

Brands in the Age of Political Polarization

Oded Netzer

Based on research with Verena Schoenmueller and Florian Stahl

The Big Shift

- Political polarization extends beyond politics → shaping everyday consumption behavior
- Rise of “**brand-preference polarization.**”
- Brands are increasingly drawn into political conversations — whether they intend to be or not

The New York Times



Trump voter



Biden voter

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/10/27/upshot/biden-trump-poll-quiz.html>

Brand Politics

The New York Times *Fall Slightly After Sydney Sweeney Ad*

The second quarter ended nine days after the was released, leaving little time to see the full of the campaign.

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COMPANY OF THE YEAR

Patagonia's Unapologetically Political Strategy and the Massive Business It Has Built

Gone are the days of companies trying to stay neutral on hot-button issues. Consumers want corporations to take strong stands—and Patagonia is pioneering how to do it.

BY LINDSAY BLAKELY, MANAGING EDITOR, INC.COM @LINDSAYBLAKELY



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Big Brands Play Down Their Americanness Abroad

Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Procter & Gamble have all launched ad campaigns stressing their local ties in Europe this year

By Bertrand Benoit [Follow](#)

Sept. 13, 2025 5:30 am ET



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The New York Times

Behind the Backlash Against Bud Light

After Dylan Mulvaney, the transgender influencer, promoted the beer on Instagram, conservatives called for a boycott. The fallout grew to include the retailer Target and the country singer Garth Brooks.

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**BUD
LIGHT**

Why Brands Can't Ignore This

- **80%** of consumers perceive brands as political
- **60%** boycott or boycott based on political beliefs
- **71%** expect brands to take a political stance
- However, research shows:
 - Some boycotts fade quickly (e.g., Goya)
 - Others (e.g., Bud Light) create long-term damage

Edelman (2024), Liaukonyte et al. (2023, 2024)

The Brand Dilemma

- Engage politically → risk backlash
- Stay neutral → risk irrelevance
- Key challenge:
 - **alignment,**
 - **timing, and**
 - **audience fit**



Success Depends on Alignment

- Success depends on **alignment with your audience**
- Misalignment leads to backlash (e.g., Bud Light case)



- Bud Light: Core audience perceived misalignment → backlash



- Tesla: Brand perception shifted as Elon Musk shifted political position



Measure Alignment Continuously

- Surveys (perception + self-reported behavior) 
- Behavioral data (purchases + geography) 
- Donations (corporate & employee signals) 
- Social media insights (followers, engagement)  

Without measurement, brands risk misalignment and subsequent backlash



FOLLOWER
31,2 Mio.



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Folgen

Jojo
@Jedimaster_Jojo

I am one with the force; the force is with me

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M

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Tri-State Coalition

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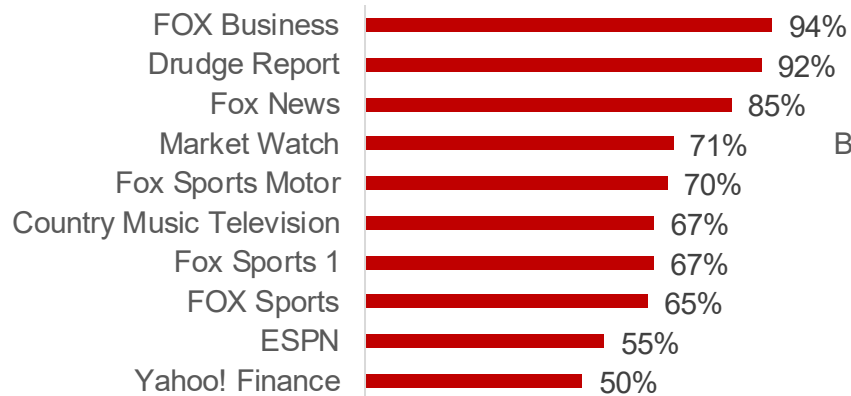
Folgen

Mosaic of Political Brand Affiliation

		 Democrats	 Republicans	
Car	Volvo			Tesla
Fashion	ModCloth			Ralph Lauren
Outdoor	Patagonia			Cabelas
Retail	Nordstrom	NORDSTROM		Sams Club
Home improvement	IKEA			Home Depot
Hotels	Standard Hotels			Seagate
Domestic Airlines	Alaska Airlines			Southwest Airlines
Foreign Airlines	Air Canada			Singapore Airlines
Ride Sharing	Lyft			Uber
Fast Food	Denny's			Chick-fil-A
Beer	Pyramid Brew			Busch Beer
Colas	Pepsi			Dr Pepper
Non Profit Organizations	Planned Parenthood			NRA

