\)](#).

<sup>8</sup>We concede that this question is broad. This broadness is by design, but on this particular question (which is not the main question of the experiment), it means that respondents may be thinking of backroom deals rather than the examples with which we have provided them. This might be part of why we measure these baseline differences.

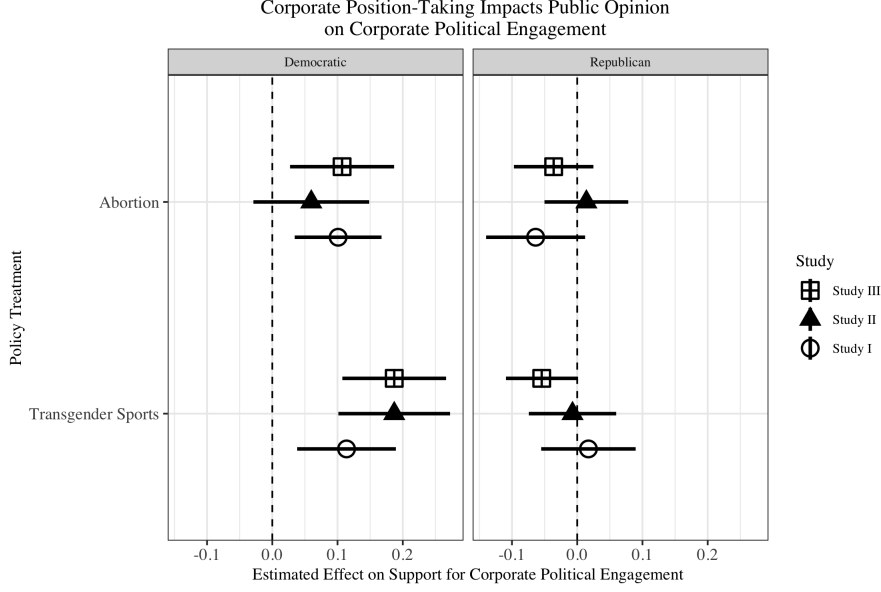


Figure 2: Effect of Corporate Position-Taking on Mass Opinion of Corporate Position-Taking by Study

## Discussion

In an increasingly partisan polarized and sorted America, even corporations are drawn into the political fray as firms heed prescriptions by stakeholder theorists and corporate social responsibility advocates to use their influence for particular social and political ends. While some policy questions may have little to do with the profit maximization imperative for most companies, firms nevertheless find themselves in a position where they must take a political side on any number of policy debates. In particular, a growing number of corporations not only have developed robust corporate social responsibility infrastructure, they are now making public statements endorsing or condemning social policies. But, do these statements “matter” in the sense that they shift public preferences?

In this paper, we have sought to explore how corporate position-taking influences mass public opinion on contentious social policies and on corporate social engagement more generally. We leverage three original survey experiments to investigate this question, finding consistent evidence that corporate position-taking does not influence mass opinion on long-polarized and stable social policy debates (abortion) nor does it influence mass opinion on less clearly polarized and more tenuous social policy divides (transgender sports participation). In short, we do not find sufficient evidence in support of hypotheses  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$ . But, we do find that corporations’ social policy engagement influences Democrats’ and, to a lesser (and less consistent) extent, Republicans’ preference for corporate engagement in social policy debates. We therefore do find support for  $H_{2a}$ , and  $H_{2b}$ .

Although we find convincing evidence that corporation position-taking is ineffective if it is meant as a

strategy to influence public opinion, it is a strategy that partisans like when it aligns with their own policy preferences — at least in the case of contentious social policies. This opens up a number of future avenues for research into corporate political engagement in social policy. Future projects should explore corporations’ goals in engaging in such behavior, elite preferences, and how elite and corporate communications interact to shape and reshape mass preferences on less entrenched social policy questions. While the dynamics of corporate political engagement’s influence on the mass public are not yet fully known, it is clear that corporations will continue to have to take political stands on a number of social issues in an inexorably polarized climate.

