

FROM POWERLESS TO POWERFUL

Five Risks & Five Strategies for Marketers in a Politicized Era



LERMA

INTRODUCTION

One radical critic's unprovoked social media attacks on companies such as Ford, Harley-Davidson, and John Deere for operating DEI programs (despite DEI being long-established among business best practices) underscores a crucial fact.^{1,2} Businesses don't often *choose* to get political: Circumstances decide. Increasingly, politics not only influences the modern consumer but also governs how companies do business. As a result, risk preparations are no longer limited to the purview of executives, crisis communications, brand safety, and public relations professionals. *Everyone* — including creative agencies — has a vital role in safeguarding businesses and employees during this volatile time.

Yet, as a collaborative endeavor, every partnership and point of contact can, therefore, serve as a front-line defense. **Politics has permeated American culture, infiltrating every issue — leaving brands highly susceptible.** In a recent survey, Forrester reported that 82% of B2C marketing executives in the U.S. have concerns about their brand's campaigns in this election cycle.³ One needs to look no further than recent headlines to see the many ways in which companies become entangled in crisis. And marketing leaders are right to be fearful in an unprecedented, highly contested election.

Boycotts, Backlash, and Beyond

THE CURRENT CLIMATE

NATIONAL SECURITY RISKS

It's not only boycotts that disrupt business, threaten safety, or impact the bottom line. Security advisers warn that threats to the U.S. in the form of international, domestic, and state-sponsored terrorism are all elevated.⁴ International politics may not have been an area of focus for brands before, but modern consumers are increasingly globally minded and impacted by geopolitical conflict.

THREAT OF ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

The Council on Foreign Relations warns of an increased risk for election-related violence, as well as the potential for attacks against government buildings and/or law enforcement officials post-inauguration, citing threats from the far right and far left.⁵ Brands should, therefore, closely monitor news and key calendar dates* and be prepared to respond quickly to unexpected events.

INFORMATION INTEGRITY UNDER ATTACK

Misinformation, AI, and deepfakes are top concerns for businesses, consumers, voters, and governments alike. Even when businesses are not the targets of such attacks — false information, bad bots, and bogus news across social media could compromise consumer trust in certain platforms.⁶ This confusion, division, and skepticism could spill over to brands. Marketers must closely monitor social media not only for social listening but also to prevent media placements from appearing beside misinformation and political or conspiratorial posts.

*See the Resources Section for key election timeline dates and events.



FROM POWERLESS TO POWERFUL

Given the increasing risk of boycotts and backlash, how are marketers, agencies, and clients protecting and preparing themselves? Unfortunately, no playbook exists for navigating this monumental task at such a historic time. Many articles offer guidance yet fail to understand how politics affects more than brand reputation. So, in service to the marketing community and our clients, we surveyed the research available, gathered insights from our own clients, and compiled this guide outlining political risks and actionable strategies to not only survive this election season but also to adapt and thrive in the months that follow.



FIVE RISKS TO AVOID *Plus Questions to Assess Political Risks*

We've all heard the directive: "See something; say something." But vigilance alone is insufficient without expert guidance on which red flags brands should look out for. Next are considerations and questions that businesses, clients, and marketers can apply to determine potential risks and weaknesses.

Risk One

POLITICS IS PERSONA

Every brand is a badge. Political identity is intertwined with personal identity more than ever before. Dr. Lilliana Mason, co-author of “Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity” explains that previously, “The status of our [political] party was the only thing at risk in every election. ... But now ... every election feels like it’s also about the status of our religious group, our racial group, our culture, where we live, and who we grew up with.”⁷

According to the recent 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, **more than half (54%) of consumers in the U.S. say they buy, choose, or avoid brands based on their own politics, up from 52% in 2023.**⁸ Lest we forget, consumers are also employees. The ways in which businesses respond or fail to respond to politics, current events, crises, and boycotts have implications for both internal and external stakeholders.

ASSESS THE RISK

With any politicized issue* companies should first consider how a particular identity (or identities) are implicated by those issues. Examples of questions to pose:

- *How might this impact our internal and external stakeholders?*
- *How might employees, consumers, clients, business partners, and suppliers be affected?*

*In the Resources Section of this guide, you’ll find a list of hot topics that are prone to being politicized.