Most Common Media Outlets

GOP Media

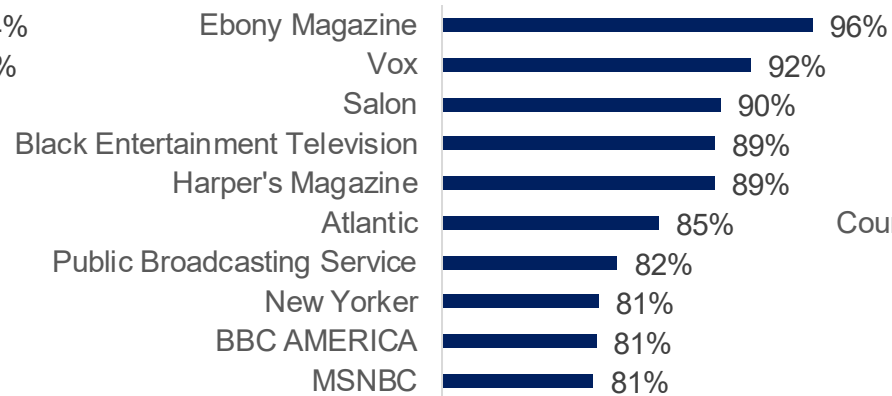


DRUDGE REPORT

FOX BUSINESS



DEM Media

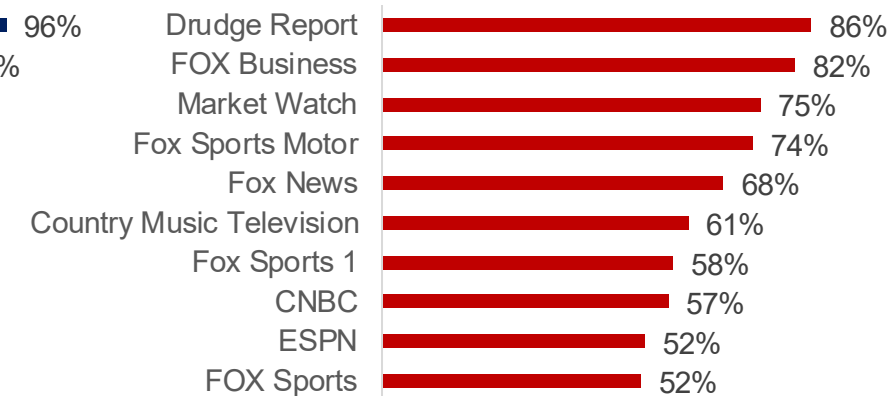


EBONY



SALON

Donald Trump Media



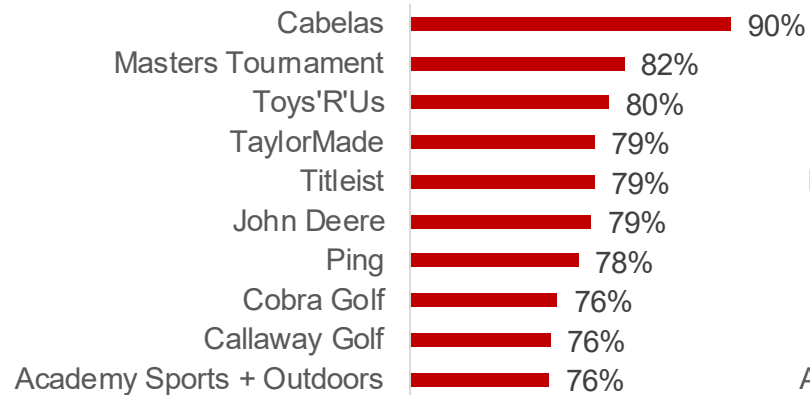
DRUDGE REPORT

MarketWatch

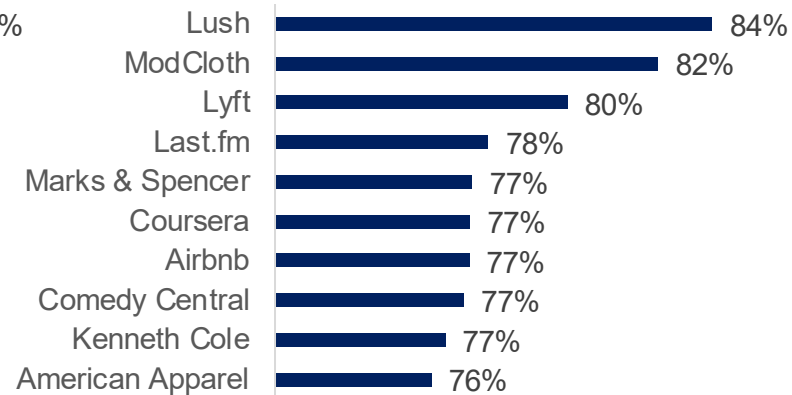
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Most Common Commercial Brands