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## A Corporate Agenda-Setting

This paper investigates the role that corporate position-taking plays in public opinion about the issues on which corporations take positions and on the corporations themselves. We primarily contend that corporations likely make these statements because they *think* they make some difference to the public, as well as to political elites and investors. That said, we find it prudent to justify why the public may be susceptible to corporate influence regarding policy. We believe this is possible because corporations are agenda-setters, who are trusted, and who benefit from public “referencing” (Allport, 1954). We articulate each of these points below.

The agenda-setting literature has long identified the key role that the news media and political elites, especially the president, play in setting the agenda for the public (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Kingdon, 1984). This vast literature regularly finds that major institutions influence what Americans prioritize, that is what political issues they think are important. While actually moving attitudes on policy questions is rare, it can happen (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Corporations, we contend, are also likely to influence public opinion due largely to their similarities to similar institutions in government and the media. First, the news media often analyzed in such studies of agenda-setting are just the corporations we theorize about. The corporation we use in the experimental manipulation, Amazon, owns *The Washington Post* along with other local news companies, Twitch (a social media streaming platform), and has its own media company. Beyond the network of subsidiaries major corporations have that fit into the news media and social media landscape, corporations also directly leverage resources to potentially influence public opinion. Corporations use advertisements on social media and in all sorts of news media, often with the assistance of celebrities, to take stances on political issues. While ample evidence suggests that actually moving public opinion is difficult, it is possible on less solidly formed issues when institutions set the agenda and provide useful information to help the public form opinions.

Corporations, at least the largest ones, are agenda-setters and beyond helping define what is salient, they are in a position to influence actual preferences because they enjoy a more favorable position with the public than to other agenda-setters. According to recent Gallup polling, 46% of respondents have a positive image of “big business” compared to 53% who have a negative image (Saad, 2022). Just two years ago, those numbers were reversed, and 20 years ago, 58% of respondents said they had a positive image of “big business.” While support is declining, the positive view of “big business” is higher than Biden’s approval rating, which has averaged 44% since taking office and much higher than Congress’ approval rating, which averages around 20% and has recently dropped to 13%. Having a positive image of an institution and approving of it are not the same measure, which we concede, but would propose that they are likely correlated. Several studies

Institution	% Confidence	% High Confidence
Banks	77	27
The Medical System	76	38
Organized Labor	74	28
The church or organized religion	68	31
Large Technology Companies	68	26
The Supreme Court	68	25
Big Business	57	14
Newspapers	53	16
The presidency	51	23
Television News	46	11
Congress	43	7

Table A.1: **Institutional Confidence in 2022 drawn from Gallup’s Confidence in Institutions Report.** “Confidence” indicates respondents have indicated at least minimal confidence in an institution — “some,” “quite a lot,” or a “great deal” of confidence in the institution — while “high confidence” indicates a higher level of confidence in the institution — “quite a lot” or a “great deal” of confidence.

argue that members of Congress, the President, and the news media all influence public opinion on various policies (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Lupia, 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schikler, 2002; Kernell, 2006). Even as some research has found these effects to be more muted (Bullock, 2011; Ciuk and Yost, 2015), results confirm that the public are swayed by elites. If they are even somewhat swayed by elites, of which the public has negative views, it is likely that an institution with a more positive image would at least also be likely to influence public opinion.

We find further evidence from Gallup’s “Confidence in Institutions” survey that Americans have more confidence in corporations than other institutions we regularly assume influence public opinion or find evidence indicating some level of influence of public opinion (*Confidence in Institutions*, 2023). Table A.1 contains the levels of confidence that respondents in Gallup’s study have in various institutions of government, business, and society. We provide both the percent who report confidence in the institution (indicate having at least “some” confidence in the institution) and who have a high degree of confidence in the institution (“quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in the institution). Institutions are listed in descending order of confidence. Where there are ties, the institution with a higher percentage of respondents reporting high confidence in the institution are listed first. We report confidence in institutions in 2022, the year of our studies, to measure public confidence in institutions in the year of the experiments.

