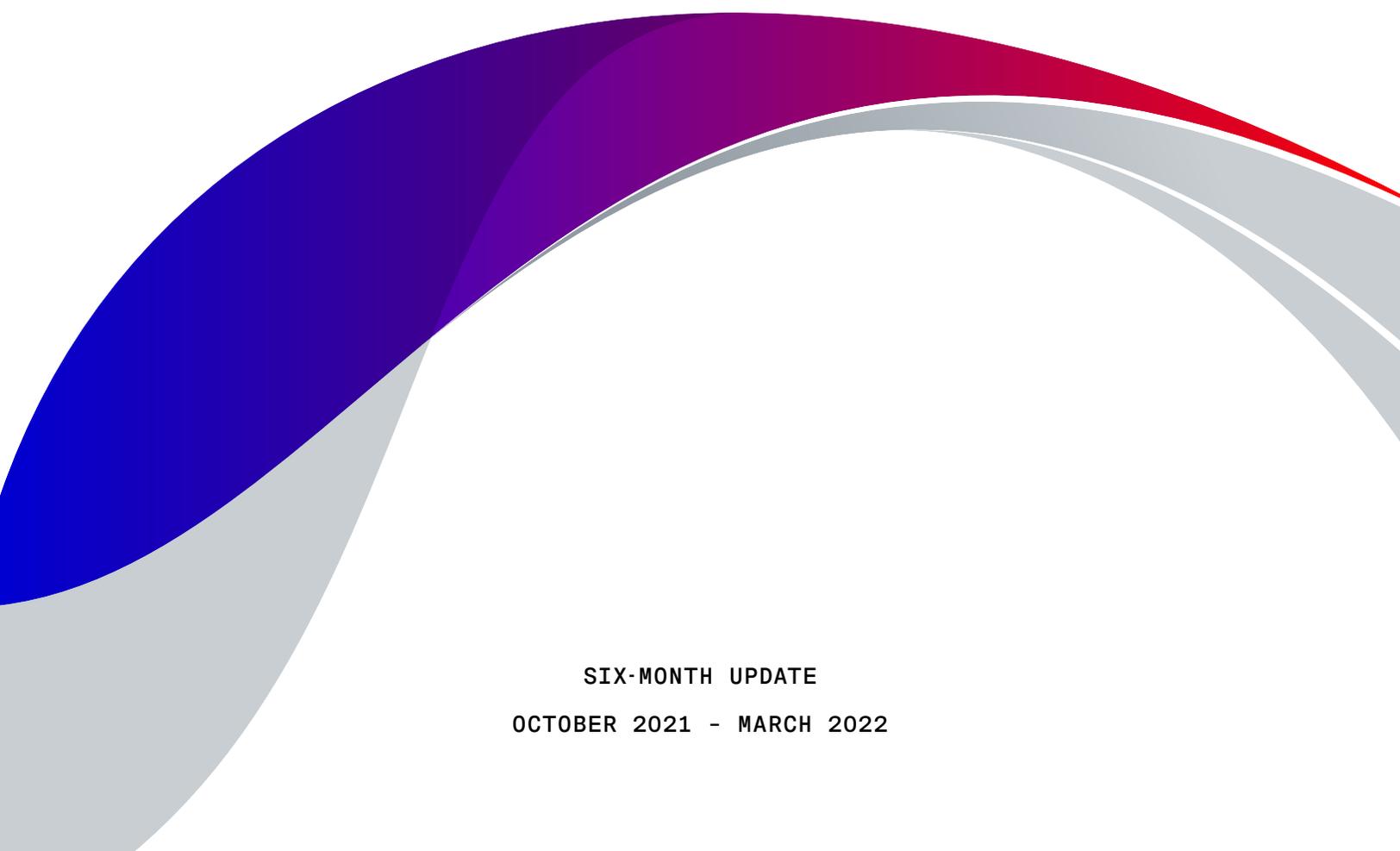


# The Polarization Index



SIX-MONTH UPDATE  
OCTOBER 2021 - MARCH 2022

## A Note from the Authors - 18 Months of Polarization.

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Societal discord has become a serious threat to the corporate world. Every business leader is grappling with the same questions: When and how should we engage on social issues that are important to our employees and our customers? How many problems can we realistically tackle? Which issues should we address, and which should we avoid? How will taking a position on a sensitive topic impact our reputation and bottom line?

According to the 2022 USC Global Communication Report, 75% of public relations professionals believe polarization is a problem for their organization because it can alienate customers and employees, making it difficult to communicate on important topics. Eighty-five percent believe that business can play a role in reducing polarization because companies have the responsibility, the platform and the resources to make a difference. Seventy-three percent predict their companies will become more engaged in societal issues in the future, but only slightly more than half say they have the information they need to guide those decisions.

That's why we created the Polarization Index — to give leaders a tool to measure the overall level of polarization in the U.S. and understand the 10 most controversial issues that contribute to it. Using a proprietary algorithm developed in conjunction with Golin and powered by data from Signal Labs, we analyze relevant stories from media outlets across the political spectrum and study how they are shared on social media. By continuously monitoring millions of individual online interactions, we can track the evolution of the most divisive topics. The results provide a roadmap for business leaders engaged in the public dialogue about the issues their customers and employees care about.

This new report provides a six-month update on our original year-long study. Over the course of 18 months, we've discovered that some things have changed, while others have not. Immigration remains the most polarizing issue in America, driven heavily by the Right. Police reform, racial equity and gun control also rank high on the list of the most divisive topics, and they will stay there for the foreseeable future.

Based on strong response from the Left to controversial new legislation in Texas, Florida and other states, abortion has moved up on the list and LGBTQ+ rights makes its appearance for the first time. These issues will likely become even hotter as new legislation is contemplated and passed, and these laws are tested in the courts. During the past six months, the Jan. 6th Capitol insurgency has also become a top-10 issue driven by the investigation in Congress and continuous Left-leaning news coverage.