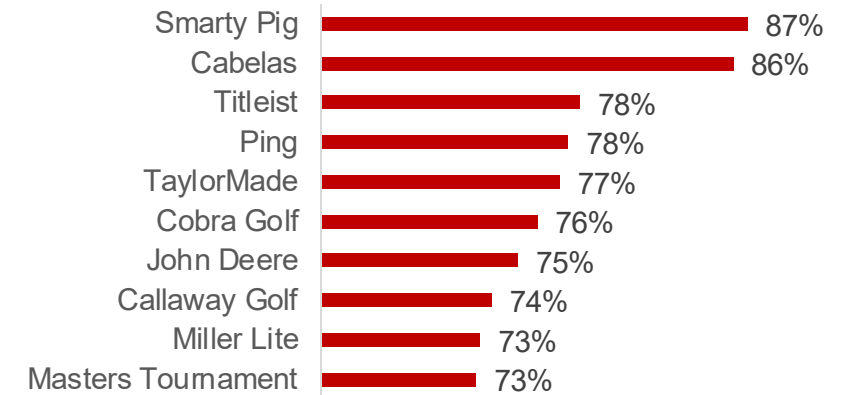
GOP Brands



DEM Brands

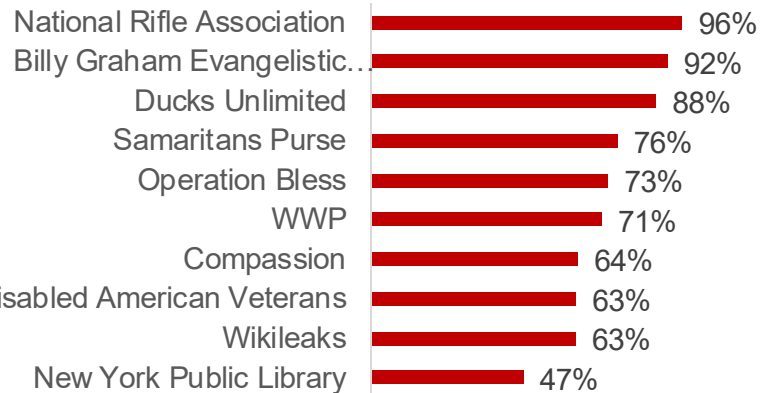


Donald Trump Brands

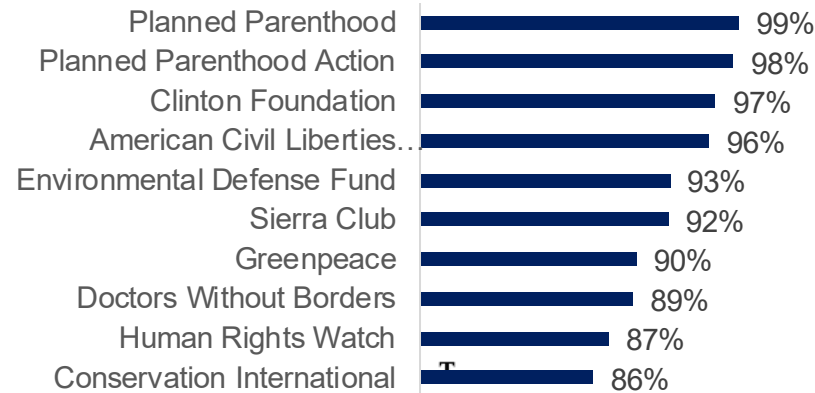


Most Common NPOs

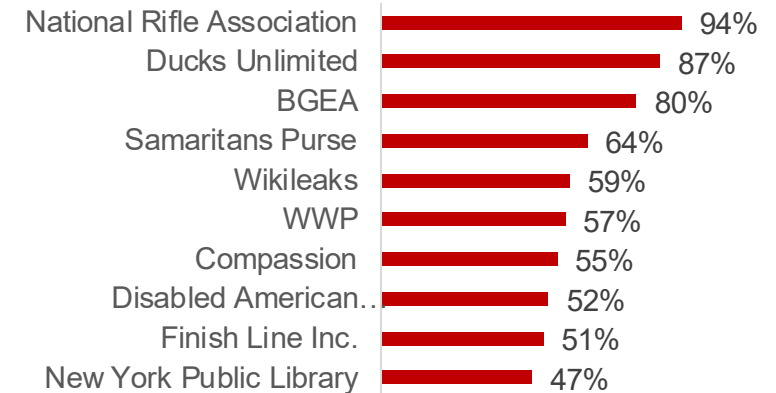
GOP NPOs



DEM NPOs



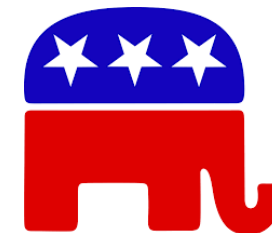
Donald Trump NPOs



Top Brands Personality Attributes



Democrat Distinctive Traits (vs Republicans)



