

 BRIEF

**U.S. MIDTERM ELECTIONS SERIES:
IMPACTS OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT
ON ORGANIZATIONS
ZEROFOX INTELLIGENCE**

B-2022-10-03a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Elections, Personal Disclosures

October 3, 2022



Scope Note

*ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 12:00 PM (EDT) on September 22, 2022**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.*

Political Involvement Impacts on Organizations

Executive Summary

In an increasingly divided political climate, an organization's perceived values can have a major impact on how they are regarded. The past several years have brought many divisive issues to the surface, including the coronavirus pandemic, voting reform, policing, income inequality, and other social justice issues. All of these issues have existed for years, but many have been increasingly moved to the forefront of society, particularly during election cycles. With information regarding campaign contributions from organizations - and leadership social media postings - readily available online, groups and individuals can easily research where organizations give their funding and where they stand on social issues. When those stances or donations do not align with expectations or desires of a segment of society, it can be the basis for physical, cyber, or reputational attacks.

Details

In years past, organizations could remain relatively quiet when social and political issues arose. Today, the far-reaching scope of social media has expanded and expedited awareness around these stances, with an organization's stance - or silence - on notable issues now being examined under a microscope.

Analyst Commentary

The impacts on organizations due to their political involvement became much more visible around the 2020 U.S. election cycle. Many websites made information readily available on campaign contributions which can be traced back to specific donors and organizations. This information highlights the amounts given to candidates as well as lobbying efforts, and allows users to easily locate organizations giving money to



candidates and efforts that those users may not agree with. In a study conducted by Sprout Social, 70 percent of consumers indicated that they felt more connected to brands where their CEOs were active on social media, as well as 53 percent saying they felt connected when that brand's values align with their own.¹ From there, these users frequently reference such contributions through social media postings and in forums to stir up negativity towards the organization, which can trickle down to impacts on their investors as well.



Source: [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/GeorgeWLDD/status/1550531054418550784](https://twitter.com/GeorgeWLDD/status/1550531054418550784)

Organizations not only face social pressure from the outside, but they also see it from the inside with their employees. Many employees, particularly younger workers, are extremely motivated by the desire for where they work to share their values. In one survey, those categorized as millennials were willing to accept a 34 percent pay cut to work for a firm that shared their values—more than double the amount that workers categorized as baby boomers were willing to give up.² Social pressure can also make an impact on employees choosing to leave their roles, with social media campaigns having the ability to elicit a strong response.

¹ [hXXps://sproutsocial\[.\]com/insights/data/social-media-connection/](https://sproutsocial.com/insights/data/social-media-connection/)

²

[hXXps://www.cnbc\[.\]com/2018/06/27/nearly-9-out-of-10-millennials-would-consider-a-pay-cut-to-get-this.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/27/nearly-9-out-of-10-millennials-would-consider-a-pay-cut-to-get-this.html)



djeff avenue @thecultureofme

if you're still working at _____ right now, quit. leave.
fire up linkedin and find something else.

Pinboard @Pinboard · Jun 1, 2020
is pledging to spend \$10M on token efforts to end racial injustice while continuing to spend as much as the law allows to keep white supremacists in power. [twitter.com/instagram/stat...](#)

Contributor name	Recipient	Election	State	Receipt date	Amount
	SCALISE FOR CONGRESS	PRIMARY	DC	12/31/2019	\$2,500.00
	SCALISE FOR CONGRESS	PRIMARY	DC	09/30/2019	\$2,500.00
	MCCONNELL SENATE COMMITTEE	GENERAL	DC	09/25/2019	\$1,500.00
	NRSC	PRIMARY	DC	06/30/2019	\$15,000.00
	NRCC	PRIMARY	DC	04/08/2019	\$15,000.00
	MCCONNELL SENATE COMMITTEE	GENERAL	DC	03/31/2019	\$1,000.00
	SCALISE FOR CONGRESS	GENERAL	DC	10/25/2018	\$5,000.00
	NRCC	PRIMARY	DC	08/23/2018	\$15,000.00
	NRSC	PRIMARY	DC	07/09/2018	\$15,000.00
	DEVIN NUNES CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE	GENERAL	DC	06/29/2018	\$1,000.00
	SCALISE FOR CONGRESS	PRIMARY	DC	04/26/2018	\$2,500.00

8:29 PM · Jun 2, 2020 · TweetDeck

11 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 54 Likes

Source: [hXXps://twitter.com/thecultureofme/status/1267976555784962048](https://twitter.com/thecultureofme/status/1267976555784962048)

More frequently than ever before, activists and consumers are paying attention to the political affiliations of a particular organization's leadership. Finding which political candidates and committees an individual donated to only requires a simple search on a portal within the Federal Election Commission's (FEC) website.

Under the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), political committees, which include candidate committees and political action committees (PACs), must register with the FEC and comply with disclosure requirements. Political committees are required to file periodic reports that disclose the total amount of all contributions they receive, and the identity, address, occupation, and employer of any person who contributes more than USD 200 during a calendar year.

Given the laws against straw donors (someone who makes a campaign contribution illegally with another person's money in their own name), all individual contributors are mandated to donate in their own name, with their correct personal information listed. This means that FEC disclosures could potentially be a major source for accessing private information. This information is displayed in a publicly accessible database and individual contributor searches may be performed using one or more filters to narrow the actual search.



Data collected on individual contributors include the following:

- Name
- Occupation or Employer
- City
- State
- Date of transaction
- Amount of contribution
- Name of committee disclosing the contribution

One such tool is Zippia, which is a job search portal. The site aggregates the contributions of every employee whose donations were publicly available and displays how many belong to each political party.