Gallup finds in their study that banks, the medical system, and organized labor are some of the institutions in which the public has the most confidence, on average, with at least 74% of respondents reporting at least “some” confidence in each. Congress, television news, the presidency, and newspapers are the institutions in which the public has the least confidence, all hovering around half or fewer of respondents indicating that they have at least “some” confidence in the institution. Our theory is built around major corporations

taking political positions and the possibility that the public could be swayed by this position-taking. We find that the institutional categories in Gallup’s poll that include corporations — banks, large technology companies, and big business, all do quite well. 77%, 68%, and 57% have at least some confidence in banks, large technology companies, and big business, respectively, and 27%, 26%, and 14% have high confidence in each. This compares to 16%, 23%, 11%, and 7% who express high confidence in newspapers, the presidency, television news, and Congress. Plenty of political science literature confirms that the news media, members of Congress, and the Presidency have at least some, and sometimes a great deal, of influence over public opinion (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Lupia, 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schikler, 2002; Kernell, 2006; Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Lawrence and Bennett, 2001). Most studies indicate that the news and elites set the agenda, but rarely, but not always (i.e. Iyengar and Simon (1993)), change attitudes on a policy question.

We are not, in this piece, arguing that corporations are without question shaping public opinion. We argue instead that corporations *think* that they can at least agenda-set and may be able to influence public opinion or at least influence positive feelings about the corporation. We think that, like the news media and political elites, corporations use their wide-spread power and resources to set the political agenda and are successful in this largely because they are a trust institution in American society. Many studies recently identify how “unpopular” big business is. As we show above, public opinion data shows that 1) corporations are more than just big business and also include large technology companies, banks, and news companies and 2) even big business is more popular and more trusted than any branch of government and the media, save the Supreme Court.

We also argue that views of government and views of corporations share a connection. This connection is that asking the public what they think about “big business” is very different from asking them what they think about Amazon, Walmart, IBM, Google, or any other major corporation much the same way asking them what they think about “Congress” is different than asking what they think about their own member of Congress. This is similar to Allport (1954)’s “referencing,” in which individuals can hold negative stereotypes about a group, but favor members of that group. On an institutional level, it makes sense that individuals dislike and even blame Congress for various issues, but have very positive feelings about their own representative. In a similar vein, individuals with a negative view of big business may hold very positive views of individual businesses. This is exactly what prior studies find when measuring confidence in particular corporations such as Amazon, Google, or Facebook (Ladd, Tucker, and Kates, 2018). This may also be because asking about “big business” is a vague concept, especially when considering that major corporations, about which we are most interested, transcend just that category. Does the public envision Jeff Bezos, some anonymous corporate villain, the employees of the corporations, or something else? This is



unclear. Nevertheless, studies asking about specific companies (and their quarterly earnings reports) indicate that the public quite likes these corporations even while they may express negative views of “big business” more generally. These negative views, however, are not as negative as those expressed about newspapers, television media, the U.S. presidency, and Congress.

## B Research Design

### B.1 Primary Experiment

Figure B.1: Experimental Manipulation Vignette—Abortion Control

APRIL 21, 2022, 07:24 AM [NATIONAL](#)

## 28 States Would Ban or Restrict Abortion if Roe v. Wade Overturned

Thirteen states have what are called trigger laws in place such that if the Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, abortion will be outlawed within the borders of those states. In some states, these bans would take effect immediately, while other states have the bans kick in within 30 days of a Supreme Court decision overturning the famous 1973 ruling that protects limited abortion access rights. An additional fifteen states have laws in place that would ban or tightly restrict abortions even before fetal viability.

The debate over abortion rights has been a political flashpoint across the country for over 50 years. In 1973, the Supreme Court held that the Constitution protects a pregnant woman's liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction. Ever since, many state legislatures have attempted to limit abortion rights. If the Court overturns Roe v. Wade, five states have pre-Roe laws that would immediately kick in and ban abortions altogether. Critics and women's rights activists argue that such legislation discriminates against poorer women who cannot travel to states with abortion protections to access safe abortions and that deaths from unsafe and unregulated abortions outside medical facilities will increase in states with bans in place.