Republican Distinctive Traits (vs Democrats)

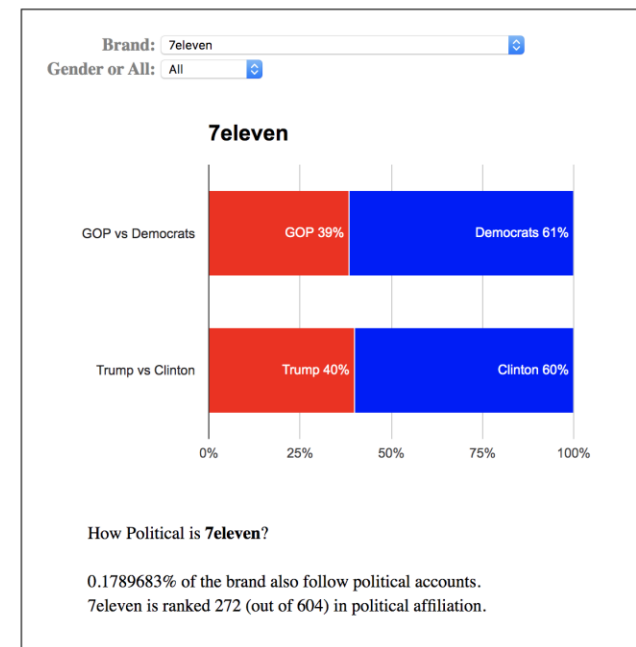
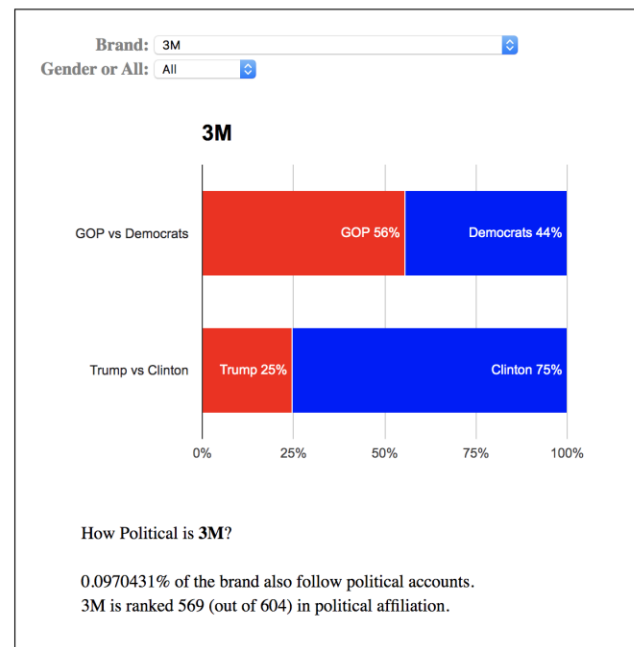


*The word clouds are based on attributes with a $p < 0.05$ difference of average values between Democratic and Republican brands

How Democratic and Republican Are Your Brands?

