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Advocating for good? Individual-level political predictors of attitudes toward corporate sociopolitical activism[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Organizations are increasingly engaging in and taking a stance on public debates about controversial sociopolitical issues. This study explores how stakeholders' political predispositions (i.e., political orientation and political trust) and contextual attitudes (i.e., societal issue salience and CSA skepticism) shape their attitudes toward CSA. The results of a preregistered representative survey in the Netherlands ($N = 1,863$) showed that stakeholder attitudes toward CSA are more positive when individuals identify less as conservative, trust political institutions more, and are more aware of major social (as opposed to economic or safety-related) issues. Moreover, we found an interaction effect between CSA skepticism and social issue salience on attitudes toward CSA: CSA attitudes become more positive with increasing social issue salience among highly skeptical individuals than among those with moderate or low CSA skepticism. These findings improve our understanding of the determinants of overall (favorable) evaluations of CSA across organizations and issue domains.

1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly engaging in and taking a stance on public debates about controversial sociopolitical issues, such as climate change and social inequality (Van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). One example comes from the fast-food chain Chick-fil-A, which politically conservative consumers have long supported due to its commitment to anti-LGBTQI + initiatives (Zhou, 2023). However, with changes in leadership, the company's strategy changed: its engagement against racial injustice led to criticism on social media and boycotts from conservatives. Similarly, Target reduced its advocacy on pro-LGBTQI + -related topics during Pride month because of the pressure from its conservative consumers (Stewart, 2023). These examples highlight the sensitive nature of *Corporate Sociopolitical Activism* (CSA)¹: a company's public demonstration, including actions and statements, of support for or opposition to controversial sociopolitical issues, which may increase the risk of stakeholder backlash and alienation among those holding opposing views (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Public acceptance and approval of organizations and their behavior

are vital for their survival and success. It is thus crucial to understand which factors influence individuals' attitudes toward CSA, which we conceive as individuals' overall evaluation of companies' statements or actions that demonstrate companies' stances on sociopolitical issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Overton et al., 2020). However, previous research has been mostly focused on organizations and their strategies, or the effects of CSA strategies. It has often examined the consequences of CSA communication strategies for organizations in the case of specific issues (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hydock et al., 2020), with generally little attention to how stakeholder characteristics shape attitudes towards CSA more broadly (Austin et al., 2019). Following previous research (Austin et al., 2019; Heffron & Dodd, 2021; Hydock et al., 2020), we argue that public support of CSA depends, first, on political predispositions that are relatively stable (i.e., political orientation and political trust) and, second, on context-specific attitudes (i.e., skepticism toward CSA and the problem perceptions of societal issues, hereafter referred to as societal issue salience), which are less stable.

The general connection between individuals' political

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¹ While prior research used various labels to refer to and study this phenomenon, including corporate social advocacy and political corporate social responsibility, we follow recent work for the purpose of this study and refer to these kinds of corporate actions as corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA; Brower, 2023).

predispositions and the approval of socio-political corporate behavior has been established (e.g., Heffron & Dodd, 2021), and typically, researchers associate CSA with left-wing stances (e.g., Waymer & VanSlette, 2021). Despite a few exceptions (e.g., Austin et al., 2019), the role of political predispositions in individuals' general attitudes toward CSA has, however, not been explored sufficiently in previous research. As earlier studies have found that perceptions of CSA often depend on societal issues the CSA effort is engaging in (Hydock et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2022), we examine whether the perceived importance and urgency of societal problems (i.e., societal issue salience) predicts individuals' CSA attitudes. Finally, as skepticism toward companies negatively influences public responses to their socio-political efforts (e.g., Kim & Rim, 2024), we examine the role of CSA skepticism in interacting with political predispositions and societal issue salience. CSA skepticism reflects individuals' tendency to doubt or question the motives and authenticity of companies' CSA efforts. Our research is guided by the following research question: *To what extent is there a relationship between individuals' political attitudes and their evaluation of CSA? And to what extent is this relationship moderated by CSR skepticism?*

Building on prior research (Parcha, 2023; Waymer & VanSlette, 2021), we hypothesized that CSA attitudes increase (get more positive), (a) the more people identify with a left-wing political orientation, (b) the more they trust political institutions, and (c) the more they perceive their country is facing societal problems (i.e., societal issue salience). We also assumed that CSA skepticism moderates the relationship between these three variables and CSA attitudes. We tested these hypotheses using a pre-registered² collaborative survey conducted in the Netherlands (Azrouit et al., 2022) with a representative sample of the Dutch population ($N = 1,863$). This study contributes to CSA research by shifting the analytical focus from organizational strategies and specific corporate outcomes to stakeholders' broader perceptions and attitudes toward CSA efforts in general. It highlights the importance of individual-level factors – such as political orientation, trust in political institutions, and perceived social issue salience – in shaping how CSA is generally evaluated. Rather than viewing stakeholder perceptions as uniform, our findings suggest that attitudes toward CSA are conditional and shaped by both stable predispositions and dynamic contextual cues. This perspective enables a more generalizable understanding of CSA across issue domains and supports a contingency-based approach to theorizing stakeholder attitudes. In terms of practical implications, our study suggests that organizations should consider the ideological and contextual landscape of their stakeholders when deciding whether and how to engage in CSA.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Emergence of CSA

CSA is an emerging phenomenon and can be understood under the umbrella term of corporate social responsibility (CSR; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Brower, 2023). Generally, CSR encompasses activities and efforts that address a company's responsibilities toward society at the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic levels (Carroll, 1999). In line with an often-cited definition, CSR means that companies are “integrat[ing] social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (European Commission, 2011). In the last few years, companies have begun to go beyond merely integrating concerns into their business; they are actively speaking out or taking a stand in controversial debates (Van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021), including those related to diversity, immigration, racism, and international conflicts. Examples include companies supporting the Black Lives Matter movement (such as Nike) and initiating petitions on same-sex marriage laws (as seen with Ben &

Jerry's; Carter, 2023).