Risk Two

BRANDS ARE EITHER RED OR BLUE

As much as brands wish to be bipartisan or nonpartisan, they are nevertheless assigned a political ideology by consumers. For example, in a 2023 report by Engagement Labs entitled “Brand Marketing Amid Political Polarization,” Walmart, despite having a lion’s share of stores located in majority Republican regions, had five points higher favorability with Democrats.⁹ For brands that want to stay in the good graces of consumers from all political sides, the task seems extremely difficult. Perception often becomes belief. The Edelman Trust Barometer showed **80% of people say brands are acting in a politically motivated way: from their choice of social networks to their choice of influencers.** What counts as a political action? Encouraging voting, hiring influencers with political views, and advertising near political news were all seen as political by 25% to 35% of respondents.



ASSESS THE RISK

- *Do we have a stake in this issue? Is this topic relevant to us? What have we said in the past?*
- *Does this issue align with our mission, vision, and values?*
- *Is this platform the best place to address this issue?*
- *What risk does this partnership pose to our brand?*
- *Have we thoroughly examined a potential partner’s actions, reputation, and affiliations?¹⁰*

Risk Three

DON'T BECOME A POLITICAL PAWN

Marketing journalist Rob Walker wrote about the real motive behind the now infamous 2023 Bud Light boycott and the fallout from its partnership with Dylan Mulvaney, a transgender woman and social media influencer. Walker remarked: “They [Bud Light critics] care [only] about their own agendas, and a can of beer with a transgender person’s image on it was just a handy prop.”¹¹

Businesses should consider the bigger picture before responding to political attacks. As WARC news editor Brian Carruthers wrote after the Bud Light fiasco: “Politicians think in terms of electoral cycles, while businesses give more consideration to things like customer lifetime value which necessitates a longer view (even as those same businesses juggle with the quarterly demands of the stock market).”¹²

ASSESS THE RISK

- *Is the critic leveraging a legitimate issue that is salient to core audiences?*
- *What is the position of core audiences on this issue? How might employees and other stakeholders feel about it?*
- *Could any response be construed as legitimizing a bad-faith political actor?*

Risk Four

EVERYONE IS ANXIOUS

Another startling survey result from the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that **79% of consumers across the globe worry about election outcomes**. Compare this finding with 77% who worry about nuclear war, 70% who worry about personal safety, and 60% who worry about paying bills. Apprehension about elections presents a unique problem for marketers.

It necessitates being cognizant of the tone and sentiment of the current political moment — in addition to anticipating and adapting to any changes in the collective mood. Marketing campaigns created today must prepare for how they will be seen in a different context depending on the ways political events unfold and contribute to an already anxious American psyche.

I WORRY ABOUT...



2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report

ASSESS THE RISK

- *How will this increased fear of election outcomes impact the consumer mindset?*
- *And how might the effects of emerging technology, including a rise in deepfakes, misinformation, and distrust, contribute to suspicion and apprehension?*
- *What are the ramifications for communications and information shared across social media platforms?*

Risk Five

NO ONE HAS A CRYSTAL BALL

There is no historical precedent for this moment in our nation's politics. But we do know the dates and timelines of anticipated election events (see Resources Section). Brands should be aware of election milestones and plan accordingly, given the potential for unprecedented delays, uncertainty, and/or potential political turmoil. Moody publishes presidential election forecasts and predicted macroeconomic consequences of presidential platforms, yet estimates aren't an exact science.¹³

Admittedly, they are based on "similar policies over the past 75 years." This is problematic since both presidential candidates' policy proposals are markedly divergent from policies historically enacted by previous administrations. **Nevertheless, organizations should research and estimate those impacts on business from issues such as tax rates, immigration policy, domestic/foreign affairs, and economic policy.**

ASSESS THE RISK

From the perspective of both internal and external audiences, envision what life might be like on the first day that either presidential candidate assumes office. What policies will be immediately enacted, and how might they impact industries, businesses, consumers, and employees beginning Jan. 21, 2025? In spring (Q2) 2025? And so forth. Examples of questions to pose:

- *How would different presidential policies such as tariffs impact supply chains and distribution?*
- *How would tax policies impact future growth and expansion?*
- *How might immigration policy, such as mass deportations, affect industries, markets, customers, and employees?*



FIVE STRATEGIES TO ADOPT *And a Checklist for Each*

While cultural resonance reviews and content audits were necessary to prevent backlash before, the stakes are even higher now. The scrutiny is no longer limited to creative executions, brand campaigns, or external communications. Companies' internal communications and employee programs, both present and former, can become politicized. Everything a company (or an employee, influencer, or previous business owner) does or says, privately or publicly, can become political fodder. Here's how to prepare with caution.