Source: [hXXps://www.zippia\[.\]com/](https://www.zippia.com/)

Additionally, the financial news website MarketWatch compiled the political contributions of every S&P 500 CEO during the midterm election cycle and created a searchable database. The data is broken down by political party, and each donation can be viewed individually.

What S&P 500 CEOs spent on midterms

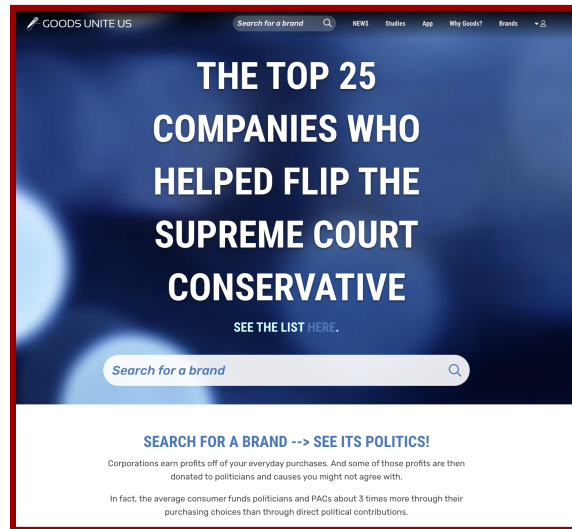
Enter a CEO or company to view details of contributions, partisan breakdown

Source: [hXXps://www.marketwatch.com/graphics/executives-political-donations/#/](https://www.marketwatch.com/graphics/executives-political-donations/#/)

Activists are also using FEC data to target contributions from organizations themselves. One such example is Goods Unite Us, which is a free mobile app that allows users to search for an organization and learn about which political parties and candidates



senior employees have donated to. The app was started by legal professionals and says it has info on over 4,000 brands.



Source: [hXXps://www.goodsuniteus.com/](https://www.goodsuniteus.com/)

In the current political climate, the stakes are increasingly high. In March 2021, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed SB 202, creating a new voting law that made several changes to how elections are run in the state. Following the bill's signing into law, many individuals, groups, and organizations condemned it and attempted to distance themselves from the state and the politicians that supported it - particularly those headquartered in Georgia, which saw increased scrutiny of their political donations.³ Many organizations spoke out against the law, and a professional sports league moved their 2021 All-Star Game and Draft out of the state as a direct result of the law, costing the state significant revenue.⁴

Activists targeted individuals that had previously donated to the politicians that authored and/or supported SB 202. While they could not do anything to immediately remove the politicians from office, they could publicly shame or harass the donors that helped elect politicians with differing views from theirs.⁵

This particular issue highlighted another area which could elicit backlash against an organization - corporate political spending not aligning with an organization's public

3

[hXXps://truthout.org/articles/corporations-back-away-from-georgia-voting-bill-after-funding-its-sponsors/](https://truthout.org/articles/corporations-back-away-from-georgia-voting-bill-after-funding-its-sponsors/)

4

[hXXps://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/31183822/mlb-moving-all-star-game-atlanta-georgia-voting-law](https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/31183822/mlb-moving-all-star-game-atlanta-georgia-voting-law)

5

[hXXps://atlantaciviccircle.org/2022/04/21/election-workers-on-their-own-when-facing-threats-accusations-of-misconduct/](https://atlantaciviccircle.org/2022/04/21/election-workers-on-their-own-when-facing-threats-accusations-of-misconduct/)



stance. Several organizations were maligned for funding a group accused of supporting voter suppression laws, while publicly stating that they supported voter rights.⁶



Source: [hXXps://twitter\[.\]com/CREWcrew/status/1394691850045382660](https://twitter.com/CREWcrew/status/1394691850045382660)

Similarly, in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, many media outlets highlighted the corporate executives that were the largest donors to Donald Trump and Joe Biden. This was used to show which leaders, and by proxy, their organizations, supported which political candidate. Once again, there was observed backlash towards organizations who publicly stated one viewpoint, but whose political donations were perceived to be in opposition to those statements.⁷ Organizations found to be in support of certain candidates or political parties faced backlash and boycott activity which impacted their revenue. However - the backlash did not stop there, as this then translated into backlash and boycotts of organizations they supplied, with organizations being targeted due to who their third parties were.⁸

Recommendations

Organizations should maintain awareness of their campaign contributions and have a communication plan in place should these contributions become publicly known and generate backlash. In addition, executives should refrain from providing residential

⁶

[hXXps://documented\[.\]net/reporting/google-deloitte-and-citigroup-quietly-collaborate-with-gop-group-pushing-voter-suppression](https://documented[.]net/reporting/google-deloitte-and-citigroup-quietly-collaborate-with-gop-group-pushing-voter-suppression)

⁷ [hXXps://www.crispthinking\[.\]com/blog/brands-guilty-by-association](https://www.crispthinking[.]com/blog/brands-guilty-by-association)

⁸

[hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2022/06/09/business-food/martins-potato-rolls-doug-mastriano-cec/index.html](https://www.cnn[.]com/2022/06/09/business-food/martins-potato-rolls-doug-mastriano-cec/index.html)



addresses on their campaign contributions in favor of PO boxes in order to limit the exposure of this information to activists looking to target them for their views. While previous contributions cannot be updated to remove this information and thus remain available on the FEC website, leadership can limit these disclosures on their campaign contributions moving forward. ZeroFox Intelligence can provide security teams with Executive Threat Assessments to determine current exposures and provide mitigation recommendations where available. Lastly, a policy around social media activity that outlines acceptable leadership and employee behavior on social media is strongly recommended as a means to proactively prescribe how interactions around social and political issue should be handled.



Appendix: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.