Such CSA efforts differ significantly from traditional CSR, as outlined in previous research (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Marschlich & Bernet, 2024). The main difference between CSA and CSR is the perceived company's fit with the sociopolitical issue or cause the company addresses through its engagement (Marschlich & Bernet, 2024). CSR is typically linked to a company's core business and addresses neutral (non-controversial) issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020), whereas CSA involves tackling or even seeking public support on controversial issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014). Hence, following previous literature, CSA can be understood as “a firm's public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue” (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 1). By taking a stance for or against a sociopolitical issue, companies demonstrate their values and beliefs (Bhagwat et al., 2020). CSA typically addresses larger socio-political issues with higher levels of salience; thus, sociopolitical issues can be understood as “salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups” (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 386). CSA goals range from achieving financial gains (Dodd & Supa, 2014) to contributing to political discourse, public policymaking, and democracy (Heffron & Dodd, 2021) and affecting societal change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

Previous CSA research mostly explored *stakeholder responses to CSA* as consequences of companies engaging in CSA, such as purchase and boycott intentions (Hong & Li, 2020) and brand perceptions (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). Moreover, research examined *stakeholder characteristics as boundary conditions of their responses to CSA* (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hong & Li, 2020; Rim et al., 2020; Zhang & Zhou, 2023). Research has for instance revealed that the higher the alignment of stakeholders with the promoted issues and their identification with the company, the more positively they perceive the company (Hong & Li, 2020; Marschlich & Bernet, 2024). Prior studies also explored *company-related characteristics affecting stakeholder responses to CSA*, including the company-issue-fit (e.g., Hong & Li, 2020), the size of the company's market (Hydock et al., 2020), the style of CSA communication (Marschlich & Bernet, 2024), the communicator of CSA efforts (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020), and whether other companies support the issue as well (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020).

While research on stakeholder responses to CSA and their conditions is extensive, research on *perceptions of and attitudes toward CSA* is relatively scarce, which is surprising. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), individuals' behavior is predicted by individuals' attitudes towards such behavior. Thus, it seems plausible that CSA attitudes likely predict CSA-related behavior, such as supporting or boycotting a company. Moreover, as stakeholders' attitudes and related expectations act as a filter of the information they receive (e.g., regarding CSA through corporate communication or news coverage) and affect social interactions between companies and their stakeholders and related behaviors of stakeholders (Olkkonen & Luoma-Aho, 2014), it is important to understand CSA attitudes and how they are shaped. As CSA is a strategic yet risky form of corporate communication (see Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), understanding the psychological and contextual drivers shaping CSA attitudes allows companies to identify the stakeholders who are supportive and in favor of CSA or the opposite, and to act accordingly and maintain legitimacy (see Yim & Kim, 2024). Exploring CSA attitudes, in this way, also allows us to better understand which type(s) of stakeholders believe companies should indeed engage in CSA.

Attitudes toward companies' socio-political engagement have been studied under various names, mostly in the context of CSR, often reflecting individuals' general evaluations, support, or beliefs about the role and appropriateness of corporate engagement in social issues (e.g., Overton et al., 2020; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Attitudes refer to people's overall evaluations of a given object or behavior (Fishbein &

² Our project's preregistration: <https://osf.io/td26p/>.

Ajzen, 1981). Park et al. (2023) defined individuals' attitudes toward socially responsible corporations as "consumers' overall evaluation of a corporation that establishes or supports socially responsible initiatives designed to make positive impacts on community and environment" (p. 1980). Similarly focusing on evaluations, Overton et al. (2020) defined attitudes toward CSA as "the degree to which an individual has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation about [...] [a company] to take a stance on a social issue, or to engage in CSA" (p. 698). Following these definitions and the CSA definition by Bhagwat et al. (2020), we conceive CSA attitudes as individuals' overall evaluation of companies' statements or actions that demonstrate support for or opposition to a controversial sociopolitical issue.

One of the few studies examining the attitudes and expectations surrounding the general concept of CSA comes from Austin et al. (2019). The authors explored perceived motivations as well as general beliefs and expectations related to CSA, and found that individuals held the highest expectations for corporations' societal role in three areas: (1) companies should work to better society, (2) advocate for social issues, and (3) take political stances aligned with their corporate values. The study also found that the alignment of political issues advocacy with stakeholder values was least expected, although still moderate. Notably, CSA perceptions differed between groups, depending on socio-demographics, including age, gender, educational background, and income. Younger people, those with higher incomes, those with higher educational backgrounds, and males (compared to females) are more likely to agree that companies should advocate for social issues, even if there is no clear social consensus about the issues, than their counterparts (Austin et al., 2019). These findings highlight both the broad support for CSA and the importance of accounting for demographic variation in stakeholder expectations.

Moreover, Yim and Kim (2024) developed a validated scale to measure CSA expectations and found that such expectations positively influence individuals' willingness to support CSA, an outcome comparable to holding favorable attitudes toward CSA. Their study identified several key expectations driving supportive behavioral intentions, including that companies should promote social change, take a stand on morally contested issues, and prioritize social interests over business interests. However, as the study did not report mean values for these expectations, no conclusions can be drawn about how widely these views are held. While expectations toward CSA provide important insights into what individuals believe companies should do, it is equally crucial to understand how personal factors such as political predispositions shape overall attitudes toward corporate engagement in sociopolitical issues. This will be examined in more detail in the following section.

2.2. Political orientation and trust and their relationships with CSA attitudes

While some CSA studies have considered political attitudes, orientations, or ideologies (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2020; Haupt et al., 2023; Ketron et al., 2022; Marschlich & Bernet, 2024; Parcha, 2023), they have primarily examined these political factors as moderators influencing the effects of CSA on corporate outcomes and individual behavioral intentions. Scholars argue that if individuals share the same political orientation, which is consciously or unconsciously expressed through CSA, this can increase their attachment to that company, as CSA may "support ideological components of their self-concept" (Flight & Coker, 2022, p. 734). At the same time, companies risk receiving negative responses, including boycotts, from individuals with a political orientation that differs from the one implied through CSA (Fernandes, 2020; Parcha, 2023). Finally, research on political attitudes and responses to CSA has shown that liberal individuals, compared to conservatives, tend to react more strongly to companies' sociopolitical stances, placing greater importance on such corporate political engagement (Ketron et al., 2022). However,

relatively little attention has been given to how political predispositions may predict individuals' general attitudes toward CSA. This gap is surprising, given that prior scholarship emphasizes that CSA addresses major sociopolitical issues embedded in public and political debates, making CSA a significant part of the broader political information environment (e.g., Heffron & Dodd, 2021).