Strategy One

THINK LIKE A POLITICIAN

Take a page from politics. **A tactic known as “opposition research” entails in-depth research on the background, social media accounts, prior statements, and affiliations of an individual or organization. Apply this tactic to “opponents” as well as “surrogates”: both critics and allies or influencers.** For example, opposition research could have helped in combating a recent slew of viral attacks against brands. Careful scrutiny of Robby Starbuck, who led the boycott against Tractor Supply,

Harley-Davidson, John Deere, and Ford (among others), would have uncovered important facts that would have exposed Starbuck as an extreme activist with racist views who is a proponent of conspiracy theories (he attributes the rise in LGBTQIA+ identification among younger generations to drinking-water contamination)^{14,15}. Unfortunately, several media outlets reporting about the boycotts of these brands framed Starbuck as a reasonable critic acting as a “megaphone for the people.”

ACTIONABLE ITEMS

- *Thoroughly vet your critics.*
- *Thoroughly vet your surrogates (potential partners and/or influencers).*
- *Thoroughly vet the coalitions of each. (Are they members of your base? Are they bots or other bad actors?)*

Strategy Two

PICK YOUR BATTLES

Just like legislative policy, there are often unintended consequences of every action. **In response to backlash, companies risk secondary backlash from employees, business partners, suppliers, and consumers.** Recently, when Tractor Supply backtracked on DEI, the company confessed it had “heard from customers that we have disappointed them.” Among them is The National Black Farmers Association president, who called for a boycott of Tractor Supply and the resignation of its president and CEO, Hal Lawton.¹⁶

While viral attacks on brands might make national news, other times, businesses have leverage in deciding when to issue a public statement. These include social movements, major political events, and national crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, the assassination attempt on former President Trump). Before weighing in, these four questions below provide a practical and emotionally intelligent decision-making framework.

BEFORE ACTING, ASK

- *Does this need to be said?*
- *Does this need to be said by my organization?*
- *Does this need to be said by my organization now?*
- *Did anyone reputable ask?*

Strategy Three

FIND THE BENT OF YOUR BASE

A recent study by Pew Research indicates a slightly higher share, 71% of registered voters, said “it really matters who wins this election” compared with prior years.¹⁷ Do you know which party your customer base is pulling for? Understanding the political bent of core audiences is not only helpful now but also incredibly useful in predicting how consumers might feel *after the elections are over*. **Marketers should routinely perform consumer surveys to determine the political leanings of core audiences, utilizing both online and offline survey data.** Social listening is useful yet insufficient as the sole consumer insight since it can skew the results by

capturing a vocal but potential minority of audience perspectives across social media platforms.¹⁸ Furthermore, knowing whether your brand holds favorability with consumers who support either Democrats or Republicans (or Independents) is not enough. The International Journal of Advertising suggests that the impact of brand activism on current and future employees may be at least equal to its impact on consumers.¹⁹ To both attract and retain employees and consumers across the political spectrum, businesses must tread carefully so as not to alienate either group of stakeholders.

ACTIONABLE ITEMS

- *Conduct routine research on the political bent of core customers and expanded audiences.*
- *Conduct routine research on the political bent of the brand as seen by external audiences.*
- *Consider the impact of each action on both employees and core consumers.*

Strategy Four

CHECK THE POLITICAL WEATHER

Given that political polarization in the U.S. has only increased over time, it is unlikely that the political threat to brands will diminish, nor will partisan animosity fade quickly simply because we have a new president (no matter who that may be).

The risk to brands doesn't end on Election Day. In fact, there are 62 days between Nov. 5 and Jan. 6, 2025 (the date when Congress is slated to count the electoral votes and certify the 2024 presidential election). As we've seen in the past, a lot can happen in a single day. Some election experts predict potential disruptions in the sequence of states' election certification and/or delays in congressional verification of a presidential winner (as was the case in the last presidential election and also in 2000).²⁰ Any period of uncertainty could create volatility and apprehension for the entire nation, let alone markets, businesses, consumers, and employees.

As companies, agencies, and marketers, we must be cognizant of the fear, uncertainty, and division that the American public may experience at any of these pivotal moments.* Brands should take the political temperature daily and act accordingly.