Figure B.2: Experimental Manipulation Vignette–Abortion Treatment

APRIL 21, 2022, 07:24 AM [NATIONAL](#)

## 28 States Would Ban or Restrict Abortion if Roe v. Wade Overturned, Amazon condemns legislation

Thirteen states have what are called trigger laws in place such that if the Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, abortion will be outlawed within the borders of those states. In some states, these bans would take effect immediately, while other states have the bans kick in within 30 days of a Supreme Court decision overturning the famous 1973 ruling that protects limited abortion access rights. An additional fifteen states have laws in place that would ban or tightly restrict abortions even before fetal viability. In response, Amazon, the nation's largest retailer, has condemned such bills, calling the legislation "discriminatory and unsafe."

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In the wake of this flood of anti-abortion legislation, Amazon has released official statements condemning any bill that "limits the rights of women to safely make medical decisions about their bodies." As the nation's largest retailer and with employees, customers, and clients in nearly every corner of the nation, Amazon said it hopes for women to be allowed to make decisions about their lives "without fear for their safety or health."

Figure B.3: Experimental Manipulation Vignette–Transgender Sports Participation Control

APRIL 21, 2022, 07:24 AM [NATIONAL](#)

## 30 States Considering Anti-Trans Sports Bans

Since the start of the new year, 30 states have advanced or considered legislation that would ban transgender student athletes from participating on sports teams matching their gender identity. In other words, students who were born biologically male could not participate in sports as a girl or woman.

The debate over the inclusion of transgender athletes, especially women and girls, has become a political flashpoint across the country. Many of the bills before state legislatures seek to define “sex” as “the biological distinction between male and female based on reproductive biology and genetic make-up” and make this understanding of sex, as listed on student athletes’ birth certificates, the criteria for how they may compete in school sports. Critics and trans rights activists argue that the language of “biological sex” is too simplistic and misleading, and that such legislation creates an unsafe and unhealthy environment for all children and young people.

Figure B.4: Experimental Manipulation Vignette—Transgender Sports Participation Treatment

APRIL 21, 2022, 07:24 AM [NATIONAL](#)

## 30 States Considering Anti-Trans Sports Bans, Amazon condemns legislation

Since the start of the new year, 30 states have advanced or considered legislation that would ban transgender student athletes from participating on sports teams matching their gender identity. In other words, students who were born biologically male could not participate in sports as a girl or woman. In response, Amazon, the nation's largest retailer, has condemned such bills, calling the legislation "discriminatory and unsafe."

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In the wake of this flood of anti-trans legislation, Amazon has released official statements condemning any bill that "targets LGBTQ+ children, workers, customers, or clients." As the nation's largest retailer and with employees, customers, and clients in nearly every corner of the nation, Amazon said it hopes for parents and children to be allowed to exist "without fear for their safety or health."

Following random assignment to transgender sports vignettes, respondents in studies I and II were asked:  
*Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?*

- By law, transgender student athletes should never be allowed to participate in sports that align with their gender identity (only participate in sports that align with their sex determined at birth)
- The law should permit transgender student athletes to participate in sports that align with their gender identity as long as they do not have an unfair advantage AND if the local school board agrees to it.
- The law should permit transgender student athletes to participate in sports that align with their gender identity as long as they do not have an unfair advantage
- By law, transgender student athletes should always be allowed to participate in sports that align with their gender identity as a matter of personal choice

And the following question if randomly assigned to an abortion vignette:

*Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?*

- By law, abortion should never be permitted.
- The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger.
- The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.
- By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

In study III, we used the following two items instead, borrowed from PEW:

*Do you think that transgender student athletes participating in sports that align with their gender identity (than than the sex determined at birth) should be...*

- Legal in all cases
- Legal in most cases
- Illegal in most cases
- Illegal in all cases