In this study, we focus on two specific political predispositions: political orientation and political trust. Political orientation is considered the most fundamental dimension of political attitudes and generally reflects one's ideological positioning along a liberal-conservative spectrum. It shapes moral reasoning (Emler, 2003), and correlates with openness to change (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003) as well as views on institutional roles in society (Jost, 2017). Liberals generally advocate for social change and egalitarianism, while conservatives tend to defend the status quo and tolerate social hierarchies (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003). Since CSA primarily aims at social change, reflecting more liberal issues, and conservatives are less accustomed to seeing their political attitudes reflected in CSA (Haupt et al., 2023), liberals may be more supportive of corporations taking public stances on societal issues. In contrast, conservatives are more likely to value tradition, stability, and personal responsibility (Jost et al., 2003), which may lead them to view corporate engagement in sociopolitical issues as unnecessary or even inappropriate.

In the context of CSA perceptions and attitudes, research is scarce. However, existing research is in line with the assumption that liberals might view CSA more positively than conservatives: Austin et al. (2019) explored what affects expectations of individuals toward CSA and found that liberals are more likely than conservatives to expect companies to engage in CSA to express positions on sociopolitical issues. 54% of people identifying as very conservative and 31% of those who identified as conservative agreed (or strongly agreed) that companies should advocate for social issues. In comparison, 67% and 52% of those who identify as very liberal or liberal, respectively, had the same opinion (Austin et al., 2019). The study further revealed that liberals are more likely than conservatives to believe that companies should advocate for social issues, even if there is no clear social consensus (Austin et al., 2019). Building on these arguments, we assume that conservatives have more negative attitudes toward CSA than liberals:

H1: The more conservative individuals are, the lower their CSA attitudes.

While research began to link individuals' responses to CSA and similar corporate efforts with individuals' political attitudes, its focus mostly lies on individuals' political orientation (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Haupt et al., 2023), i.e., whether people are conservative or liberal, and little is known about other variables describing individuals' political attitudes. For this reason, in addition to examining individuals' political orientation, we also take a novel look at people's political trust and the extent to which this variable can explain stakeholder attitudes towards CSA. Political trust is often conceptualized as individuals' confidence in the fairness, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the broader political system, including institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, and political parties (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political trust differs from governmental trust, which tends to refer more narrowly to trust in the current administration or executive actors, often shaped by performance evaluations and the broader political context (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Cook & Gronke, 2005). We focus on political trust as it is generally more stable and rooted in system-level beliefs, while trust in government can fluctuate depending on leadership or recent events (Hetherington, 2005; Norris, 2011). We assume that political trust, defined as a general sense of confidence in political institutions, represents a form of institutional trust and is thus related to an openness to societal engagement by institutions, including corporations. Thus, we expect political trust to be associated with attitudes toward CSA.

Previous research examining the relationship between corporate engagement in sociopolitical contexts and public perceptions of political institutions provides useful, though indirect, insights for understanding attitudes toward CSA. Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2022) found that the

perceived credibility of political institutions positively influences the perceived legitimacy of corporate actors engaging in socio-political issues, suggesting that broader institutional trust can enhance how individuals judge corporate involvement in socio-political issues. Although this research focused on CSR, which tends to be less controversial than CSA, it points to a more general mechanism through which trust in political institutions may influence responses to corporate engagement. Similarly, Hossain and Kryzanowski (2021) demonstrated that in highly corrupt political contexts, CSR is less likely to be perceived as beneficial to the public good, suggesting that contextual trust factors influence how corporate social activities are perceived.

Building on these findings, we argue that stakeholders with higher levels of political trust are more likely to perceive CSA as sincere and legitimate, leading to more favorable attitudes toward such efforts. In this context, political trust functions as a heuristic: a mental shortcut that individuals use to make efficient sociopolitical judgments (Rudolph, 2017). It enables individuals to evaluate the credibility and intentions not only of political institutions but also of other actors operating within the sociopolitical sphere, including corporations. As such, political trust serves as a cognitive resource for assessing the appropriateness of CSA. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Political trust is positively associated with CSA attitudes.

As discussed earlier, previous research found that the perception and support of CSA efforts can depend on the promoted issue (e.g., Li et al., 2022). This might be related to personal involvement in an issue, defined as the “perceived connection between an individual and an issue because of personal interest, commitment, or issue importance to one’s own life” (Li et al., 2022, p. 236). Issue involvement can also refer to individuals’ perceptions of how publicly visible an issue is, i.e., the societal salience of an issue (e.g., DiRusso et al., 2022). Given the conceptualization of CSA as companies’ public demonstration of support for or opposition to controversial societal issues, we draw on societal issue salience as a proxy to understand how relevant societal issues in general are perceived by individuals.

The importance of individuals’ salience perceptions of issues in forming attitudes toward CSA efforts can be theorized using cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). According to this, people experience mental discomfort, known as dissonance, when they hold conflicting values, beliefs, or attitudes, or when their actions do not align with their values, beliefs, or attitudes. To reduce dissonance, individuals employ several cognitive strategies, including modifying or introducing new values, beliefs, or attitudes, rationalizing the conflict away, or downplaying its significance. Applied to CSA, this suggests that individuals seek to align their attitudes with their perceptions of societal issue salience. The more people believe that numerous issues in society require attention, the more likely they are to adopt a positive view of CSA, even if they were previously neutral or negative. This alignment helps them avoid experiencing dissonance between their perceived salience of societal problems and their evaluation of corporate engagement with such issues. Supporting this prediction, Li et al. (2022) found that cognitive involvement, measured as perceived issue salience and stance, was associated with increased support for companies engaging in CSA. Based on these findings, we argue that the more salient societal issues appear to stakeholders, the more favorable their attitudes toward CSA will be, as they view it as addressing urgent social causes. Conversely, when issue salience is perceived as low, people may adopt more neutral or negative views of CSA.

H3: Societal issue salience is positively associated with CSA attitudes.

2.3. CSA attitudes and skepticism toward companies

Prior studies have found that CSA engagement can positively or negatively affect organizational perceptions and support intentions (for an overview, see Weber et al., 2023). One reason for the mixed results could be individuals’ skepticism, a phenomenon frequently and increasingly observed in the context of corporate social engagement. So

far, skepticism and social efforts of companies have mostly been researched in traditional forms of CSR (e.g., Kim & Rim, 2024) and only rarely in the context of CSA (Park, 2022). Skepticism refers to individuals’ beliefs that a company cannot be believed and has been defined as the “publics’ inclination to question and doubt an organization’s claim of socially responsible positions and actions” in the context of CSR (Kim & Rim, 2024, p. 201). Adapting this, we define CSA skepticism as an individual’s tendency to question and doubt corporate claims of CSA positions and actions.

