

Opinion: Big corporations are good for social progress

By Andrés Martínez

Ever since the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010, it's been fashionable to deplore (with full-on *How dare they?* indignation) the power of big business in our political process. But judging from recent events, maybe we would all benefit if corporations wielded more political power, not less.

Seriously. Think about the recent exhilarating triumphs for once-marginalized minorities: the U.S. Supreme Court legalizing gay marriage across the land; South Carolina hastening to lower the Confederate flag of sedition and racism; a Republican presidential candidate being ostracized for bashing Latino immigrants. One thread connecting these stories is the presence of corporate America taking a stand against the bullying and discrimination of minorities.

In the landmark marriage case, a Who's Who list of blue-chip companies from Procter & Gamble to Goldman Sachs signed onto legal briefs urging the justices to strike down all bans on gay marriage. They argued that such bans conflict with their own anti-discrimination and diversity policies, and that you can't have a country (and cohesive marketplace) where fundamental rights vary from state to state.

Even more impressively, big business mobilized in a number of states over the past two years to defeat or roll back proposed "religious freedom" laws seen as disingenuous efforts to legitimize the discrimination of gays. No single company has been more identified with challenging such laws than Wal-Mart, which singlehandedly defeated a proposed measure in its home state of Arkansas.

Business interests also helped turned the tide against the Confederacy. The *New York Times* story on South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley's call for the removal of the Confederate flag credited "intensifying pressure from South Carolina business leaders to remove a controversial vestige of the state's past" as one factor leading to the governor's reversal of her previous position.

At the national level, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business groups have led the charge for sensible immigration reform – though this effort can't yet be checked off as a victory. If only the business lobby had as much power as we often assume it does. In the meantime, it was gratifying for Latino activists aligned with business on immigration to watch Donald Trump be fired by corporate partners like Macy's, Comcast, Univision, and Disney over his hateful comments about Mexicans. Vicious speech denigrating immigrants may be acceptable in certain political circles, but not in the corporate realm.

Some politicians eager to cater to local prejudices, and capitalize on them, are chafing at the activism of corporations. This spring, while pushing for his own religious freedom law, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal whined in a *New York Times* op-ed: "As the fight for religious liberty moves to Louisiana, I have a clear message for any corporation that contemplates bullying our state: Save your breath." Jindal's choice of the verb "bullying" is deliciously hypocritical, because it was business rising up to oppose the bullying of people by small-minded politicians.

This is why I differ from my friends and colleagues in journalism and academia who hold to a reflexively anti-corporate worldview. They see large, distant corporations as the source of much bullying. I see the worst forms of bullying arising closer to home: at the hands of local or state governments, or dominant business interests rooted in one place.

No, there isn't anything inherently virtuous about business leaders. As cynics are quick to note, the political fights I've described here are all about business wanting what's best for business. Companies need to avoid offending customers and they need to be seen as inclusive and diverse employers to potential hires. But big business tends to be more enlightened than smaller businesses rooted in only one place, because the broader your perspective, the bigger your market, the less tolerant you can afford to be of idiosyncratic regional prejudices. It's no accident that commerce across state lines has always been one of the great motors of progress in this country, and not just economic progress.

That is also why trade agreements that seek to harmonize norms across borders are as beneficial to individuals as they are to big multinationals. The prospect of joining the European Union (and attracting investment by large foreign companies) forced governments across Eastern Europe to protect the rights of long-oppressed minorities. As much as Elizabeth Warren and her protectionist allies have attacked President Obama's proposed trade deal with Asia as a sop to big business, the agreement will help strengthen civil society and individual rights in these countries for precisely the reasons these critics attack it – by standardizing norms of behavior across jurisdictions.

Bigotry, and the disregard of people's rights and dignity that comes with it, doesn't travel well. And it's bad for business.

Andrés Martínez writes the Trade Winds column for Zócalo Public Square, where he is editorial director. He is also professor at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University.