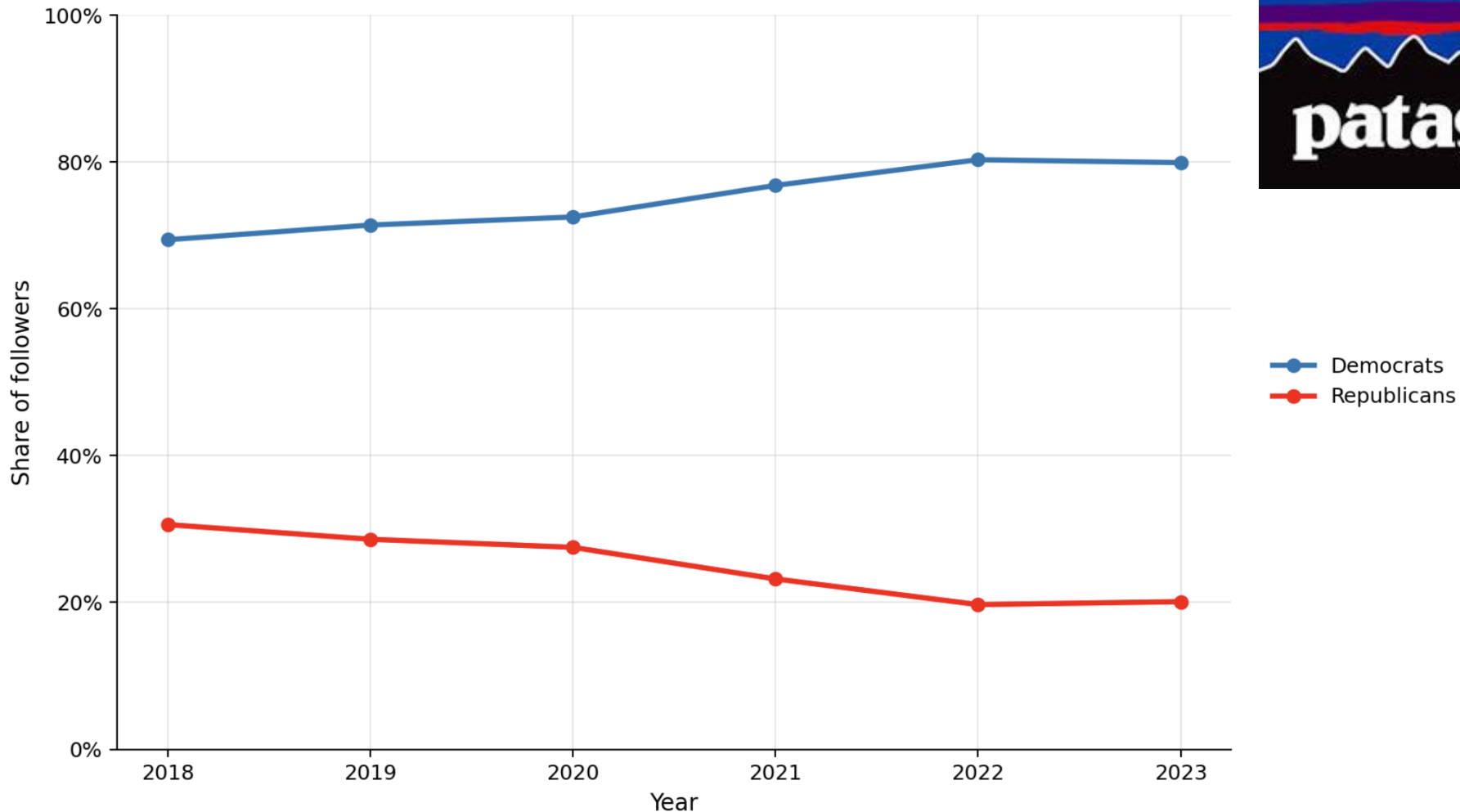
<http://www.social-listening.org/>

☐ Single brand ☒ Compare brands



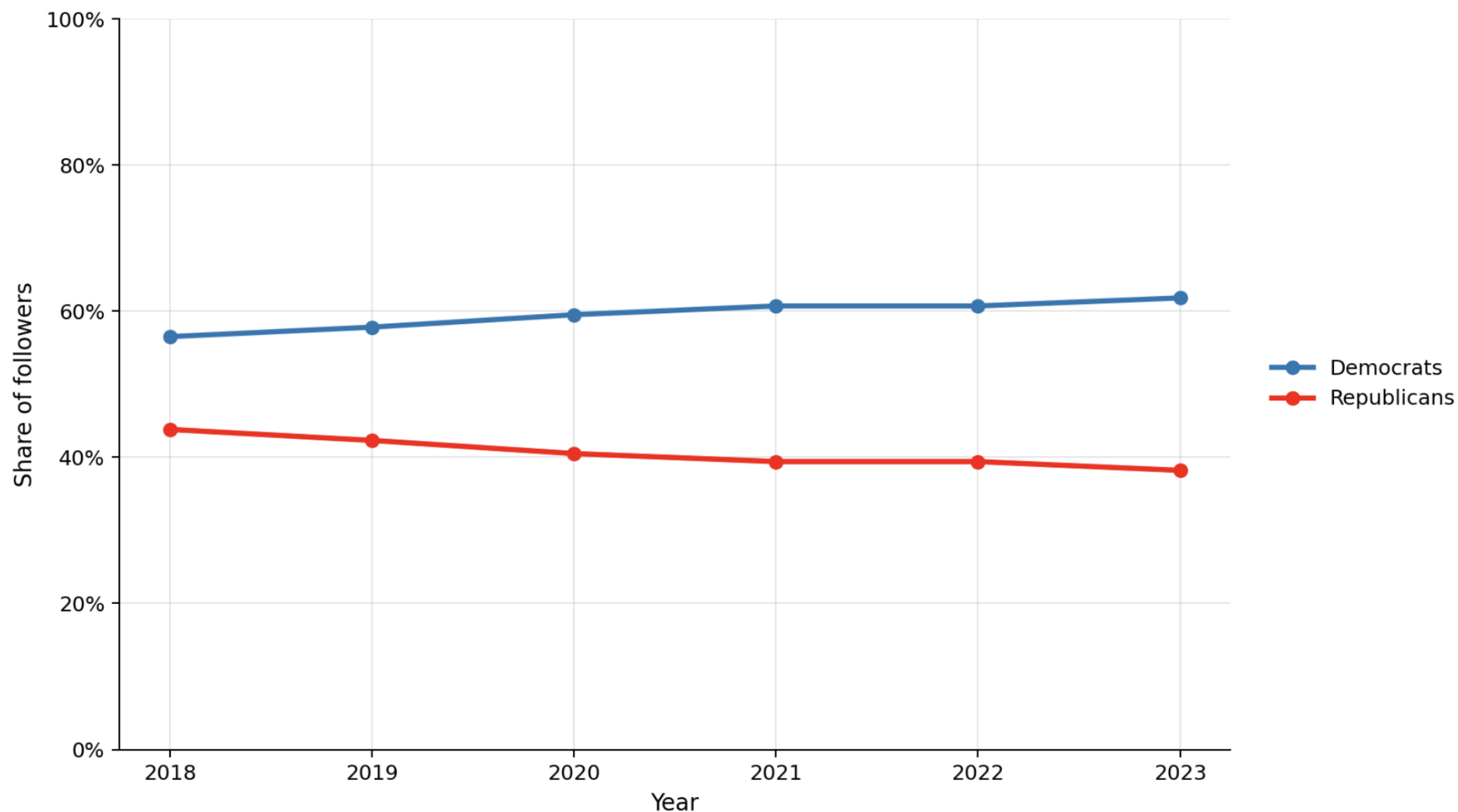
Brand Polarization Over Time

Patagonia: Share of Followers by Party, 2018-2023



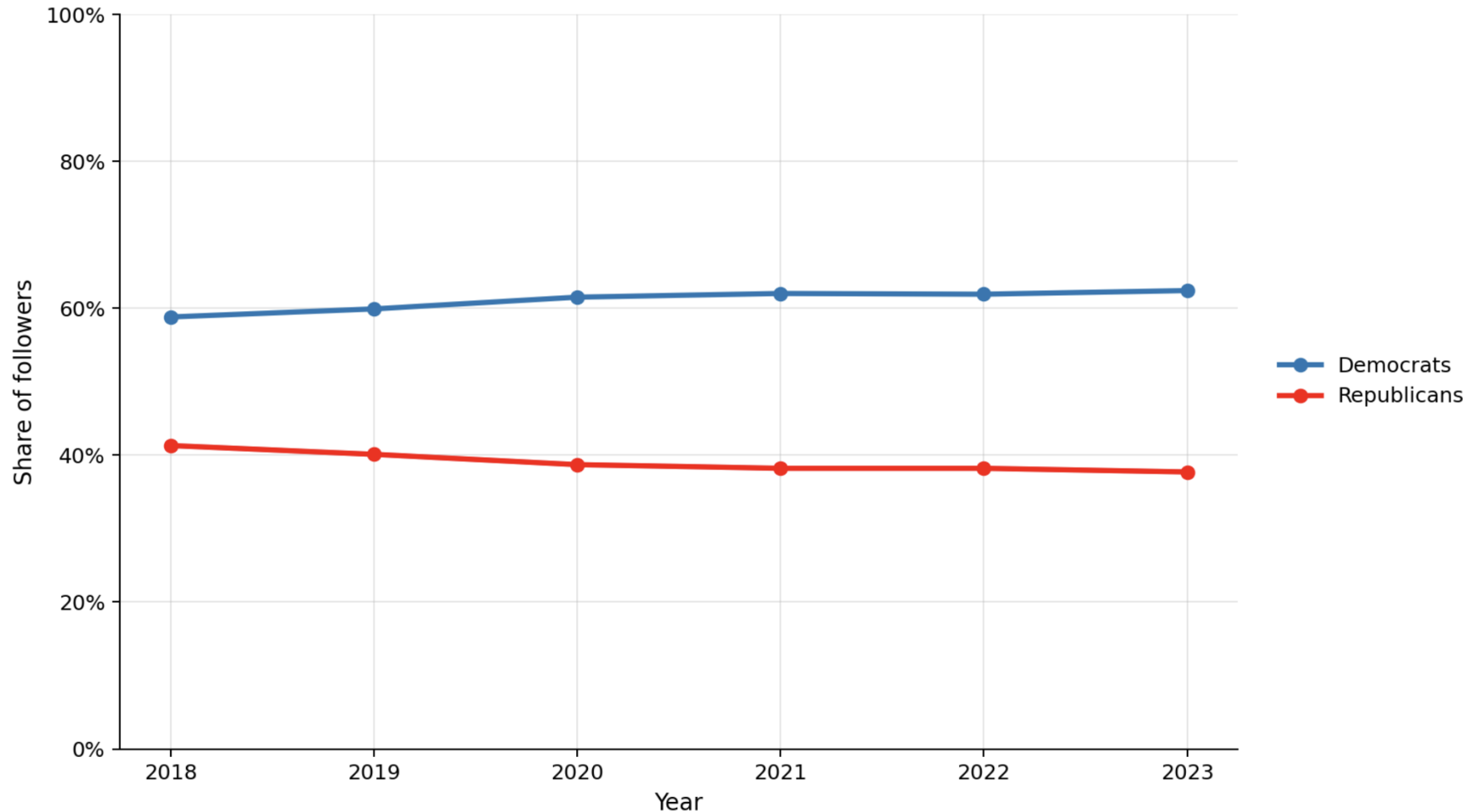
Brand Polarization Over Time

Panera Bread: Share of Followers by Party, 2018-2023



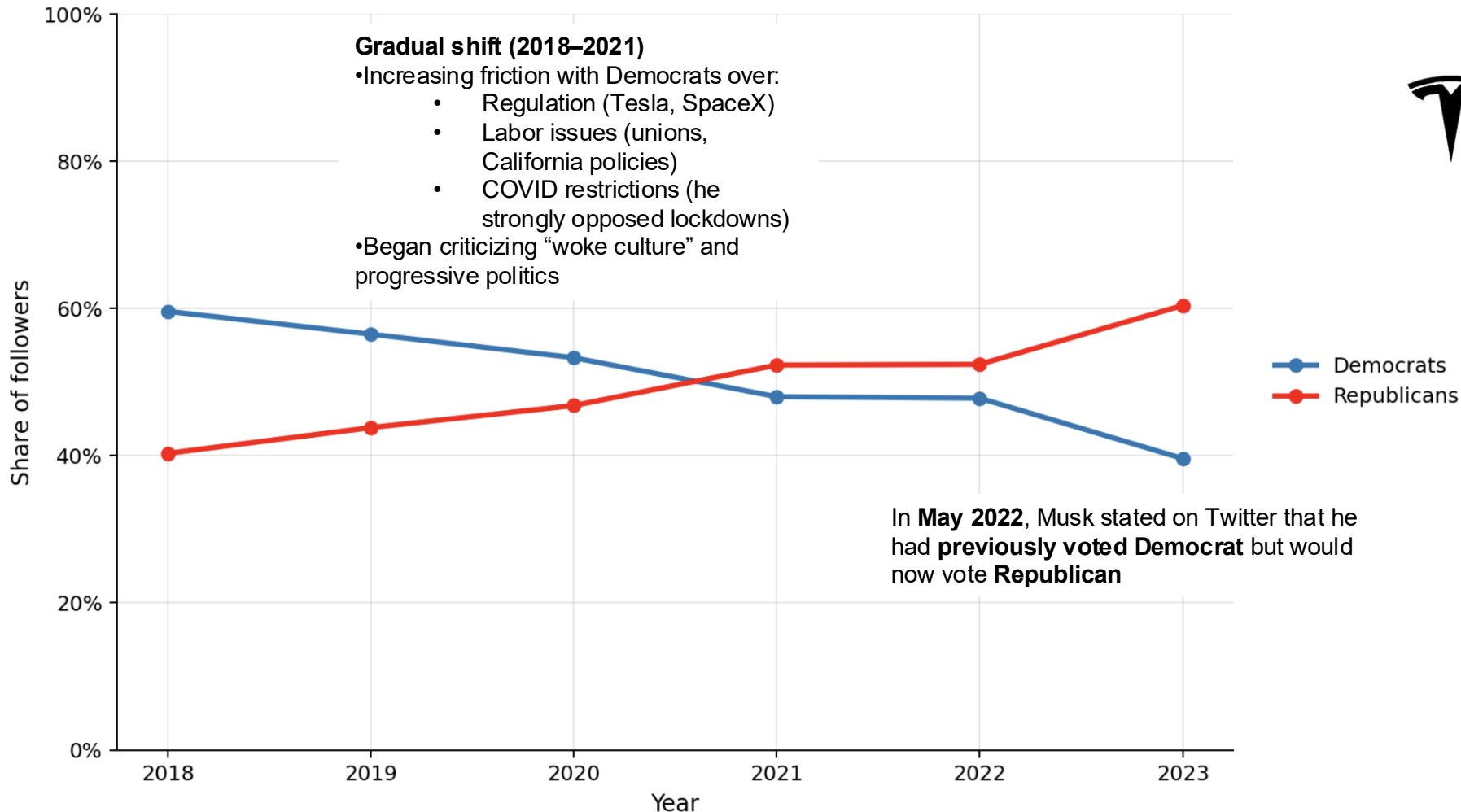
Brand Polarization Over Time