According to attribution theory and broader frameworks in persuasion research, individuals do not passively receive persuasive attempts such as CSA but actively interpret them based on perceived motives and source credibility (Kelley, 1973; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Following this, individuals assess the underlying motives of companies when they engage in social issues or communicate about them, which, in turn, affects the attitudes toward these corporate social engagements (Kelley, 1973). Individuals’ skepticism may be associated with attributing self-interest motives to organizations, such as maximizing profit, rather than altruistic motives (Kim & Rim, 2024). In this way, skepticism triggers defensive processing, leading stakeholders to discount or reject cues that would otherwise strengthen CSA attitudes, such as a left-wing political orientation, higher political trust, or higher societal issue salience. As a result, the influence of these political predispositions and attitudes on CSA attitudes is likely to be dampened or neutralized in the presence of high CSA skepticism. Thus, skepticism functions as a motivated filter that conditions the impact of individual predispositions and attitudes on how CSA is evaluated. Specifically, when individuals are highly skeptical of CSA, for instance because they question the corporate motives behind CSA, we predict that our main variables of interest exert weaker influence on CSA attitudes. We thus pose the following hypotheses.

H4: Higher CSA skepticism weakens the association between political orientation and CSA attitudes.

H5: Higher CSA skepticism weakens the association between political trust and CSA attitudes.

H6: Higher CSA skepticism weakens the association between societal issue salience and CSA attitudes.

All our hypotheses were preregistered.³ See Fig. 1 for our conceptual model.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

Our project was part of a preregistered collaborative survey that was conducted in the Netherlands (Azrouit et al., 2022).⁴ The omnibus study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of the University of Amsterdam, under number 2022-YME-15725. A representative sample of the Dutch population was recruited based on gender, age, level of education, and region through the online panel of I&O Research (<https://www.ioresearch.nl/>). The data collection for the omnibus study occurred in three waves. However, given no basis to expect differences in the variable associations of interest over time, we exclusively measured our outcome variables in the first wave.

Data collection for the first wave took place in November 2022. 2216 respondents completed the survey. 353 of them were excluded for various reasons (i.e., speeding, attention checks, straightlining, seriousness of open question answers; see the preregistration of the omnibus study). The final sample consisted of 1863 respondents. 47.9% of them were female, 51.9% male, and 0.2% selected that they identified

³ Our project’s preregistration: <https://osf.io/td26p/>.

⁴ The preregistration of the omnibus study: <https://osf.io/d958h/>.

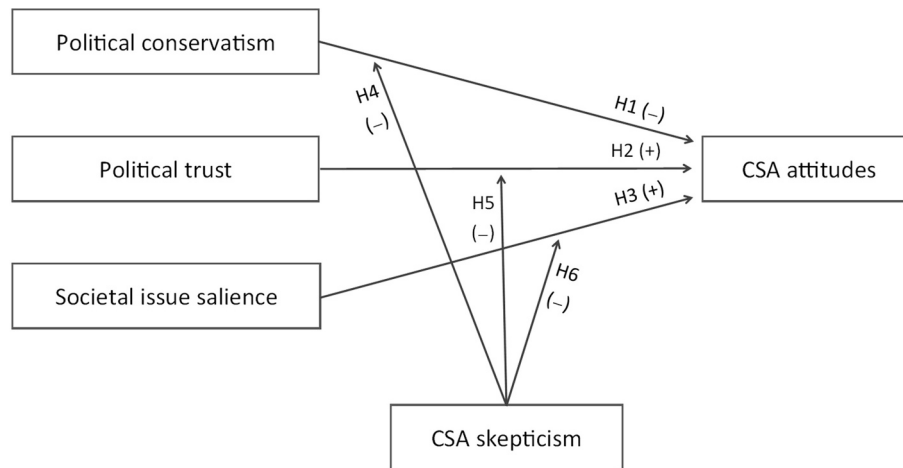


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

Note. The testing of H3 and H6 (societal issue salience) involved three subcategories (i.e., social, economic, and safety-related), which we identified based on a factor analysis.

differently. On average, respondents were 52 years old ($SD = 16.30$). These numbers correspond to official statistics of the Dutch voting population compiled by the Dutch Statistics Authority (Statistics Netherlands, 2023). In terms of their level of education, 55.2% of respondents had a degree from or were enrolled in a bachelor's or master's program at either a (research) university or a university of applied sciences. Official data published by the OECD indicate that 44.2% of the age group between 25 and 64 have attained tertiary education (OECD, 2024), excluding enrolment. However, the education attainment level in the Netherlands is among the highest in all OECD countries, thus also supporting the representativeness of our sample.

3.2. Procedure

The survey of the omnibus study contained over seventy variables, only a subset of which belonged to our project. After providing informed consent, respondents first answered a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, level of education). Subsequent categories of items addressed societal issue salience, political trust, and political orientation. CSA attitudes and skepticism were measured in a consecutive section that tapped into various general beliefs and opinions about society. The survey concluded with a few more general questions, and the respondents were thanked for their participation.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. CSA attitudes

The measurement for CSA attitudes was derived from Rim et al.'s (2022) four-item CSA-expectation scale, which was based on a Weber Shandwick report about CEO activism (2018). We explained to respondents that some companies actively engage in public debates about controversial sociopolitical issues facing society (such as social inequality, climate change, and health care problems) and asked them to indicate to what extent they agreed with four statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*): (a) I think it is a good thing when companies get involved with sociopolitical issues, (b) Companies should support sociopolitical issues that reflect their values, (c) I would support a company more if they supported sociopolitical issues I support, and (d) I refuse to support companies that support sociopolitical issues I oppose (reverse coded). The results of a factor analysis (principal axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation) revealed

a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 2.08 and an explained variance of 51.95%. Reliability analysis demonstrated, however, that the scale was not reliable ($\alpha = 0.42$). The reverse coded item appeared to measure a different aspect of CSA attitudes than the other items and was therefore removed to create a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.75$; $M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.24$; eigenvalue = 2.01, 66.85% explained variance).