## A Note from the Authors - 18 Months of Polarization.

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Meanwhile, topics like climate change have become less political, and therefore less risky for businesses who wish to engage. In fact, minimum wage and healthcare have moved below 10th place, proving that despite inaction at the federal level, the public's perception of issues can shift rapidly – which demonstrates the need for corporations to monitor their engagement in real time.

Looking at the big picture, the level of discord in America remains at the same dangerously high level that existed when President Biden was elected. To maintain viewership ratings and raise funds, partisan media and political forces on both the Left and Right continue to promote stories that support their views inside their respective social media echo chambers, regardless of their accuracy. Because this self-serving strategy appears to be working, we predict that polarization is here to stay. But the controversial issues that contribute to this ongoing conflict will continue to rise and fall based on events, legislation and politics.

There are risks and rewards for business leaders who venture into this polarized landscape. This report serves as a guide to make their communication more thoughtful and their journey more meaningful.

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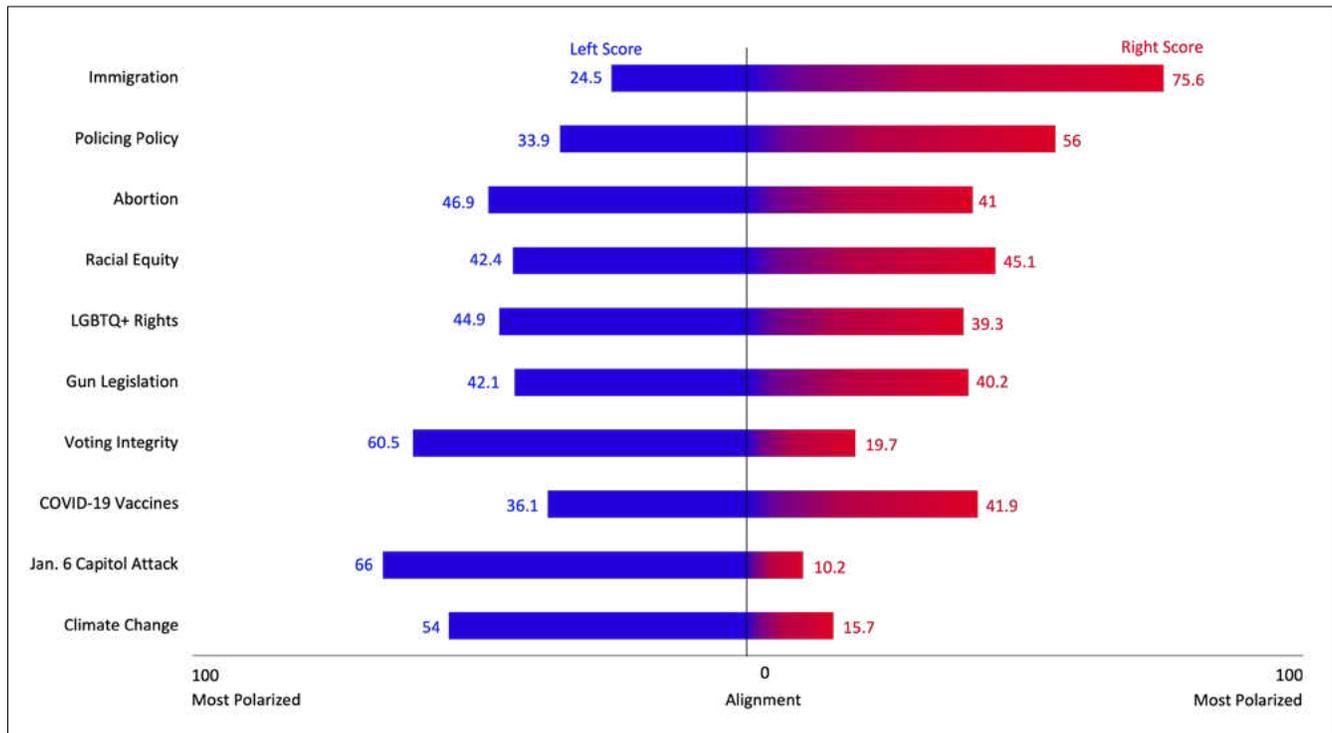
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# Executive Summary

## Q1 '22 Issues



# Executive Summary

- Over the past 18 months, the overall polarization level in the U.S. (83.6) has not dropped significantly from where it was before President Biden took office (85.1) in Q4 '20. This is primarily due to increased engagement with controversial issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and the Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol insurgency, all of which moved up our list in 2022.

- For the past year, immigration and policing policy continue to be the most polarizing topics in the country, both primarily driven by the Right, with a heavy dose of information from unreliable sources. That noted, polarization around policing policy dropped considerably in the last six months.

- The war in Ukraine is the most talked about issue in Q1 '22, even though it did not spark the same level of disagreement as the other issues included in our study. Its lower level of polarization (69) is mainly based on the Right's criticism of the Biden administration's handling of the crisis.

Over the last six months, the level of polarization around abortion increased by almost 10 points

- due to mounting reaction from the Left to restrictive state legislation that could potentially pave the way for overturning Roe v. Wade.

LGBTQ+ rights became the fifth most polarizing issue in the U.S. in Q1 '22 due to increased

- controversy over issues such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, in addition to the Right's concerns over gender education and the participation of transgender athletes in women's sports.

Despite the recent dramatic decline in COVID-19 cases, the topic of the vaccine remains a source

- of controversy, as both Left and Right began to question the vaccine's efficacy and long-term side effects.