ACTIONABLE ITEMS

- *Designate a special task force to monitor news and media and assess potential brand risks and vulnerabilities for every marketing effort.²¹*
- *Prepare a plan B: Determine when and how campaigns might respond to unexpected events (when to pause, pivot, or pair back communications or content).*
- *During key election dates and events, be prepared to issue a rapid response for stakeholders and employees, should it become necessary.*

*See the Resources Section for key election timeline dates and events.

Strategy Five

ACTIVATE THE IMAGINATION

Without a historical precedent, it's difficult to plan for scenarios we've never lived through. Yet, *we must imagine them*. Envisioning a set of plausible scenarios enables teams to formulate strategic plans for before/during/after a brand gets pulled into the spotlight, as well as for other potential political crises. Which threats, risks, and weaknesses are relatively easy to identify?

What might be new or different about this election season? **Businesses should utilize scenario planning, envision possible outcomes, and outline a planned response.** Every statement should be approved from the top and related to associates on the ground, with notice and guidelines for the next steps.²²

ENACT A PLAN FOR

- *What if an employee makes a public political statement about our brand?*
- *How will election outcomes impact employee mental health and company culture?*
- *What might a competitor do in this scenario?*
- *How has our brand responded to past major events (Sept. 11, the pandemic, economic crises, and social justice movements)?*
- *What would we do differently in the future?*

ONE PLACE WHERE POLITICS BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER

In risk preparation and strategic implementation, businesses should enlist everyone's help. In addition to executive leadership, crisis communications, and brand safety, a special task force should include a broad range of stakeholders. Strategic risk experts suggest companies collect diverse perspectives from ground level to board level to ensure a robust evaluation and response plan.²³ While Americans must wait until November to cast their ballots, brands serve as a lightning rod for consumers' political angst, fear, and frustration — *here and now*.

Through focused imagination and preparation, marketers can envision political risks, identify weaknesses, gather consumer insight, and lead with core principles to apply these five strategies as safeguards against current and future threats. This strategic use of imagination and preparation is a winning combination. **While we see division everywhere, brand safety is a uniquely collaborative endeavor. Everyone has a crucial role to play in bringing calm, foresight, agility, and vigilance to safeguard brands — not only in this election cycle but also in the long term.**

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ABOUT US

LERMA/ is a cross-cultural, creative agency headquartered in Dallas, Texas

Our mission is to help clients earn
Permission to Interrupt.

CONTACT US

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RESOURCES



DATES AND DEADLINES

2024 KEY ELECTION DATES²⁴

- **Nov. 5, 2024:** Election Day
- **Dec. 17, 2024:** Meeting and Vote of Electors in Their States
- **Dec. 25, 2024:** Deadline for Electoral Votes To Be Received
- **Jan. 3, 2025:** 119th Congress Convened
(representatives-elect and senators-elect are sworn in)
- **Jan. 6, 2025:** Congress Counts Electoral* Votes, Certifies the 2024 Presidential Election
- **Jan. 20, 2025:** Inauguration Day