3.3.2. CSA skepticism

We measured CSA skepticism using three items that assessed green advertising skepticism, adapted from Matthes and Wonneberger (2014). We replaced mentions of green claims with statements about sociopolitical issues. On a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), respondents indicated to what extent they agreed with the following three items: (a) Most company statements about sociopolitical issues are intended to mislead rather than to inform people, (b) I do *not* believe most company statements about sociopolitical issues, and (c) Because company statements about sociopolitical issues are exaggerated, people would be better off if companies did *not* make such claims at all. The scale comprised one factor (eigenvalue = 2.03, accounting for 67.80% of the variance) and was reliable ($\alpha = 0.76$; $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.18$).

3.3.3. Political orientation

Political orientation was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point scale that ranged from [0] left-wing to [10] right-wing ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.58$). To prevent discomfort, respondents were also given the option to select 'I don't know' ($n = 121$) and 'I don't want to say' ($n = 29$). We treated these answers as missing values.

3.3.4. Political trust

Respondents indicated on a 7-point scale to what extent they trusted three political institutions that characterize Dutch politics (1 = *no trust*, 7 = *a lot of trust*): (a) the Parliament, (b) the current Cabinet, and (c) the government in general. The one-factor scale (eigenvalue = 2.50, explaining 83.45% of the variance) was reliable ($\alpha = 0.90$; $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.44$). Because some respondents may have lacked knowledge of or interest in Dutch politics and therefore could not provide an accurate answer, they were also allowed to select 'I don't know'.

3.3.5. Societal issue salience

We measured societal issue salience by presenting a list of problems

facing the Netherlands to respondents and asking them to indicate the extent to which they considered those issues important on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very much important*). These issues were considered big, controversial issues in Dutch politics at the time of data collection⁵ (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research [Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau], 2022): (A) Covid-19, (B) war in Ukraine, (C) nitrogen crisis, (D) climate change, (E) shortage of housing, (F) increasing contradictions between groups in society (polarization), (G) labor shortage, (H) inhumane reception of asylum seekers, (I) inflation, (J) energy costs, (K) crime, and (L) influx of asylum seekers. These items were rated based on respondents' personal intuitions about the issues. Thus, no options were made available for indicating 'I don't know' or 'I prefer not to say'.

Since individuals' perceptions of the relevance of the mentioned societal issues may differ due to the issues having different scopes. We therefore conducted a factor analysis (principal axis factoring with a direct oblimin rotation) to determine whether the societal issues formed one or more factors. Based on the factor analysis, we found that the issues could be classified into three subcategories: *social* issues (A-H; eigenvalue = 3.62, 30.14% explained variance; $\alpha = 0.80$; $M = 5.04$, $SD = 0.98$), *economic* issues (I & J; eigenvalue = 2.26, 18.87% explained variance; $\alpha = 0.75$; $M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.08$), and *safety-related* issues (K & L; eigenvalue = 1.05, 8.73% explained variance; $r = 0.43$; $M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.23$). Consequently, to test our societal issue salience hypotheses, we ran post hoc analyses for each subcategory separately, in addition to testing the hypotheses for the main category 'societal issue salience'.⁶

4. Results

The dataset, syntax, and output for this study are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/k5ve9/>.

4.1. Main associations

We tested H1-H3 using separate linear regression models. We preregistered to include age, gender, level of education, and general trust of companies as control variables in the statistical analyses. However, adding these variables resulted in only limited increases in explained variance in CSA attitudes (i.e., the R^2 showed increases ranging from 0.01 to 0.03) and yielded nearly identical levels of support for the hypotheses. For these reasons, we report the results of the regression models with the predictors only, and without the controls (for models that include control variables, see the supplementary materials).

H1 predicted that higher levels of political conservatism (vs. liberalism) are negatively associated with CSA attitudes. The results showed that 8.00% of the variance in CSA attitudes was explained by political orientation ($F(1, 1706) = 148.33$, $p < 0.001$). The coefficient was significantly negative ($\beta = -0.28$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$), which supported our first hypothesis that the more individuals are right-wing oriented, the more negative their attitudes toward CSA were.

We next predicted that higher levels of political trust (H2) are *positively* associated with CSA attitudes. We found that 4.25% of the variance in CSA attitudes was accounted for by political trust ($F(1, 1850) = 82.06$, $p < 0.001$). The results demonstrated that political trust ($\beta = 0.21$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$) had a significant positive coefficient. H2 was thus supported. The more individuals reported trusting political institutions, the more positive they perceived and evaluated CSA.

Next, we assumed that societal issue salience (H3) is *positively* associated with CSA attitudes. We found that 10.17% of the variance in CSA attitudes was accounted for by societal issue salience ($F(1, 1853) = 209.70$, $p < 0.001$). The results showed that societal issue salience ($\beta =$

0.32, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) had a significant positive coefficient. The more individuals perceive many societal problems facing the country as important, the more positive their attitudes toward CSA. Post hoc analyses were conducted to investigate whether the results remained significant across the different subcategories of societal issue salience, specifically social issue, economic issue, and safety issue-related issue salience. Results showed that 15.16% of the variance in CSA attitudes was explained by social issue salience ($F(1, 1853) = 331.10$, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, neither economic issue salience ($F(1, 1853) = 0.01$, $p = 0.94$) nor safety-related issue salience ($F(1, 1853) = 0.00$, $p = 0.99$) explained variance in the outcome variable (both 0.00%). The results further demonstrated a significant positive coefficient of social issue salience ($\beta = 0.32$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, H3 was supported partially, that is, only for social issue salience.⁷ The more individuals perceive many social problems facing the country as important, the more positive their attitudes toward CSA are.

4.2. CSA skepticism as a moderator

According to H4-H6, CSA skepticism weakens the expected main associations. Like before, we tested each hypothesis separately using linear regression.⁸ We found that, compared to the models described earlier, adding CSA skepticism as a predictor and moderator caused an increase in explained variance in CSA attitudes of about 5% in the case of political orientation ($F(3, 1709) = 87.37$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.13$), of about 4% in the case of political trust ($F(3, 1856) = 56.01$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.08$), and of about 5% in the case of societal issue salience ($F(3, 1859) = 110.15$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.15$). We, however, did not find support for the hypotheses that CSA skepticism moderates the relationships between (H4) political orientation and CSA attitudes ($\beta = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.78$) and between (H5) political trust and CSA attitudes ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.11$).