Disagreement over the motivation behind the Jan. 6th Capitol insurgency joined the list of the

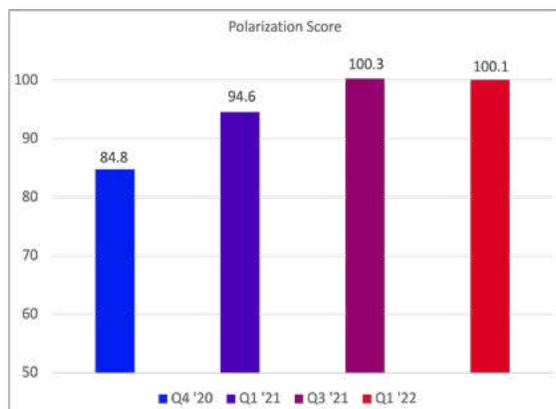
- most polarizing topics in Q1 '22 as Congress investigates former President Trump and his allies for their roles in the attack and left-leaning media cover it extensively.

- Levels of polarization around climate change, healthcare reform and minimum wage continued their gradual decline, making them less risky for companies to address.

# Evolving Issues

# Immigration

Immigration continues to be the most polarizing topic, driven by right-leaning sources discussing the Biden administration's immigration policies at the U.S. – Mexico border.



## Key Drivers of Polarization

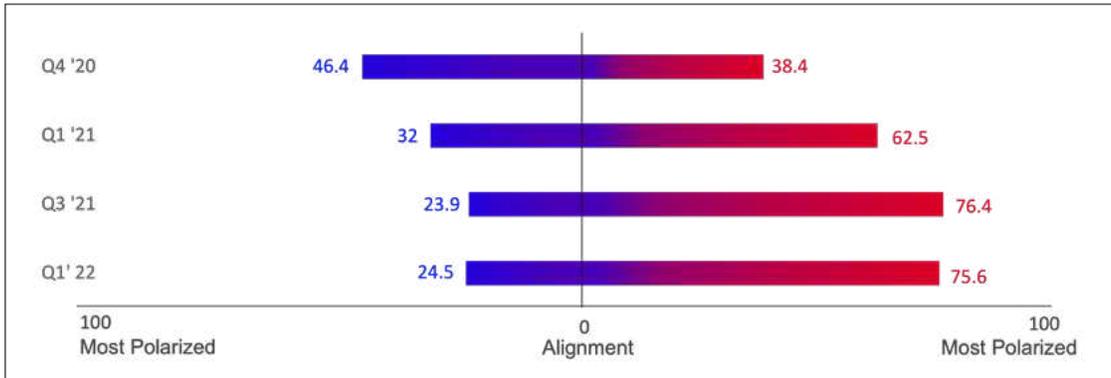
Shares of low-reliable and mid-reliable, right-leaning sources discussing immigration have continued to drive higher polarization levels. Widely shared right-leaning stories focused on the Biden administration's immigration policies at the U.S.-Mexico border, including stories from Fox News ([Border Patrol agents get into heated exchange with leadership during Mayorkas visit, leaked video shows](#) [3.1K shares]) and Washington Examiner ([Leaked photos reveal Biden's disastrous detention of migrants in Arizona](#) [1.4K shares]).

Other right-leaning articles that received significant engagement described the size and reach of the crisis at the border. Some of the most widely shared headlines included Judicial Watch ([Arizona Crossing Sees 2,404.9% Hike in Illegal Immigrants Over Last Year](#) [1.6K shares]) and Fox News ([220,000 illegal immigrants evaded Border Patrol since October: source](#) [1K shares]).

There was also some engagement with left-leaning sources, which focused on discussing problems with the Border Wall – an important part of the Trump agenda. Some of the most widely shared stories included The Washington Post ([Trump's border wall has been breached more than 3,000 times by smugglers, CBP records show](#) [8.4K shares]) and Law & Crime ([Feds Hint at Possible Plea Deal with Steve Bannon's Associate in Case of We Build the Wall, the Charity to Crowdfund a U.S.-Mexico Border Barrier](#) [841 shares]).

Finally, there was a widely shared story by left-leaning CNN discussing Biden's immigration relief for Ukrainian citizens in the U.S. ([Biden administration will extend immigration relief to Ukrainians in the US](#) [740 shares]). This is an issue that will likely spur some controversy in the next few months as more Ukrainian migrants arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border, raising concerns about who will be prioritized.

### Political Skew (Unilateral polarization)



Polarization of immigration continues to be primarily driven by the Right, especially in Q1 '22, when more than half of all stories about immigration originated from mid-reliable and low-reliable, right-leaning sources.

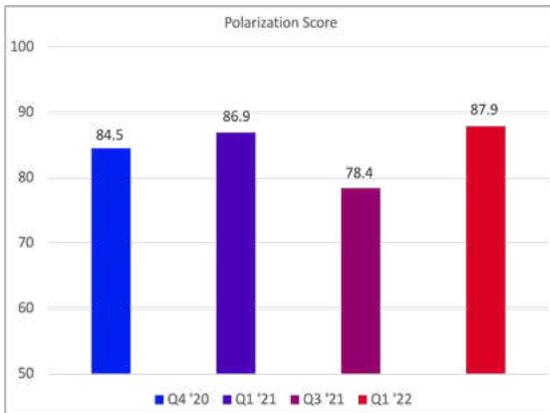
### Implications

The Right continues to use immigration as a hot button they can push to gain the attention of their base, and to mobilize independents and centric Democrats who are frustrated with the Biden administration border plans. Immigration also began to overlap with the ongoing war in Ukraine, with refugees from that country arriving at the Mexican border to seek asylum in the U.S.

It is unlikely that corporate America is going to engage to a significant degree on this topic, because the risks are too high and the problem too complex for most companies to tackle without a government plan in place. However, corporations directly impacted by policies at the Mexico border should be ready to address the societal and financial costs associated with the crisis.

# Abortion

Over the past six months, polarization of abortion has significantly increased as Texas, Idaho, Missouri, Alabama and other states propose or roll out abortion bans with more stringent measures.