Starbucks: Share of Followers by Party, 2018-2023



Brand Polarization Over Time

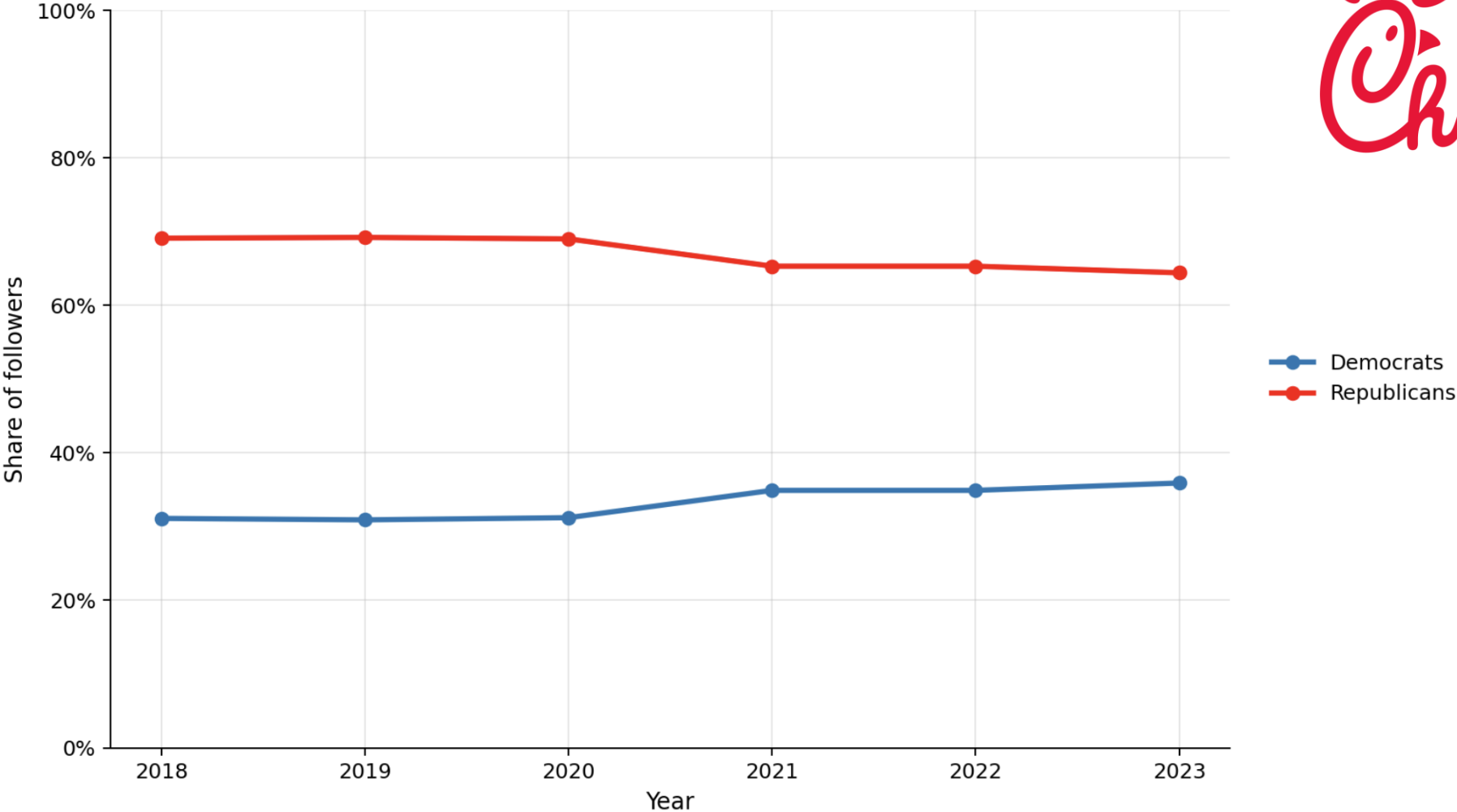
Tesla: Share of Followers by Party, 2018-2023



Brand Polarization Over Time



Chick-fil-A: Share of Followers by Party, 2018-2023



Key Takeaway for Brands

- Political identity is now central to consumer behavior
- Brands need to know and track their (customers') political affiliation
- Taking a stance is not always a choice – brands might get involved even if they don't actively do anything

Key Takeaway for Brands

- Thus, it is not a choice whether to participate but how:
 - Understand audience deeply
 - Stay consistent and align authentically
 - Build “brand echo chambers” (loyal communities)
 - Prepare for backlash (crisis plans)

What Differentiates Winning Brands

- Success depends on:
 - **Context** (political environment)
 - **Audience** (political affiliation of core consumers)
- This can be **tracked and managed**:
 - Monitor political affiliation in real time
 - Measure audience alignment with brand actions
 - Adjust strategy accordingly (*e.g., Chick-fil-A*)

In a polarized world, success depends not on taking a stance — but on taking the right stance for your audience.

Thank You

**BRANDS &
POLITICAL POLARIZATION**

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