The results only demonstrated a significant moderation effect of CSA skepticism for the relationship between CSA attitudes and societal issue salience ($\beta = 0.52$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) but in the opposite direction to what we had hypothesized (H6): CSA skepticism *strengthened* the association between societal issue salience and CSA attitudes. The moderation effect can be classified as contributory (Holbert & Park, 2020): the slope of lower-than-average CSA skepticism scores was less steep than when scores were higher than average. Thus, societal issue salience and CSA attitudes were positively associated at all levels of CSA skepticism, but the association was more pronounced with higher skepticism scores.

Post hoc analyses of the interaction effect of CSA skepticism on the main relationship between different types of societal issue salience (i.e., social issue salience, economic issue salience, and safety-related issue salience) on CSA attitudes showed that the interaction effect was significant only for social issues salience ($F(3, 1851) = 140.95$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.19$; R^2 change = 0.04) and the moderation effect was positive ($\beta = 0.52$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$). The increased explained variance was negligible for economic (R^2 change = 0.000) and safety-related issue salience (R^2 change = 0.001), indicating the absence of significant interaction effects (economic: $\beta = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.90$; safety-related: $\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.30$).

This means that individuals who are highly skeptical of CSA tend to

⁷ In addition to the separate models per predictor, we also fitted one linear regression model with all five predictors included ($F(3, 1702) = 78.47$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.19$). The results showed the largest association with CSA attitudes for social issue salience ($\beta = 0.33$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), followed by political orientation ($\beta = -0.13$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$) and political trust ($\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$). No significant associations were found for economic ($p = 0.34$) and safety-related issue salience ($p = 0.80$).

⁸ See the supplementary materials for the results of the models that include age, gender, level of education, and general trust of companies as control variables. The conclusions remain unchanged.

⁵ See the supplementary materials for more information.

⁶ We preregistered that we would collapse all issue salience scores into one variable. We changed our analysis strategy based on the reviewer feedback.

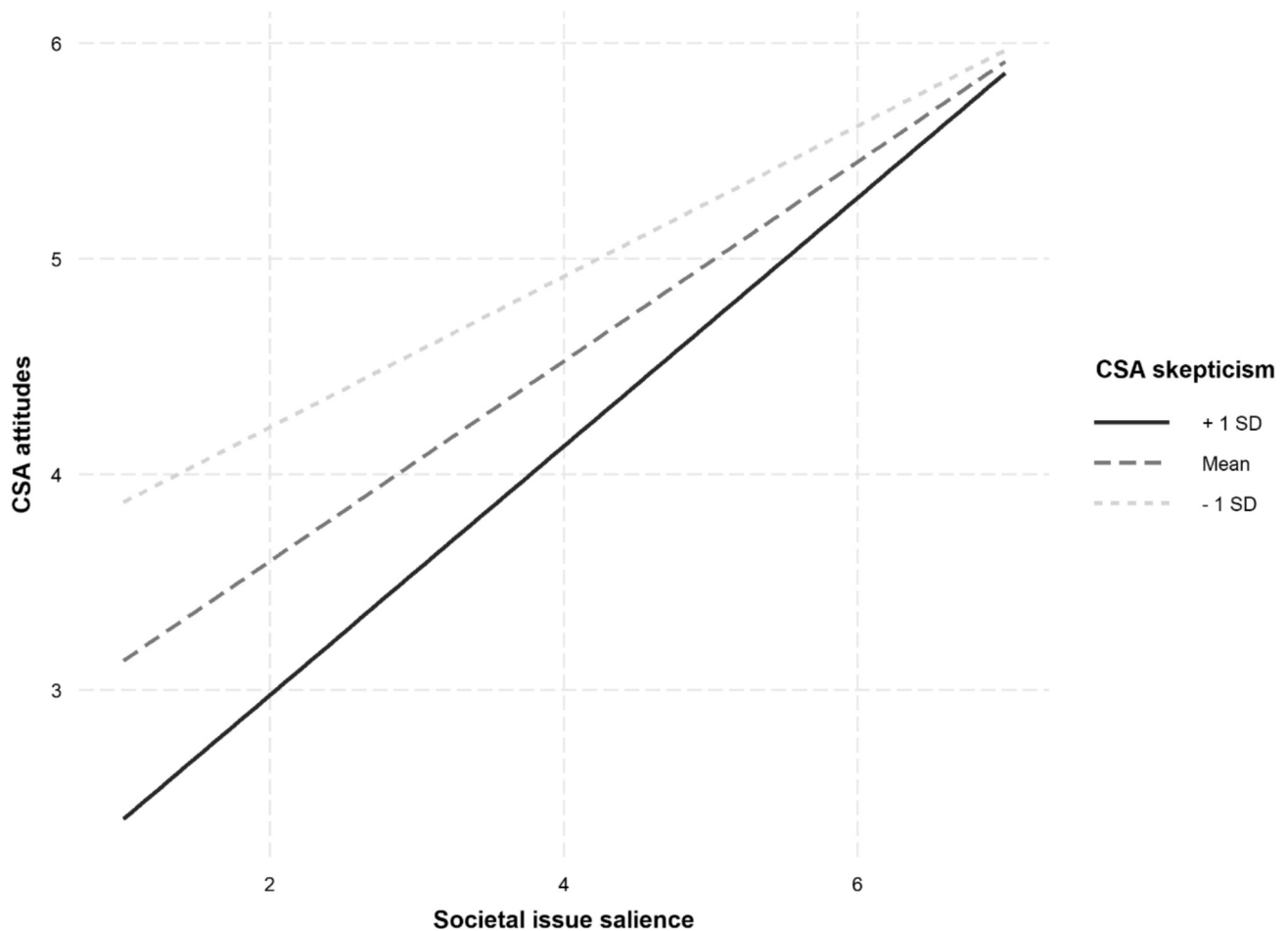


Fig. 2. Moderation Effect of CSA Skepticism on Societal Issue Salience and CSA Attitudes.

hold more negative attitudes toward CSA when they perceive low social issue salience (see Fig. 2). However, as perceived social issue salience increases, their attitudes toward CSA become more positive, similar to individuals with low or moderate skepticism. Crucially, the positive relationship between perceived issue salience and CSA attitudes is stronger among those with high CSA skepticism. That is, skepticism amplifies the influence of issue salience: the more skeptical individuals are, the more their CSA attitudes shift in response to rising perceptions of social issue relevance. This suggests that even skeptical stakeholders can become more supportive of CSA when societal issues are perceived as highly pressing.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Due to increasing expectations toward companies to publicly show their support or take a stance on sociopolitical issues, it is crucial for companies to understand which stakeholder groups are likely to endorse or reject their CSA stances. Our study investigated the general relationship between CSA attitudes and relatively stable political predispositions (i.e., political orientation and political trust) and context-specific attitudes (i.e., CSA skepticism and societal issue salience), which have been (in)directly linked to support and boycott behavior toward specific CSA efforts (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Fernandes, 2020).