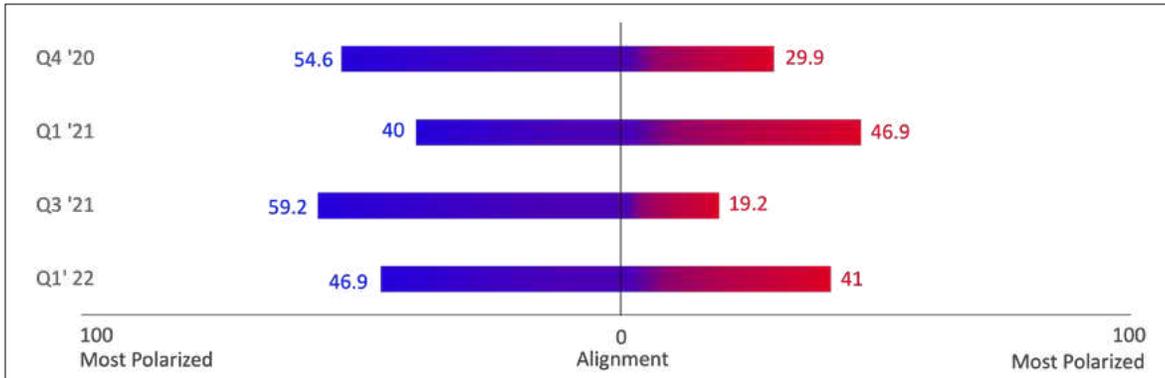
## Key Drivers of Polarization

In the last three months, shares of mid- and high-reliable, left-leaning sources criticized the “Texas playbook” anti-abortion measures being adopted in Idaho, Missouri and Alabama. This included stories in The Washington Post ([Missouri lawmaker seeks to stop residents from obtaining abortions out of state](#) [10K shares], NPR ([Doctors’ worst fears about the Texas abortion law are coming true](#) [6.9K shares] and Slate ([Idaho’s New Anti-Abortion Law Offers Cash Bounties to Rapists’ Family Members](#) [3K shares])).

A significant increase in engagement with less reliable, right-leaning sources led to an overall increase in polarization around abortion in Q1 '22. Widely shared stories focused on debunking arguments for abortion rights, including articles from Lifenews.com ([Amazing Video Shows a Living, First Trimester Unborn Baby](#) [1.2K shares]) and Breitbart ([Abortion Leading Global Cause of Death in 2021 with 43 Million Killed](#) [1.4K shares])).

Other widely shared right-leaning stories highlighted anti-abortion Democrats who have conservative views on abortion, including articles in Newsmax ([Sen. Manchin Joins GOP Colleagues in Defeating Abortion Bill](#) [1K shares]) and Fox News ([South Carolina Democrat switches to Republican Party: ‘I am pro-life and for funding police’](#) [726 shares])).

### Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



Abortion went from being the seventh most polarizing topic in Q3 '21 to being the third in Q1 '22 (up by 9.5 points) due to a significant increase in shares of less reliable, right-leaning news media. However, the biggest shares were primarily driven by the Left.

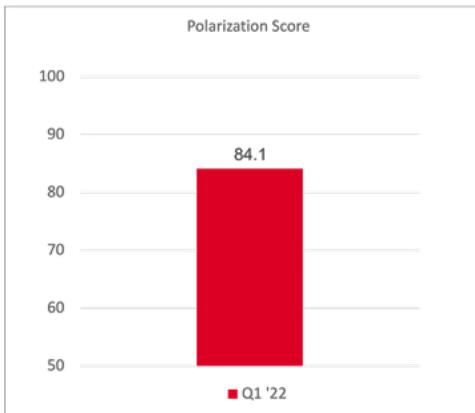
### Implications

After decades of being out of bounds for companies, abortion is rapidly becoming the next big issue to address. Several brands, including Lyft and Uber, spoke out when the Texas legislation was passed, but few followed their lead. Now that more states are passing similar bills, the pressure for other companies to take

a stand will mount, as we are seeing with a proposed boycott of Pepsi over its donations to the Texas GOP. Concerns about the potential overturn of Roe v. Wade by the Supreme Court are driving both activists and employees to act. Every company should be prepared to respond.

# LGBTQ+ Rights

LGBTQ+ Rights became the fifth most polarizing issue in the U.S. as concerns about gender education, transgender youth health care services and same-sex affection depicted in media continue to grow.



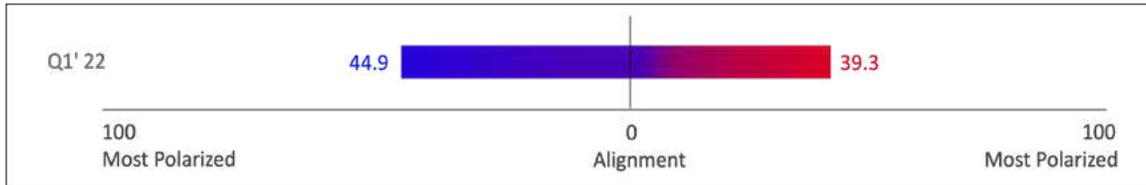
## Key Drivers of Polarization

LGBTQ+ Rights polarization is being driven by engagement with left-leaning sources, although there was also significant engagement with mid-reliable, right-leaning sources. Some of the most widely shared left-leaning headlines were published in Variety.com ([Disney Censors Same-Sex Affection in Pixar Films, According to Letter From Employees](#) [6.9K shares] and [Same-Sex Kiss Restored in Pixar’s ‘Lightyear’ Following Staff Uproar Over ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Bill](#) [5K shares]).

Other widely shared reliable, left-leaning sources discussed health care and gender identity services for transgender youth. Some of these headlines included The New York Times articles [Texas Investigates Parents Over Care for Transgender Youth, Suit Says](#) [5.2K shares] and [Doctors Debate Whether Trans Teens Need Therapy Before Hormones](#) [4.6K shares].