*Do you think abortion should be...*

- Legal in all cases

- Legal in most cases
- Illegal in most cases
- Illegal in all cases

We note that the questions wording of the first item is much more cognitively demanding, especially the transgender item as the abortion item has been asked for decades and respondents are likely familiar with it. Transgender sports participation is a relatively new policy area and this item is new, meant to mimic the ANES abortion item. In acknowledgement of the cognitive demands and its subsequent possible introduction of noise through confusion or measurement error, we ask the much less cognitively-demanding Pew items on study III. Results in the main text indicate that there are neither statistically nor substantively significant differences between responses to the two question wordings, indicating that our measures are reliable and valid across studies.

Then, we asked all respondents the following item with a 101 point response slider (0–100) with 0 indicating “Corporations should not be involved in influencing public policy” and 100 indicating “Corporations should have an active role in politics”:

*Some people believe that corporations should have an active role in politics. Others believe that corporations should not be involved in influencing public policy. Where would you place yourself on this scale where lower values indicate you believe corporations should not be involved in influencing public policy and higher values indicate corporations should have an active role in influencing public policy?*

## B.2 Secondary Experiment: Punishing Political Corporations

A second experiment followed the initial experiment intending to identify drivers of support for legislative reward or punishment for corporate position-taking. In study I, only half the sample (753 respondents) received this experiment, while in studies II and III all respondents did. The vignettes give the same general information that after Amazon made an official statement condemning either the anti-abortion or anti-trans student athlete legislation (this is matched to the treatment they received in the primary experiment), either Democratic state legislators offered to reward Amazon with tax incentives or Republican state legislators threatened to punish Amazon by revoking tax benefits. The experimental manipulation, therefore is the party (Democrat or Republican) calling for either rewards or punishment for Amazon’s corporate position-taking. The outcome variable asks respondents “How do you think state legislatures should react when corporations attempt to influence public policy?” with answer options being to punish corporations, reward corporations, or to do nothing.

Treatment I:

After Amazon made an official statement condemning [legislation that bans or restricts access to safe abortions/anti-trans student athlete legislation], Republican State Representatives moved to punish Amazon by threatening to revoke several of Amazon's tax breaks.

Treatment II:

After Amazon made an official statement condemning [legislation that bans or restricts access to safe abortions/anti-trans student athlete legislation], Democratic State Representatives moved to reward Amazon by offering to increase tax incentives to benefit Amazon's business in the state.

Following one of these treatments, respondents were all asked:

*How do you think state legislatures should react when corporations attempt to influence public policy?*

- Punish corporations that engage in this behavior
- Reward corporations that engage in this behavior
- Do nothing regarding corporate behavior