FUTURE CONGRESSIONAL ACTION DATES AND DEADLINES^{26,27}

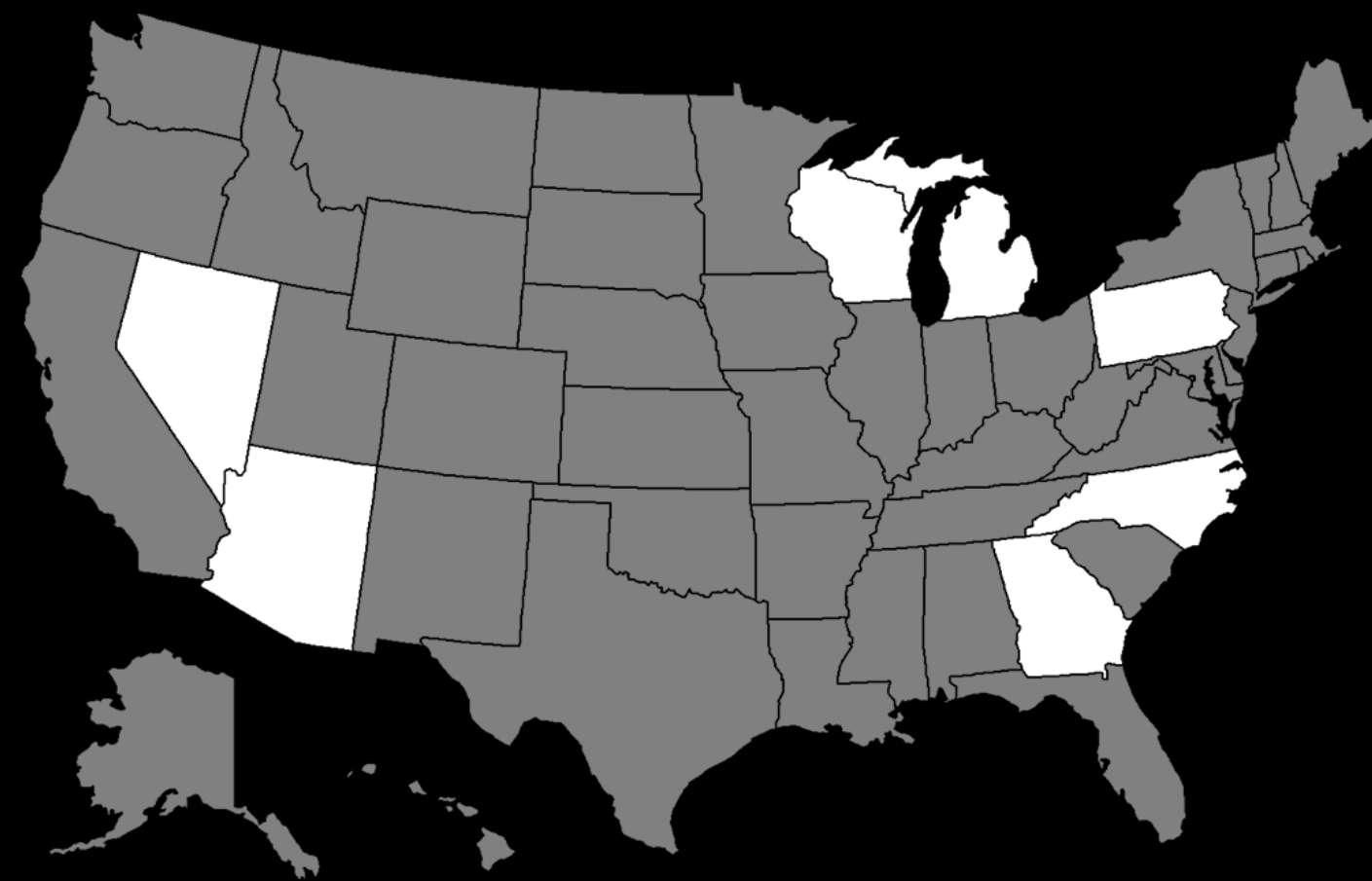
- **Jan. 1, 2025:** Debt ceiling reinstated (just days before the swearing of the 119th Congress, weeks before the presidential inauguration)
- **Sept. 30, 2025:** Discretionary spending caps expire
- **Dec. 31, 2025:** The expiration of major tax provisions from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA)
- **Dec. 31, 2025:** Enhanced subsidies for the purchase of health insurance expires

*The Electoral College consists of 538 electors. The winner in the race for president of the U.S. is not determined solely by the popular vote but rather requires winning a majority of 270 electoral votes to become president. Each state has the same number of electors as it has members in Congress: one for each member in the House of Representatives plus two senators.²⁵

POLICY ISSUES AND PRIORITY REGIONS

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS FOR INCREASED POLITICAL ACTIVITY²⁸

In seven so-called “swing states,” or states where election outcomes have historically swung between victories for Democrats and Republicans, these states are targeted more frequently by presidential campaigns, candidates’ visits, and political advertising: Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, and Nevada.



POLICY ISSUES TO MONITOR THROUGHOUT THE ELECTION PROCESS²⁹

- Individual and corporate tax policies, including state and local income tax (SALT) deductions.
- Spending priorities, such as energy, infrastructure, and defense.
- The future of programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.
- Health care policy, including the future of the Affordable Care Act.
- Regulation.
- Immigration policy.
- China, including the potential for additional tariffs on Chinese-made goods.
- Geopolitical conflicts (Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Hamas/Hezbollah).



A LIST OF POLITICAL HOT TOPICS

- Supreme Court Rulings.
- Abortion/Reproductive Rights.
- Immigration.
- Inflation/Stagflation.
- Gun Safety.
- LGBTQ+ civil rights, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).
- Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG).
- Religion, issues related to the division of church and state.
- Education and privatization, book bans.
- Israel/Hamas/Hezbollah War.
- War in Ukraine.

*This is not a complete list, as topics can expand or shift rapidly

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