



2024 U.S. Elections: Guidance for Companies

November 17, 2023

On November 5, 2024, American voters will elect the president, determine majority control in both chambers of the U.S. Congress, choose governors in 11 states and decide numerous ballot initiatives on a wide array of state and local issues across the country.

Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate and United Minds equip clients with guidance on internal and external communications considerations, from business-as-usual efforts to engagements in political and election-related activities or events and issues-oriented programs. In the months ahead, we will provide updates and counsel on timely developments and emerging issues related specifically to the 2024 elections and beyond.

This election cycle, clients and brands must navigate a convergence of highly polarizing issues including the economy, abortion, the Israel-Hamas war, immigration, racial inequities, LGBTQ+ rights and climate, alongside the impacts and consequences created by artificial intelligence, misinformation and disinformation and geopolitical implications. Following the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath, there is also heightened attention to misinformation and election interference, voting rights issues and corporate political activity – real or perceived.

As a starting point, we offer the following guidance for clients.

The 2024 U.S. elections are already creating business uncertainties and risks for corporations and brands, requiring monitoring and awareness.

We recommend that companies prepare for the likelihood of a delay in the nation knowing the outcome of the presidential and/or congressional contests, and the possibility that election results will not be accepted

by all. Further, the election will play out against the backdrop of contentious dynamics and trends that companies should monitor:

- **We are living in an era of close presidential elections, decided in just a handful of states.** In the last nine elections, no candidate was won by a margin close to 10%. In 2000 and 2016, the candidate with a plurality of the popular vote lost the Electoral College. The number of truly contested battleground states has declined sharply. Current surveys indicate another close contest; the outcome will be determined by narrow margins in the same five to six states that experienced post-election close counts and legal challenges in 2020: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.
- **Polarization among Democrats and Republicans extends across a broad spectrum of fault lines: race, gender, education, social policy, geography (both an urban-rural divide and a coastal-inland divide) and ideology.** Highly partisan voters dominate the base of both major political parties. Candidates appeal to them because these partisans are donors and activists and are more likely to vote.
- **Many voters are dissatisfied with the direction of the country.** Between 60 and 70 percent of voters consistently tell pollsters that the country is on the “wrong track.” A majority of Americans are dissatisfied with an apparent rematch between President Biden and former President Trump. There remains the possibility of a third-party candidate further disturbing the campaign dynamic.
- **Both President Biden and former President Trump face ongoing investigations, including House Republicans’ impeachment inquiry into Biden and Trump’s four criminal indictments.** New developments in these investigations and legal cases could quickly shift the political landscape.





- **Voters increasingly rely on social media for news and political commentary, but should be wary of misinformation and disinformation.**

Social platforms can provide voters with critical information and offer candidates a low-cost tool to engage with voters, but they can also be awash in misinformation, hate speech and conspiracies. In 2024, we anticipate that mis- and disinformation will circulate on social media. While misinformation may originate from or target political partisans on both sides of the aisle, history indicates that there may be [greater engagement](#) among more conservative voters. A declining focus or relaxed rules around trust and safety issues on social platforms may exacerbate this issue. As in the past, expect calls from the left for social platforms to aggressively moderate the spread of misinformation, accompanied by aggressive calls from the right to label such efforts as violations of free speech.

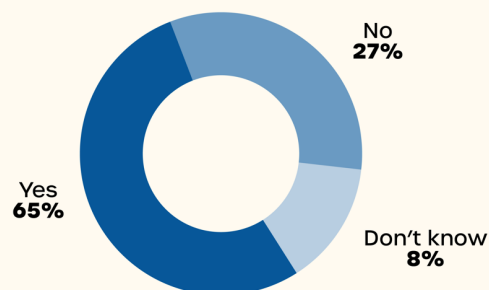
- **This is the first AI election. Campaigns are using AI tools to target communications to specific voting blocs and create advertising and information to reach voters in real time.**

AI can also be used as a tool to create and spread misinformation and disinformation to voters. Several political campaigns have used generative AI to create ads. While some platforms like Google have created [rules](#) requiring disclosure of the use of AI in campaign ads, we expect that non-official and grassroots efforts using AI will circulate organically. According to [recent Axios-Morning Consult polling](#), half of Americans expect misinformation spread via AI to affect the outcome of the 2024 elections. Additionally, the mere existence of generative AI is likely to increase distrust of the veracity of political messaging on all sides.