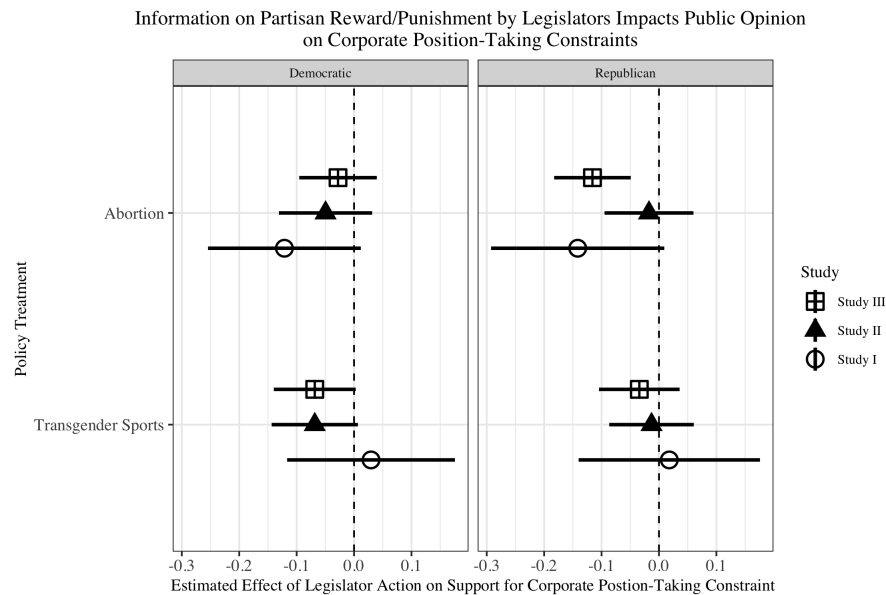


Figure B.5: Effect of Republican State Legislative Threats to Punish Corporate Position-Taking on Mass Preferences for Legislative Response by Study

Figure B.5 plots the estimated effect of the Republican threat of punishment treatment on preferences for state legislative action towards corporations that engage in contentious social policy debates. Positive values indicates preference for rewarding corporations, negative values, for punishing corporations. Overall,



we find that Republican respondents are more supportive of state legislators punishing corporations that engage in social policy debates when the issue is abortion, but there are null effects when the issue is transgender sports. Democratic respondents are unmoved on abortion, but when the issue is transgender sports, they are, curiously, more supportive of punishing corporations in studies II and III. These findings are puzzling and warrant further investigation into the expected governmental responses to corporate position-taking on contentious social policy among the mass public as well as the role of political elites in shaping those expectations.

### B.3 Partisan Identification and Issue Polarization

While strongly correlated, there is not a perfect match between partisan identification and preferences on abortion policy. That said, [Carsey and Layman \(2006\)](#) find evidence for both party-based issue change and issue-based partisan change on the issue of abortion. They argue and find evidence that individuals who are aware of party differences on an issue, like abortion, and who find that issue salient are likely candidates for issue-based partisan change, while those who are aware of party differences and do not find the issue salient will evidence party-based issue change. When individuals are unaware of party differences, they will exhibit neither process. So, for Americans who know about the party differences on abortion and see the issue as salient, they are likely to switch to the party that matches their preferences on abortion, but when they do not find the issue salient, they will update their preferences on abortion to match that of their party. In both instances, individuals resolve the mismatch by changing their partisanship to match their preferences or changing their preferences to match their partisanship. Those who remain mismatched are most likely to be unaware of party differences on abortion. Additional studies confirm that abortion attitudes are strong enough to lead to party-switching, finding that anti-abortion Democrats and pro-abortion Republicans switch parties to resolve the mismatch ([Killian and Wilcox, 2008](#)).

That said, there can be and are pro-abortion Republicans and anti-abortion Democrats. The previous literature indicates that these individuals likely are either not particularly politically sophisticated (are unaware of partisan differences) or do not have strong preferences on abortion. Pro-abortion Republicans may be happy that Amazon has taken a stance on abortion that aligns with them. But, the issue is likely not salient for them, meaning it will have very little influence on their weak preferences. We expect the same among anti-abortion Democrats. If abortion is not a priority for them, this information will not have much influence over their preferences. These individuals, then, should behave similarly whether they receive treatment or the control. As such, the imperfect correspondence between partisan identification and abortion preferences dampens our effects making our estimated effect more conservative than might otherwise be the

case.

We do think, however, that most Americans are aware of and care about the issue of abortion. In the 2020 ANES, 83% of respondents said that abortion was at least “some-what important,” and over 55% said it is “very” or “extremely” important ([American National Election Studies, 2021](#)). Just 4% said it was “not at all important.” The majority of Americans consider the issue of abortion important and, post the Dobbs decision, likely see it as salient. Those who do not are those most likely to not match up to expected party divides. As such we think that not removing these individuals from our sample only means our estimates are more conservative in magnitude than they would be among a perfectly sorted sample.

