

Contentious Conversations: Talking Politics at Work

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(download The Political Risk issue of *Risk Management Essentials*, [here](#).)

Is civil discourse creating a toxic environment in your workplace? According to the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) [Politics at Work Survey](#), deepening divisiveness across party lines is a catalyst for workplace conflict. This often results in lower productivity, employee alienation, poor morale, increased stress for individual workers, and claims of employer discrimination, harassment, or retaliation. Nonprofit employers can do more to effectively manage disruptive political debates that increasingly occur at work.

SHRM's Spring 2020 edition of *HR Magazine* tackles contentious political conversations in the workplace in its article, "[Uncivil Discourse](#)." (Note: the full article is available to SHRM members.) Author Susan Milligan shares how toxic these talks have: "... gone far beyond setting rules about whether employees should be permitted to wear T-shirts or buttons supporting political candidates. It's much more personal, with people feeling threatened about not just their choice of candidate but their very value systems."



Take the following steps to maintain an inclusive work environment while managing the risks of politically driven discord.

1. Accept that politically charged conversations will happen at work.

Instead of censoring employees or trying to prevent these disagreements, focus on fostering peaceful, productive dialogue while preventing escalation and negative outcomes.

2. Understand state and local laws that govern the political activity of your workers.

[Explore some of the laws](#) that protect employees based on their political affiliations, expressions, and other activities. Some jurisdictions prohibit employers from retaliating against employees for engaging in political activities; others prohibit discrimination against employees for election-related speech or party affiliation. Multi-state employers need to craft custom policies in order to satisfy the various laws that apply to them. Don't forget to account for one of the major exceptions to an employer's ability to restrict speech and expression at work: the [National Labor Relations Act](#) (NLRA), which protects an employee's ability to discuss wages, hours, and working conditions. For example, under the NLRA, an employee's workplace speech is likely protected when urging peers to vote for a candidate who supports higher wages or improvements to working conditions.

3. Ensure that employees know their rights.

Employees might misconstrue the protections they enjoy under the First Amendment. While the First Amendment prevents the government from restricting free speech, it does not protect individual expression of political views in private workplaces. In fact, the First Amendment does not protect *any* type of speech in a private workplace. Private employers are generally allowed to set rules about what speech is acceptable at work, and employers can fire at-will employees for any or no reason—potentially including an employee's political views—except a reason or basis specifically prohibited by federal, state or local law. Discrimination based on political activity is often lawful, unless it violates one of the federal, state or local laws that protects an employee's political speech or activity in the workplace (see #2 above).

4. Provide guidelines to employees for keeping political discourse appropriate and respectful.

Some experts recommend avoiding a discussion of politics during employee training, but others recognize the need to inform employees what constitutes workplace harassment versus political disagreement. Consider educating employees about how to avoid [blatantly hateful rhetoric](#) or political expressions that border on hostile or discriminatory speech. Share *why* this type of speech is unproductive and unacceptable at work, whether it borders on illegal discrimination, creates a toxic work environment, or cultivates a workplace culture of exclusion that stunts contribution, creativity and collaboration. Provide real-life examples for employees to learn from, preparing them to manage or avoid the most polarizing political issues, which have the highest potential of instigating disruptive conflict. Teach employees to recognize and shut down the types of political expression that could be interpreted as harassment or baiting. Also educate employees about the potential consequences of sharing political opinions online. Posting on personal social media accounts outside of work hours could still put an employee's reputation—and that of their organization—at risk in the eyes of a colleague or client. Share [these simple tips](#) to help your team navigate political small talk, and help individuals [weigh the consequences](#) of chiming in.

5. Encourage inclusion and diversity of thought.

Extreme partisanship leads many Americans to demonize one another based on political affiliations alone. Provide opportunities for team members to cooperate and learn about each other as colleagues rather than political opponents. Showcase individual team members for their contributions to your organization's mission, helping colleagues recognize each other as allies and as multidimensional—not just politically motivated—people. Every effort to inject empathy and mutual respect back into the workplace will have a positive effect on the outcomes of political discourse.

6. Cultivate civic engagement beyond party affiliations.

If your employees demonstrate a passion for politics or care for causes that shape their country, then engage them in specific civic pursuits appropriate for the workplace. Ask for volunteers to design non-partisan internal

communications about voter registration and upcoming elections. Provide volunteering opportunities that allow employees to serve causes they care about while cooperating with colleagues and building morale. Especially if employees are disappointed about restrictions of political speech or political paraphernalia in the workplace, offering alternative avenues for civic service will satisfy employee needs while keeping the peace at work.