- **There is an ongoing threat of domestic and foreign election interference.**

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently released a [threat assessment](#) for 2024 that includes a warning that the election could be “a key event for possible violence and foreign influence targeting our election infrastructure, processes and personnel.” DHS anticipates domestic and foreign adversaries will likely continue to seek to disturb U.S. industries and American way of life, including by creating or amplifying targeted misinformation narratives to further drive polarization and division.

Employees: Do companies have a responsibility to speak up about issues that are important to society, even if the issue is sensitive or controversial?



Source: [Pulse on America poll](#), August 2023

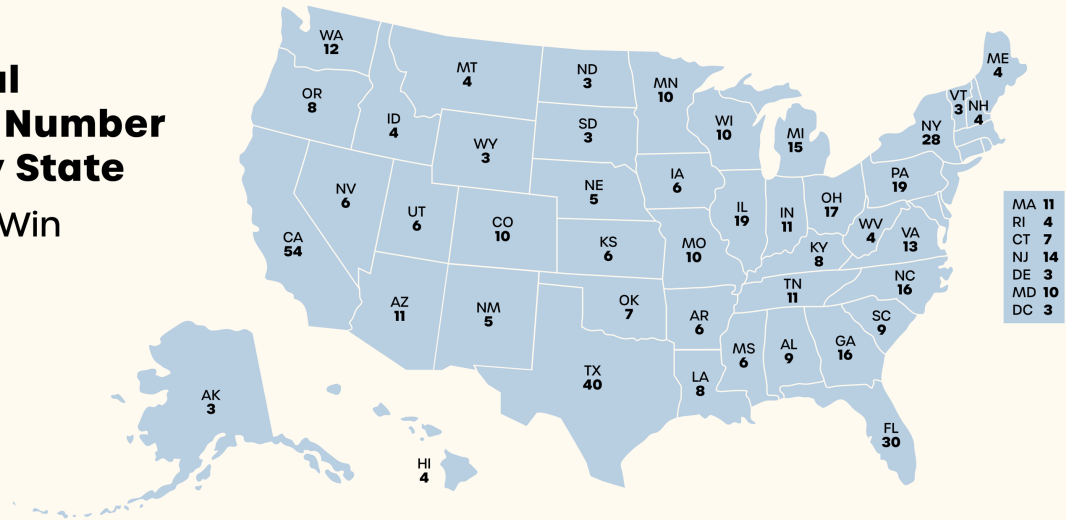
CEOs are under pressure to speak out and support controversial social issues – many of which will be central to 2024 campaigns.

- Some brands have expressed liberal or conservative views on political or social issues. While this can enhance loyalty among customers with similar beliefs, businesses can risk damage to their bottom line and exacerbate polarization among consumers with opposing views. We recommend that companies find the right balance when taking a public stance on political and cultural issues without driving away customers who might otherwise be politically inert.
- Research conducted by KRC Research with Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate and United Minds has reported that young employees and voters, in particular, want to work for and purchase from companies and brands that align with their personal values. Findings of our recent [Pulse on America poll](#) include:
 - Most consumers expect companies to take public positions on critical social issues including human rights (82%), climate change (73%), racism (72%) and gun violence (70%).
 - Eighty-four percent of employees are satisfied with their job at companies where leaders speak up about critical events and issues.



2024 Electoral College Map: Number of Electors by State

270 Electors to Win the Presidency



It's not too early for companies to put guardrails in place to guide both internal and external communications involving employees and other stakeholders ahead of the 2024 elections.