On the other side of the spectrum, some of the most widely shared headlines from mid-reliable, right-leaning sources focused on the debate about transgender athletes competing in women’s sports and covered news about transgender people accused of sexual assault. Some of these articles were in Fox News ([California trans child molester, 26, gets 2 years in juvenile facility thanks to progressive DA Gascon](#) [6K shares] and [VA Tech swimmer rips NCAA transgender participation policy: ‘Feels like the final spot was taken from me’](#) [5.7K shares]).

### Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



Polarization of LGBTQ+ rights is being driven by engagement on both the Left and Right. Most of the engagement in the last three months has been with reliable, left-leaning sources, but there is still significant engagement with mid-reliable and low-reliable, right-leaning sources.

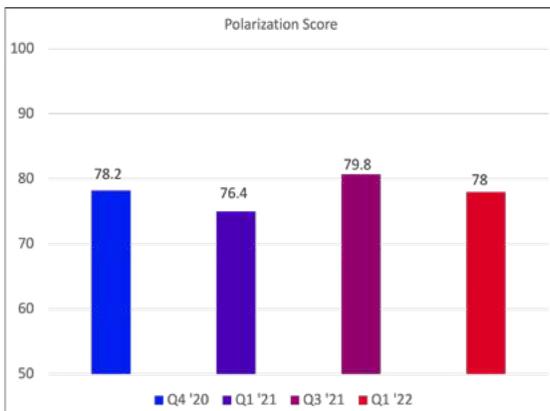
### Implications

As we have seen in Florida, the Left is concerned about new perceived attacks on the LGBTQ+ community that it believes is designed to help the Right gain attention and political support from its base, which has put companies, such as Disney, on the hot seat. Many organizations have a history of supporting LGBTQ+ policies and employees, but few have openly opposed

specific legislation like the “Don’t Say Gay” law. After seeing what happened to Disney, many may prefer not to comment. But as more right-leaning states pursue the Florida strategy, it will become harder for companies with a significant LGBTQ+ employee or customer base to sit on the sidelines with a general statement of support. They should prepare to join the fray over the actual legislation.

# COVID-19 Vaccines

Over the past year, COVID-19 vaccines' polarization score increased as both Left and Right debated the vaccine's efficacy amid the rapid spread of the Delta and Omicron variants, and growing concerns about the rollout of vaccine mandates in the country.



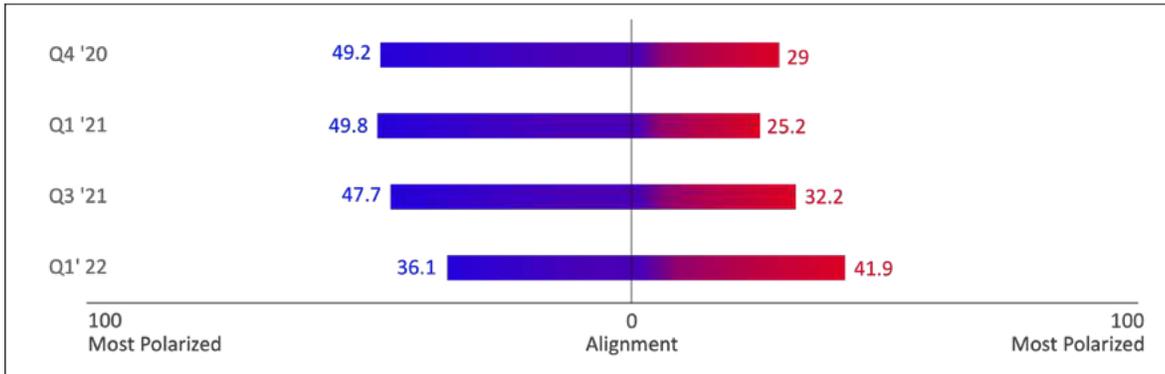
## Key Drivers of Polarization

Despite a drop in cases, this issue was among the most widely discussed topics in Q1 '22 after Ukraine. While once influenced by shares from left-leaning sources, in Q1 2022 polarization of COVID-19 vaccines was skewed by engagement with mid- and low-reliable, right-leaning sources. Some of the most widely shared right-leaning headlines criticized the Biden administration and the CDC for their vaccine data collection practices, with articles from The Daily Mail ([CDC is refusing to publish data it has collected on booster effectiveness](#) [8.3K shares]) and The Blaze ([Exclusive: The federal government paid hundreds of media companies to advertise the COVID-19 vaccines](#) [18.3K shares]).

Other widely shared right-leaning articles raised concerns about the vaccines' side effects, with articles from The Gateway Pundit ([Triple Vaccinated Swiss Olympic Athlete Fabienne Schlumpf Diagnosed with Myocarditis – May Never be Able to Compete Again](#) [8.3K shares]) and The Daily Mail ([Christian Eriksen and Sergio Aguero's on-field heart problems 'have fueled suspicion of Covid vaccines in Premier League players'](#) [6.8K shares]).

Reliable, left-leaning sources also generated a significant amount of engagement around vaccines' safety and their potential side effects. Among the most widely shared stories were Reuters ([Sweden decides against recommending COVID vaccines for kids aged 5-11](#) [56K shares]) and Bloomberg ([Frequent Boosters Spur Warning on Immune Response](#) [52.4K shares]).

### Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



While there continues to be significant engagement with high reliable, left-leaning sources, polarization of COVID-19 vaccines is being driven by the Right as shares of mid- and low-reliable, right-leaning sources increase.