We first analyzed the extent to which political orientation (conservatism vs. liberalism) predicted CSA attitudes, finding that higher levels of conservatism are negatively associated with CSA attitudes. This implies that conservative individuals are less likely to be supportive of CSA than liberals. We attribute this to the way the general public likely associates CSA with progressive social change (Austin et al., 2019):

“change aiming at establishing more social equality in society” (Becker, 2020, p. 7). CSA has earned a liberal reputation, further demonstrated by the fact that most of the CSA researchers focus on progressive stances, such as those related to social justice and equality (Waymer & VanSlette, 2021). However, some companies advocate for *reactionary* social change, which reflects a (conservative) “desire to return to the past” (Becker, 2020, p. 8). To deepen our understanding of the political attitudes of CSA supporters, future studies should differentiate more between the different ways in which CSA manifests in liberal and conservative political contexts.

Furthermore, we found a positive relationship between political trust and CSA attitudes. Our results suggest that stakeholders with high trust in political institutions tend to support CSA. It thus seems likely that, in line with the heuristic thesis of political trust (Rudolph, 2017), people’s general disposition towards political institutions affects how they judge specific sociopolitical activities by other non-political institutions (in this case, companies). This finding supports the notion that today, individuals view corporations as political actors, i.e., as active participants in not only corporate but also political affairs (e.g., Van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). However, we acknowledge that the relationship between political trust and attitudes toward CSA may not be strictly positive. While greater political trust may reflect a broader openness to institutional engagement in societal issues, including by corporations, an alternative logic could be that *declining* political trust may heighten expectations toward business to fill perceived governance voids and thus lead to more positive attitudes toward CSA. This may be especially relevant in times of shifting political dynamics and rising geopolitical tensions.

Furthermore, we assumed a positive association between CSA

attitudes and societal issue salience. However, we could only find support for the positive relationship in the case of *social* issue salience, not in the cases of economic or safety-related issue salience. This finding implies that the more people are highly cognizant of social challenges in society, the more they appreciate it when organizations assume responsibility and address these problems in meaningful ways, including by engaging in CSA (e.g., Li et al., 2022). Compared to social causes, economic and safety-related causes are possibly less associated with CSA, perhaps because these concerns are considered to have a more direct impact on profits. This could explain why the salience of economic and safety-related issues was not associated with CSA attitudes.

Our findings further suggest that individuals appear comfortable viewing organizations as political actors in significant public debates. This is a positive finding for companies that feel they must contribute to society through CSA, given our result that acceptance of CSA is higher when individuals perceive society to be faced with many issues in need of decisive action. Companies can use their visibility, authority, and resources to advocate for desired change. However, viewing companies as political actors also raises ethical concerns (Néron, 2010). For instance, organizations are most likely to support existing rather than novel stances, which could have polarizing effects (Parcha, 2023). Moreover, the motives of organizations to engage in CSA are often unclear. If their CSA stances are covertly intended to advance the corporate agenda, such as improving market standing, this can be considered problematic (Néron, 2010).

Furthermore, we analyzed the role of CSA skepticism in the relationship between CSA attitudes and political orientation, political trust, and societal issue salience. Contrary to our predictions, our findings indicate that political orientation and trust in political institutions remained strong predictors of CSA attitudes, regardless of how skeptical individuals were about CSA. This suggests that CSA skepticism does not ‘interfere’ with how political orientation and trust shape attitudes toward CSA. Those deeper political predispositions still matter even if someone is doubtful or critical of companies’ motivations for getting involved in sociopolitical issues.

We found a significant interaction effect between social issues salience and CSA skepticism, but in the opposite direction of our assumption. People who are more skeptical of CSA showed more positive attitudes toward CSA when they also perceived social issues as highly salient (i.e., important and urgent). Hence, perceptions that the country faces many social issues seem to override CSA skepticism, and major social concerns can lead even skeptics to view CSA more favorably. Many social issues in our study represented large and complex political crises, while also being very general and omnipresent on the public agenda (e.g., climate change, the war in Ukraine, and polarization). They are highly politicized and, thus, characterized by a high degree of public salience, by an increasing range of people voicing opinions on the matter, and by increasingly extreme opinions (De Wilde, 2011), making them ideally suited for CSA activities. When public debates are clearly delineated, this can promote a clearer understanding of how organizations can engage meaningfully in them. The economic and safety-related issues might have been considered *too* specialized for companies to incorporate into CSA efforts. Our findings thus seem to indicate that individuals’ CSA attitudes are less driven by CSA skepticism when organizations tackle important issues that are politicized and well-defined, but not too specialized.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study advances research on CSA by shifting the focus from organizations to individual stakeholders, and from the consequences of CSA to its antecedents. Whereas prior work has mainly examined organizational strategies and stakeholder responses to specific CSA campaigns (e.g., Hong & Li, 2020; Klostermann et al., 2022), our study emphasizes the predictive role of stakeholders’ political predispositions and contextual attitudes –such as political orientation, trust in political

institutions, and social issue salience- in shaping general attitudes toward CSA. Our findings suggest that stakeholder attitudes are influenced not only by stable factors like political orientation but also by dynamic, context-dependent cues like CSA skepticism. This supports the development of more nuanced theoretical approaches that recognize the conditional and evolving nature of CSA evaluations. By examining CSA attitudes broadly, beyond specific issues, and integrating political attitudes, we contribute to a more generalizable understanding of how CSA is received across different issue domains (see Bhagwat et al., 2020), bridging insights from political science, consumer research, and business scholarship.

