

# HR Insights

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## Keeping Political Discussion Civil at Work

Political discussion has and will continue to be a reality in many work environments. Work can already be a stressful place for many, with political discussion adding an additional stressor for employees—and in many cases, an additional concern for employers. While disagreement in and of itself isn't always a detriment to all workplaces, political discussion can negatively affect the work environment for many employees.

This article addresses the impact that political discussion has in the workplace and steps that employers can consider to help keep political discussion civil.

### The Presence and Impact of Political Discussion in the Workplace

In a poll conducted in 2019 from the Society for Human Resource Management, 56% of employees reported that political discussion had become more common in the preceding four years. The same poll found that, while two-thirds of employees felt their organization was inclusive to different political perspectives, one-third of employees felt their organization was not.

In many cases, political discussion is a natural element of a work environment, and doesn't directly impact all employees in a negative way. However, that isn't always the case. In an American Psychological Association survey conducted in 2019, they found that 1 of every 4 employees reports being negatively impacted by political discussion in the workplace. The survey found that this impact can lead to:

- Stress
- Negativity
- Low productivity
- Poor work quality

Political discussion presents a challenge both for HR professionals and leaders within an organization. How do you respect employees' ability to discuss politics with their peers, while keeping these discussions civil?

Outright banning of political discussion can infringe upon employees' rights. It is nearly impossible to achieve a workplace devoid of political discussion, and overreaching or micromanaging measures can be even worse than allowing political discussions in the first place. But employers can acknowledge that these discussions often do take place, and thoughtfully take steps to focus on making sure these discussions don't negatively impact their workplace. There isn't an easy answer for how to keep political discussion civil, but employers can strive to foster an environment built on respect and trust.

### Tips for Employers

Employers can consider proactive and thoughtful steps to address expectations, encourage respect and create an environment that remains civil. These considerations include:

- **Address expectations**—Employers can focus on clarifying what expectations are and how employees can engage civilly. Employers can also clarify what their policies are for political discussion.
- **Focus on behaviors, not beliefs**—Focus on what behaviors are appropriate—rather than what employees should believe or think. Employers should clearly outline what types of behaviors are not welcome, while avoiding providing direct or indirect guidance on how an employee should feel about political issues.
- **Encourage respect**—The reality is that not all employees will agree on every topic—whether work-related, personal or political. Employers should focus on encouraging employees to respect each other and their thoughts—even if they disagree.
- **Lead by example**—Should leaders endorse specific political parties or political candidates—or behave heavily partisan—it may have an impact on the norms of the workplace culture. Employees who feel differently may not feel comfortable speaking up. To that end, these same employees may even feel that their personal views could hold back their careers in the workplace. If leaders showcase desired behaviors, that can help set the expected behaviors within a company culture.
- **Hold training sessions**—Training sessions can focus on showing respect to co-workers and building trust—even if employees don't always see eye-to-eye. Design training that makes employees aware of how their actions might impact others and offers strategies for politely conversing with their co-workers.
- **Provide resources to employees**—Political topics are often personal, and the current political environment can cause stress for many employees. Ensure that employees are aware of available resources, such as an employee assistance program (EAP), any flexible work offerings and workplace wellness programs.

Some laws protect particular speech and forms of expression for employees in the workplace, such as discussion of unionization. This complexity makes it difficult to ban political dialogue altogether. As well, some states and cities have specific laws. Employers should be aware that laws related to political expression vary by locality, and before implementing or changing workplace policies, employers should seek legal advice from local legal counsel.

### Addressing Political Discussion

Political discussion is a complex topic that isn't always easy to address, but employers can take proactive steps to help facilitate a respectful environment that encourages civil discussion. For additional resources, contact American Society of Employers.