### Implications

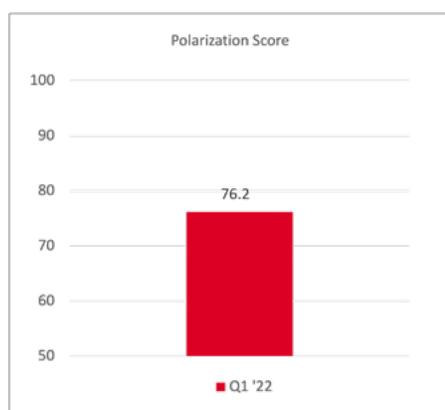
While cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. have decreased and the regulations around it have lessened, the issue is still highly polarizing. In many countries around the world, the virus continues to disrupt business and society. In the U.S., the Supreme Court blocked Biden’s vaccination-or-testing mandate for large business in January. Even without a mandate, corporations have the right – and the responsibility – to ensure the safety of their employees. Despite personal disagreement about getting vaccinated, communicating health policy is not a matter of opinion. Companies should feel free

to share their views on this topic, especially as more employees return to the workplace.

It appears that the philosophical rift between those who were vaccinated and those who were not will continue long after the virus is gone. The same tension will exist in individual decisions about whether to wear a mask. When companies articulate their policies, they should take a balanced approach, knowing that these two politically charged topics still evoke a lot of emotion.

# Jan. 6th Capitol Attack

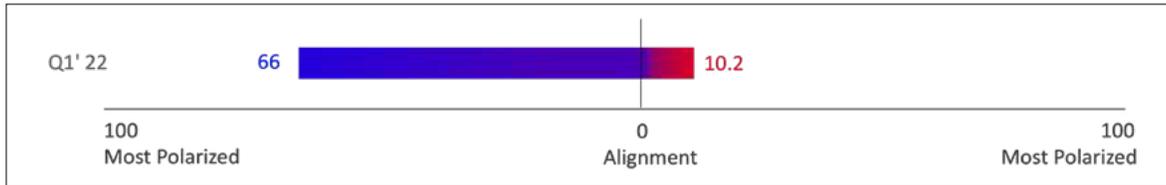
Disagreement over the Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol insurgency joined the list of the most polarizing topics in Q1 '22 as Congress investigated former President Trump and his allies for their roles in the attack.



## Key Drivers of Polarization

Within the Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol insurgency discussion, shares of mid- and high-reliable, left-leaning sources accounted for most of the engagement in Q1 '22. Some of the most widely shared headlines focused on reporting the evolution of the Jan. 6th investigation – specifically as it relates to former President Trump and his administration – and the GOP’s declaration of the events as a “political discourse.” This included stories from The New York Times ([G.O.P. Declares Jan. 6 Attack ‘Legitimate Political Discourse’](#) [52.4K shares]), CNN ([First on CNN: January 6 committee has text messages between Ginni Thomas and Mark Meadows](#) [18.1K shares]) and The Washington Post ([Some records sent to Jan. 6 committee were torn up, taped back together — mirroring a Trump habit](#) [9.5K shares]).

### Political Skew (Unilateral polarization)



The Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Attack became one of the most polarizing issues in the last three months, largely driven by left-leaning sources.

### Implications

The Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> insurgency was the ultimate manifestation of polarization, driven by the Right’s belief that the results of the presidential election were fraudulent. In its aftermath, the Democratic-led congressional investigation of those who were allegedly involved in the attack, including former President Trump and some of his closest allies, continues the controversy.

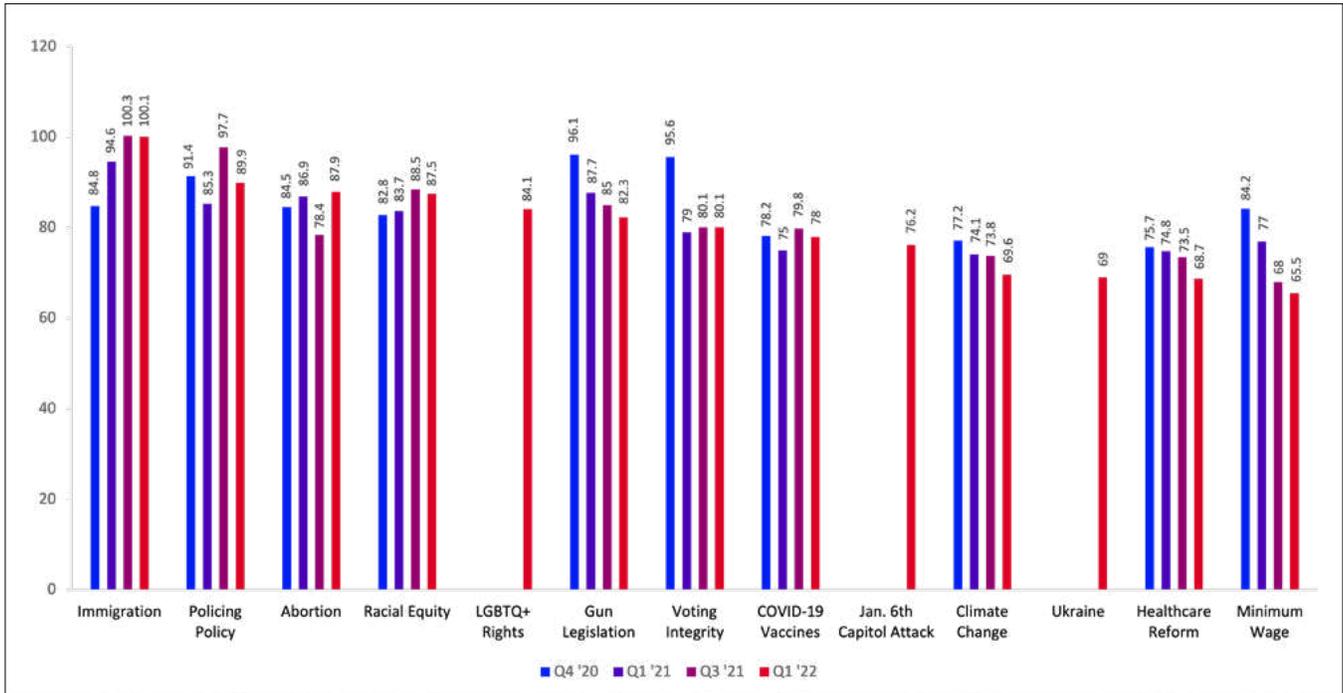
This unprecedented event forced companies to reassess their political lobbying and spending and led some business leaders to announce they would stop

or pause funding to Congress members who tried to discredit the election. Companies should continue to be transparent about their political activity and thoughtful about their contributions. Their politics should reflect and reinforce their values.

As long as the current investigation continues and its new developments are widely covered by the media, January 6<sup>th</sup> will remain a symbol of polarization in America and a difficult subject to address without furthering the divide.

# Sustaining Issues

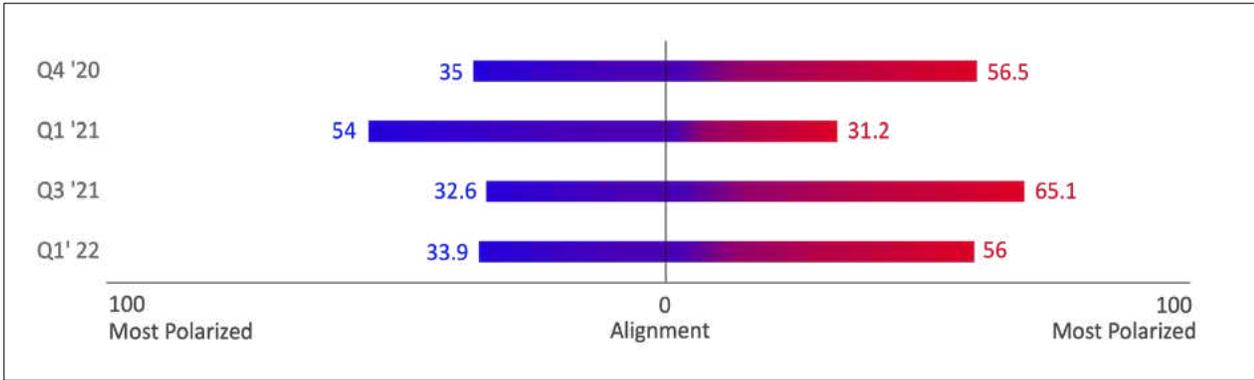
### Biannual PI Issues



Tracking data over the past 18 months demonstrates how engagement with an issue evolves over time. These dynamics are the result of unexpected events, purposeful political strategies and changing public opinion. The good news is that topics that were once highly controversial, such as the legalization of marijuana and same-sex marriage, have become accepted elements of the American culture, even if Congress was unable to agree. The bad news is there always seems to be another issue around the corner, which like an ice cube in boiling water, is instantly transformed when dropped into our over-heated national dialogue. Polarization is not the result of disagreement, but the cause of it.

# Policing Policy

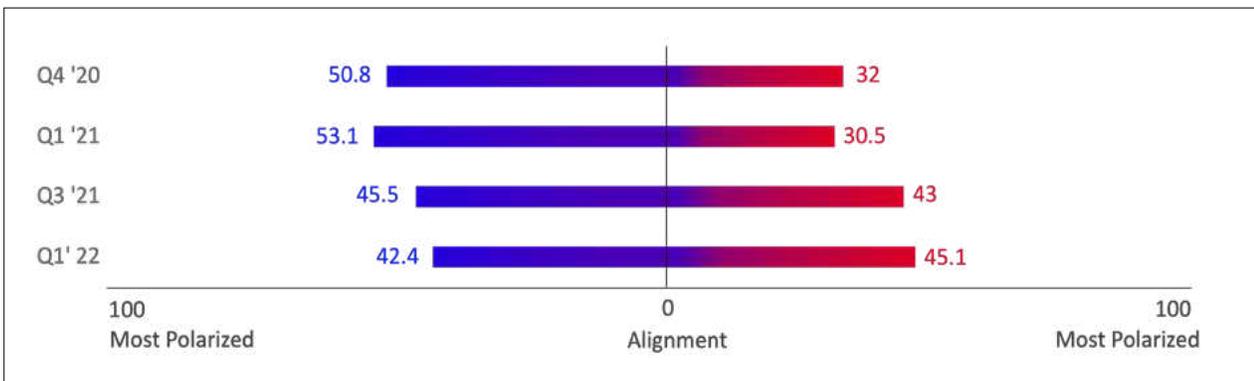
## Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



Policing policy continues to be the second most polarizing issue on our list, being primarily driven by high engagement levels with mid-reliable, right-leaning sources. Widely shared headlines were mostly focused on criticizing Democrats who supported the defunding of the police, but allegedly hired private security services using taxpayer dollars. However, policing policy’s polarization score decreased by 7.8 points in the last six months, going from 97.7 in Q3 ’21 to 89.9 in Q1 ’22. A single police incident can escalate this issue.

# Racial Equity

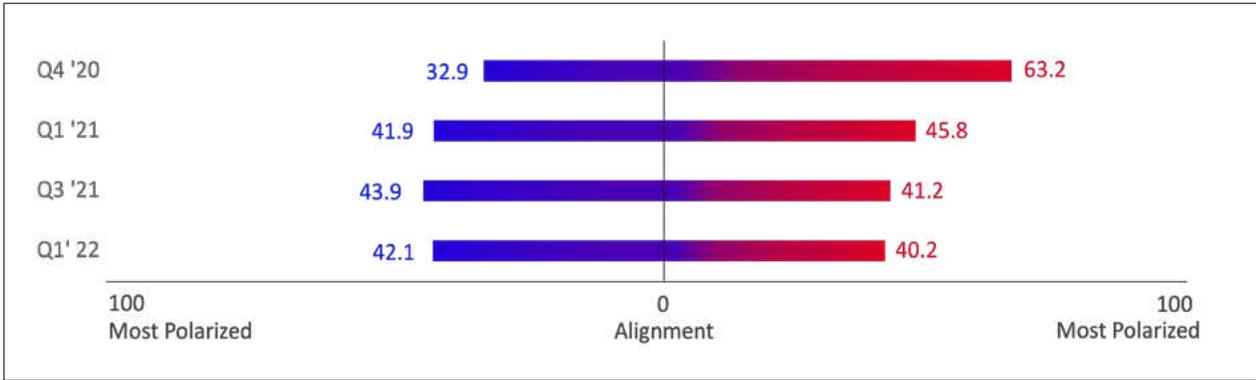
## Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