Here are some recommendations for executives and communications specialists to consider:

- Stand up - or reactivate - a cross-functional election taskforce.** Brand, marketing and corporate communications leaders should partner closely with human resources, government relations and legal teams and other colleagues closely engaging with stakeholders to understand, monitor and mitigate potential political vulnerabilities that might exist for every organization at the national, state and local levels. The taskforce should consider how the organization has - or hasn't - engaged with stakeholders on political and politicized topics and what processes are in place - or need to be - to thoughtfully and promptly respond to emerging issues if needed.
- Use data to understand the landscape and dynamics around issues relevant to key stakeholders.** Narrative and stakeholder intelligence grounded in data enables organizations to see around corners to understand and anticipate business and social issues relevant to key stakeholders. This knowledge will inform scenario planning in a world where almost everything can become political and pose reputational risks.
- Deliver a message of respect for government and legal institutions.** If making public statements or comments related to the elections, emphasize the importance of respect for our democratic institutions and processes, the rule of law and peaceful protest. In the event of election-related civil unrest and violence, business leaders will have to decide how and when to speak out.
- Stay focused on DEI and ESG commitments.** Companies can stay focused on foundational reputational issues in which employees, customers, investors and the public are demanding greater action, including diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments and environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices.
- Business announcements, campaigns, partnerships and activations - big and small - can be politicized.** A decision to close a factory, lay off workers or delay or cancel a new investment project can trigger an immediate response in local communities that are impacted, as well as by national political leaders. Similarly, partnerships, influencer engagements and campaign/activation elements should be carefully vetted and evaluated relative to organizational values and based on potential for politicization and reputational risk. Consider the timing and potential response to such decisions, particularly during the months leading up to November 2024 and scenario plan accordingly.



- **Political contributions will be monitored and can become a reputational issue.** Contributions to candidates, parties and political causes – either by executives or through corporate political action committees (PACs) – are being closely scrutinized by activist groups on both the left and the right. Hosting a visit by a candidate to a factory or facility may be perceived as political support. Be prepared to defend any political activities to employees, customers, media and investors.

Senior executives should communicate with employees, set an example and provide guidelines for everyone to follow to promote and retain a culture of civility in the workplace.

- **Executives must set the tone of civility and tolerance in the workplace.** More employees are returning to regular work in office environments. Workplace emotions may be heightened in an election in which high-stakes economic, social and foreign policy issues are at the center of national debate. Many employees will be passionate about the outcome of the election and its potential impact on their personal and professional lives. Employees expect their company to be a safe harbor: according to our Pulse on America survey, a strong majority – 79 percent – report the general tone in their place of work is civil and respectful. Watch for signs that employees are changing their work behavior because of politics. Executives should urge civility, remind everyone to be tolerant of differing opinions and be a voice of reassurance.
- **Encourage and promote participation in the political process.** Building on efforts in the 2020 elections, many companies are urging their workers to vote and some are likely to provide paid time off on Election Day for them to do so. [Voter turnout](#) in 2020 reached 66% of the voting-eligible population,

the highest of any national election since 1900. The 2022 midterm election turnout, with a lower rate of 46%, exceeded that of all midterm elections since 1970. Still, U.S. voter participation lags many other nations. Providing a half-day off for employees if they choose to vote in person may also help promote a shift in culture that increases voter participation.

Organizations should contemplate U.S. elections' influence on the 2025 policy agenda and the implications of global elections elsewhere in 2024.

- **Look over the horizon and begin to prepare for the policy agenda in 2025.** Elections have consequences for business. This is a time to plan and prepare for different policy outcomes post-election in 2025 in areas such as corporate taxes, labor and environmental regulations, trade and investment policies and more. Government relations and public affairs teams can begin to map out scenarios that may impact the business. Investor relations teams should identify business risks and determine how they will communicate these to analysts, media and investors.
- **Monitor geopolitical risks with potential consequences for business.** In addition to the United States, several other major countries have national elections scheduled in 2024 including Mexico, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, South Africa, India, Indonesia and Taiwan, as well as the European Parliament. Companies that operate globally must navigate today's fractured world order as nations compete for global or regional political influence, economic preeminence and national security interests.

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