A novel contribution is the introduction of political trust as a heuristic for evaluating the sincerity of corporate sociopolitical engagement (Rudolph, 2017), an element largely overlooked in current CSA frameworks. Investigating societal issue salience, our study advances CSA research by moving beyond the focus on individual issues (e.g., LGBTQ + rights, environmental activism) to investigate general attitudes toward CSA across issue domains (see Bhagwat et al., 2020). Our findings offer a conditional understanding of when CSA may be perceived as legitimate or accepted. This broader lens supports the development of more generalizable theoretical models of stakeholder responsiveness.

However, it is essential to note that CSA may not be uniformly expected in all societies. CSA may be more significant in high-trust political contexts and those with higher societal (or political) issue salience. In contexts marked by low political trust or fragmented public discourse, even well-intentioned CSA efforts can be perceived as opportunistic or divisive. Recent developments in world politics, including increasing polarization and declining institutional trust in many democracies, underscore the risks of misreading the salience or resonance of issues among diverse audiences. Our findings support a contingency-based view of CSA, suggesting that strategic engagement is more likely to be effective and legitimate when aligned with high institutional trust and perceived issue urgency.

5.2. Managerial implications

Our findings provide actionable insights for practitioners navigating the challenges and risks associated with CSA. As has been highlighted by previous research, it is crucial for corporations to understand which stakeholders have positive or negative attitudes toward CSA to be able to identify stakeholder groups that are in favor or disfavor of CSA and develop CSA (communication) strategies accordingly, which, in turn, may lower boycott reactions (Fernandes, 2020). Rather than assuming that CSA will resonate uniformly, our results suggest that CSA is most likely to be accepted by stakeholders who (1) identify as politically liberal, (2) trust political institutions, and (3) perceive pressing social issues in their country. These insights can help companies better assess whether, when, and how to engage in CSA, particularly in contexts where reputational backlash is a possibility. Our findings thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the risks associated with CSA by revealing that stakeholder acceptance is not uniform but conditioned by political predispositions and contextual perceptions. While CSA may be perceived more positively and strengthen support among certain stakeholder groups, as identified by this study, it can simultaneously alienate others. The backlash against campaigns like Gillette’s ‘The Best Men Can Be’ (which challenged traditional masculinity norms) exemplifies this risk: when CSA is perceived as ideologically polarizing or inconsistent with stakeholders’ views, CSA attitudes might be less relevant and CSA can backfire (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Yim, 2021). Therefore, strategic silence, i.e., a deliberate choice to avoid public sociopolitical stances, may sometimes be the more prudent option in politically fragmented environments, when public trust in institutions is low, or when political salience is low. Our results show that when people perceive societal problems as highly relevant in their country, they tend to view CSA more positively, even those who are generally skeptical of CSA. In contrast, when societal issues are seen as less pressing, attitudes toward

CSA become more negative, and people are more likely to view it as inappropriate or unnecessary.

Hence, it should be emphasized that we do not advocate for the uncritical adoption of CSA or for organizations to target stakeholders based on their political attitudes; rather, we suggest considering specific ideological and contextual configurations. In societies or contexts where political trust and social issue salience are for instance low, CSA may be perceived as opportunistic or polarizing rather than sincere. Understanding when and where CSA resonates is just as important as deciding what to stand for.

5.3. Limitations and Future research

Although our work employs regression models to understand statistically causal relationships between variables, our survey design allowed us to identify associations but not to establish causal relationships. We should, thus, be careful when evaluating the study's findings. Furthermore, it is important to note that CSA attitudes were measured in general, not for each societal issue specifically, which could yield different findings because the alignment between CSA and individuals' views may vary depending on the specific issue or issue domain at hand (Li et al., 2022). Previous research showed, for example, that people attribute different motivations to companies in the context of CSR/CSA (e.g., strategic-driven, egoistic-driven, and stakeholder-driven motivations; Overton & Xiao, 2022) and that these attributions have varying effects on CSR attitudes depending on how much people perceive a fit between the addressed issue and the company (e.g., Min et al., 2023). In addition, we did not measure more specific perceptions of societal issues, such as the level of controversy or concreteness, which might have offered an even deeper insight into the study's findings.

We also acknowledge a potential limitation in our measurement of CSA attitudes. The example issues provided (e.g., climate change) may reflect a more liberal-leaning agenda, which could have influenced responses, particularly among conservative respondents who might view these issues negatively. Consequently, our findings related to conservatives' lower acceptance of CSA may partly reflect issue framing rather than an inherent opposition to CSA as a concept. Future research should consider a more balanced set of issues representing a wider political spectrum to better capture how CSA is perceived across ideological groups. This limitation highlights the importance of recognizing that CSA can serve diverse and sometimes opposing political or social agendas.

Future research could also benefit from exploring several additional dimensions. Researchers could examine the generalizability of the findings across different countries, given the specificities of the Dutch context (e.g., less polarized than the US). As political landscapes shift and geopolitical tensions rise, the confidence and trust in institutions, including political institutions and corporations, and the attitudes towards their roles in addressing societal issues are becoming increasingly contested. We therefore recommend that future research investigates the interplay between political trust, organizational trust, sociopolitical beliefs, and opinions about CSA over time to better understand how declining trust in political institutions (Edelman, 2023, 2024) interacts with trust in corporations. Future research could also explore how different or changing political contexts shape whether, and under what conditions, political trust enhances or undermines support for CSA, as the relationship between political trust and CSA attitudes does not necessarily need to be strictly positive, as discussed.

In addition, CSA is conceptually linked to large societal issues with a polarizing impact. Yet, CSA could also target less visible issues that may be of interest only to local communities, for example. Future research should explore these meso- and micro-level issues to facilitate the conceptual development of CSA and a more comprehensive empirical mapping of this phenomenon. Another valuable avenue for future research is to explore whether our findings generalize to related outcomes, such as boycott intentions. Finally, our work focused on CSA

attitudes as applied to corporations. However, various actors, such as non-profit organizations, are also involved in sociopolitical activism. Future research should also examine the perceptions of these actors, enabling more accurate comparisons with our study to identify when, where, and which stakeholder groups generally approve of CSA.

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The dataset, syntax, and output for this study are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/k5ve9/>.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Britta C. Brugman: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sarah Marschlich:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization, Project administration. **Olga Eisele:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Sonia J. Shaikh:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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