Racial equity was the fourth most polarizing issue in Q1 ’22 with a score of 87.5, being driven by engagement with mid- and high-reliable, left-leaning sources as well as mid-reliable, right-leaning sources. Widely shared headlines from left-leaning publications focused on the societal and financial cost of police misconduct as it relates to Black Americans, and highlighted discussions around Critical Race Theory education. Stories from right-leaning news outlets attacked Black Lives Matter leadership. Since the BLM protests of 2020, this has been an area of focus for many companies. They should continue to report their progress against the commitments they’ve made, because this is one issue where business is making a big difference.

# Gun Legislation

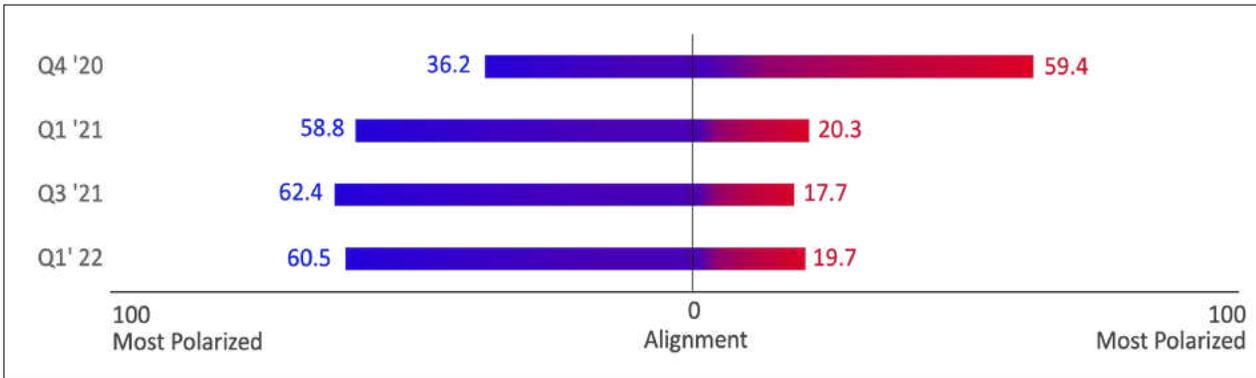
## Political Skew (Bilateral polarization)



Gun legislation’s polarization decreased by 2.7 points in the last six months, being driven by engagement with high-reliable, left-leaning sources as well as mid-reliable, right-leaning sources. Widely shared headlines from left-leaning publications focused on Biden’s support for stricter gun control measures. Right-leaning articles that received high engagement attempted to discredit gun control activists. It is inevitable that another shooting will turn up the volume of this continuing debate.

# Voting Integrity

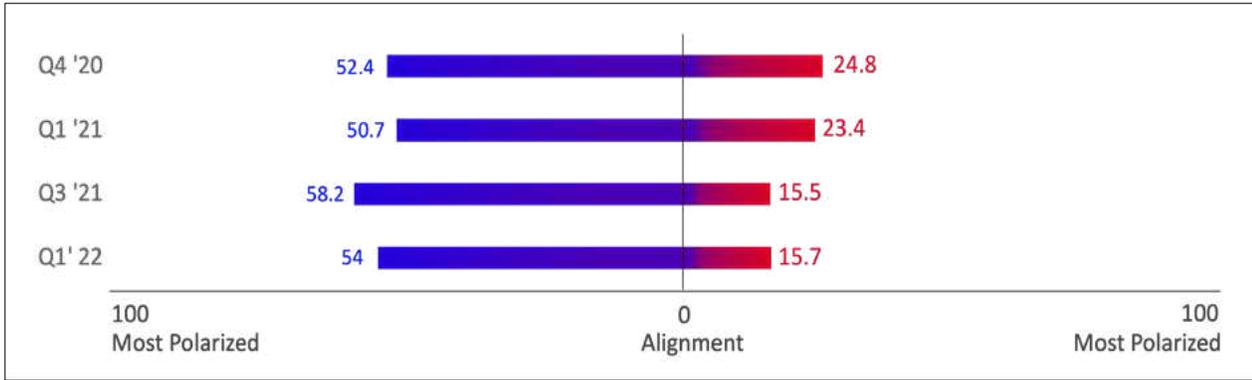
## Political Skew (Variable polarization)



Even though voting integrity was once influenced by shares from mid- and low-reliable, right-leaning sources in Q4 '20, this issue is now being primarily driven by the Left. Most engagement came from high- and mid-reliable, left-leaning sources, which focused on discussions about voting rights legislation in the U.S. Senate. Voting integrity polarization level (80.1 points) has not changed in the last six months. These numbers will likely escalate as we approach the midterm elections.

# Climate Change

## Political Skew (Unilateral polarization)



Polarization around climate change continued to decline – down by 4.2 points in the last six months, going from 73.8 in Q3 '21 to 69.6 in Q1 '22. More than half of all shares related to climate change derived from high-reliable, left-leaning sources. Widely shared left-leaning articles focused on discussing the connection between high gas prices, Trump, Putin and Saudi Arabia. This is an area where there is mainly upside for corporations who contribute to both the dialogue and the solution.