## C Full Regression Results

### C.1 Measuring the Effects on Policy Preference

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.210* (0.026)	0.117* (0.025)	0.094* (0.020)	0.447* (0.030)	0.586* (0.033)	0.571* (0.029)
Amazon Treatment	-0.036 (0.037)	0.010 (0.035)	0.029 (0.028)	0.001 (0.042)	0.034 (0.047)	-0.014 (0.041)
Obs.	273	235	239	327	242	257
R2	0.003	0.000	0.004	0.000	0.002	0.000
R2 Adj.	0.000	-0.004	0.000	-0.003	-0.002	-0.003

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.2: **No evidence from OLS models that corporate position-taking effects abortion policy preference.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on abortion policy position. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-abortion legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.491*	0.452*	0.414*	0.665*	0.791*	0.777*
	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.022)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.022)
Amazon Treatment	-0.037	0.002	0.014	-0.005	0.027	0.021
	(0.042)	(0.040)	(0.031)	(0.042)	(0.039)	(0.031)
Obs.	289	265	261	320	258	243
R2	0.003	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.002
R2 Adj.	-0.001	-0.004	-0.003	-0.003	-0.002	-0.002

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.3: **No evidence from OLS models that corporate position-taking effects transgender sports policy preference.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on transgender sports policy position. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-transgender legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

## C.2 Measuring the Effects on Support for Corporate Position-Taking

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.437*	0.182*	0.191*	0.516*	0.377*	0.312*
	(0.028)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.029)
Amazon Treatment	-0.064	0.014	-0.036	0.101*	0.060	0.107*
	(0.039)	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.045)	(0.041)
Obs.	273	211	227	328	210	239
R2	0.010	0.001	0.006	0.026	0.008	0.028
R2 Adj.	0.006	-0.004	0.002	0.023	0.004	0.024

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.4: **Corporate position-taking on abortion policy sometimes effects support for corporate engagement in politics.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on corporate engagement in politics. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-abortion legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.376*	0.231*	0.195*	0.451*	0.395*	0.287*
	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.032)	(0.028)
Amazon Treatment	0.017	-0.007	-0.054	0.114*	0.052	0.187*
	(0.037)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.039)	(0.044)	(0.041)
Obs.	287	240	243	319	228	223
R2	0.001	0.000	0.015	0.027	0.006	0.088
R2 Adj.	-0.003	-0.004	0.011	0.024	0.002	0.084

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.5: **Corporate position-taking on transgender sports policies effects support for corporate engagement in politics.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on corporate engagement in politics. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-transgender legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

### C.3 Measuring the Effects on Support for State Legislature Punishment

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.452* (0.057)	0.317* (0.028)	0.339* (0.024)	0.603* (0.048)	0.489* (0.028)	0.485* (0.024)
Amazon Treatment	-0.142 (0.077)	-0.017 (0.040)	-0.116* (0.034)	-0.121 (0.068)	-0.050 (0.041)	-0.028 (0.034)
Obs.	137	235	239	158	242	257
R2	0.024	0.001	0.047	0.020	0.006	0.003
R2 Adj.	0.017	-0.003	0.043	0.014	0.002	-0.001

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.6: **Corporate position-taking on abortion policies effects support for Republican Legislature Punishment of Corporations.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on support for Republican State Legislatures punishment corporations that take positions. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-abortion legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

	Republicans			Democrats		
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study I	Study II	Study III
Intercept	0.538* (0.051)	0.299* (0.027)	0.298* (0.026)	0.508* (0.056)	0.507* (0.026)	0.517* (0.026)
Amazon Treatment	0.018 (0.081)	-0.013 (0.038)	-0.034 (0.036)	0.030 (0.075)	-0.057 (0.038)	-0.068 (0.036)
Obs.	153	265	261	143	258	243
R2	0.000	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.008	0.014
R2 Adj.	-0.006	-0.003	0.000	-0.006	0.005	0.010

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table C.7: **Corporate position-taking on transgender sports policies does not effect support for Republican Legislature Punishment of Corporations.** Full OLS model results testing the effect of treatment on support for Republican State Legislatures punishment corporations that take positions. Treatment is information about Amazon condemning anti-transgender legislation. All variables scaled 0-1. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preference.

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