

EVENT TITLE: Fireside Chat on Public Policy and Current Events

EVENT DATE: 7/9/2025

EVENT TIME: 4:30 PM ET

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The NACD New England Chapter convened a timely and relevant fireside chat addressing how company boards should approach public policy and current events in today's increasingly polarized environment. The discussion focused on the implications of regulatory complexity, social and political activism, stakeholder pressures, and evolving expectations for corporate voice and positioning.

In this candid and instructive session, board members were encouraged to reconsider how they engage in issues ranging from geopolitical instability and ESG disclosures to DEI backlash and multijurisdictional regulatory conflicts. The conversation highlighted the mounting tension between staying true to corporate values and navigating political and social landmines that can carry real business and reputational risks.

One of the key themes throughout the conversation was the fundamental shift in expectations around corporate voice. Five years ago, staying silent on hot-button societal issues was often the default. Today, that silence can be interpreted as complicity or weakness. However, speaking out carries its own risks—including backlash from stakeholders, regulators, and politically opposed constituencies. Boards were urged to move beyond a binary “speak or stay silent” framework and instead consider a calibrated, values-driven, and business-specific approach to public engagement.

Real-world case studies brought the risks of unstructured public engagement into sharp relief. These stories revealed how boards must be informed and engaged in overseeing corporate affiliations, third-party advocacy, and voice-related risk exposures.

The discussion emphasized that boardroom conversations about corporate voice and policy engagement should be routine, not reactive. Companies need clear frameworks to assess whether and how to take a position on a public issue. One suggested approach was a positioning “yardstick” that evaluates factors such as business relevance, alignment with employee and customer values, potential for reputational risk, and whether the company can meaningfully influence the debate.

The conversation also addressed the role of surrogates—industry associations, influencers, or lobbying firms—who may act as public-facing extensions of the company’s voice. While using third parties can offer a buffer, it also requires rigorous due diligence. Boards should ask who speaks on behalf of the company and whether those surrogates are consistent with the company’s values and risk appetite.

For global businesses, regulatory divergence across jurisdictions—especially among the U.S., EU, and China—complicates policy engagement. European regulations on ESG, AI, and DEI are moving in different directions than U.S. policies, particularly under the influence of recent political shifts and executive orders. As an example, while DEI mandates in Europe require specific disclosures and representation goals, similar programs may be considered legally risky in certain U.S. states. Boards must navigate how to comply with regulations in each jurisdiction while maintaining consistency with corporate values.

Climate regulation and disclosure provided a particularly instructive area of contrast. While the U.S. has pulled back on federal climate disclosures, many large multinational companies are still required to comply with CSRD or other EU-led reporting standards. Board members questioned whether, in practical terms, U.S. deregulatory efforts make a difference when the global investor and customer base expects climate transparency and action. Many agreed that “future-proofing” corporate disclosures by adhering to international standards may be a more sustainable strategy.

Generational shifts in the workforce were also a point of discussion. Younger employees increasingly expect their companies to reflect their values, especially around DEI and sustainability. At the same time, internal disagreement on sensitive topics can cause board-level discord. Examples were shared where board members clashed with management or each other over whether and how to address topics such as reproductive rights or geopolitical conflicts. These moments illustrated the importance of clarifying a company's core values and setting clear parameters around how the company speaks publicly and internally.

Boards were advised to integrate public policy and stakeholder engagement into regular governance structures. This includes assigning responsibility to specific committees, including directors with public policy expertise, and ensuring public affairs staff regularly brief the board. Companies were also encouraged to distinguish between formal positions, informal points of view, and internal-only talking points—each of which can serve a purpose depending on the audience and risk level.

Finally, boards were reminded that time and attention are finite resources. Not all issues or stakeholders deserve equal weight. Directors should assess stakeholder influence and alignment, and prioritize engagement efforts accordingly. One recommended tool was a matrix mapping stakeholder influence against alignment, enabling boards to focus their attention on persuadable, high-impact actors and avoid over-indexing on fringe voices.

Throughout the conversation, the tone was pragmatic and grounded in lessons learned. Boards face a new operating environment where societal expectations, regulatory demands, and stakeholder activism converge in complex ways. Clear governance structures, thoughtful communication strategies, and values-driven leadership are essential to navigating the challenges ahead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Elevate Board Engagement on Public Policy:** Boards should regularly and systematically address political engagement, lobbying practices, and public positioning—not just in moments of crisis.
- **Adopt a Structured Voice Framework:** Use tools like a “positioning yardstick” to guide decisions about when and how to speak out, based on business relevance, stakeholder impact, and reputational risk.
- **Know Your Surrogates:** Third-party groups can extend the corporate voice but carry risk; due diligence and ongoing monitoring are essential.
- **Prepare for Regulatory Divergence:** U.S., EU, and China are taking vastly different paths on climate, AI, and DEI. Boards must prepare for compliance conflicts and consider global disclosure alignment.
- **Balance Values and Risk:** Speaking out should be grounded in core corporate values and aligned with mission and business model, while understanding generational shifts and managing potential backlash.

MODERATOR:

Jaime Mahoney, CEO, JDE USA

SPEAKER:

Dan Konigsburg, KPMG Global Head of Public Affairs

PROGRAM PARTNER:

