

Talking Politics at Work: Election 2020, a Primer

You won't be able to prevent political discourse entirely, but here's how HR can help keep the peace during this election season.



Catherine Tansey | zenefits.com | Oct 06, 2020

You needn't have watched last week's debate to know the nation is divided. Party lines are drawn more firmly than ever. With the election fast approaching, it's up to HR to ensure the workplace — in-person, online, or hybrid — remains professional and free of conflict.

Yet the long-held belief that you shouldn't talk politics at work is not the given it once was. A recent Robert Half survey found that 53% of employees think it's OK to talk politics with colleagues, depending on the situation. And while the remote-work reality of many due to the pandemic means there are less opportunities for watercolor chat, working from home hasn't quieted political discussion "at work."

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Set the ground rules now

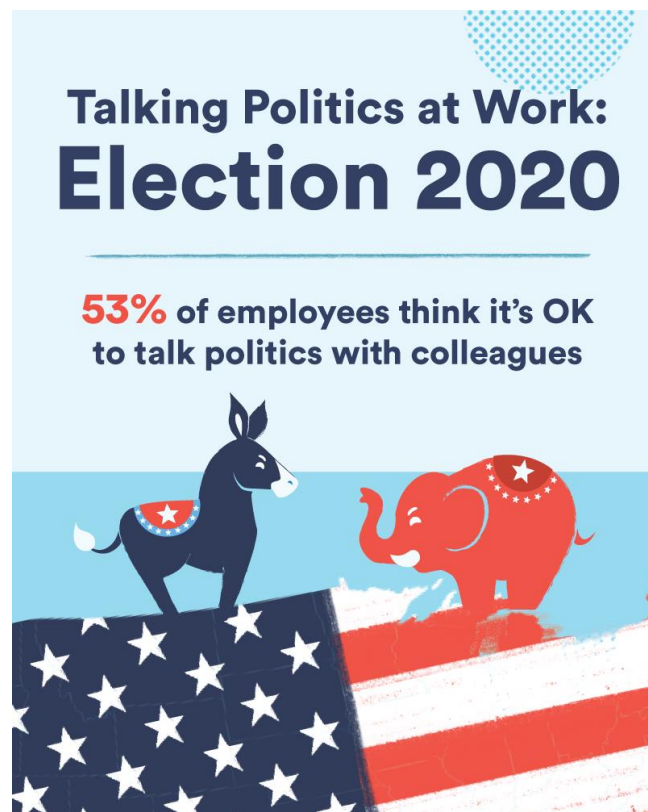
Barring all political talk isn't realistic. As humans, we need to discuss and process what's going on in the world around us, and we do that in communities — like the workplace. Rather than attempting to shut down every political discussion, HR leaders should ensure company policies reflect the organization's values and culture.

“During this particularly tense time, it’s worth developing a few guidelines for political conversations that help guide the tone, time, and place, and ensure mutual respect and compassion among colleagues,” said Desiree Pascual, Chief People Officer of on-demand mental health provider, Ginger.

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Policies on talking politics at work will differ from company to company, but business and employment lawyers are unequivocal in their call for every organization to have one. “It’s important for a company’s policies about discussing politics in the workplace to be in writing,” said employment attorney David Reischer.

Clear, concise, documented policies give the workplace a framework by which to function. “With the rules in place, the company can ensure that it’s HR department, managers, and supervisory employees are implementing and enforcing a uniform set of rules to avoid conflict arising from political speech,” said Ayesha Krishnan Hamilton, owner of business and employment law firm Hamilton Law Firm.



Smart points to include:

- Ban all physical expression of political views in the workplace — in person or online. This means no MAGA hats during Zoom calls or Biden/Harris 2020 thumbnail images as Slack profile pics.
- Limit time for chatter at the beginning of meetings for the remainder of the year. Political talk won’t cease once the election is over, although it will wane.
- Encourage employees to refrain from sharing their political affiliation and views. It’s easy to agree not to engage in political discussions in the workplace while still publicizing your own beliefs.

Encourage smart social media use

Employers already understand the necessity of a social media policy to prevent issues that may arise from inappropriate use of social media in the office. But in this hotly contested election year, consider reminding employees about smart social media use outside of the office, too.

Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and is free to share their thoughts on social media. Yet it's important for employees to understand that what they post can make people feel uncomfortable or create conflict with others, including their boss.

Encourage employees who are active social media users to enable security features that limit the sharing of their posts to friends and family — not co-workers. Conflict arising from a true desire to understand can be constructive but is rare. Rather than create an opportunity for antagonism, steer employees toward sharing with selective groups.

Train managers to interrupt and mitigate as needed

Managers have had to handle the many difficult conversations taking place this year surrounding the election: the pandemic, racial injustice, and more. Political discussions can quickly turn to conversations on gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion, which are protected and could cause workplace discrimination complaints — and offend valued co-workers.

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Provide training to managers on how to interrupt the conversation and refocus on workplace matters and productivity.

“When the discussion starts to cross a line, managers should change the topic and quickly reign it in,” said David Fitton, managing director and co-founder Excelsior Consulting, an HR consulting firm. “Then have a sidebar conversation with the individual(s) who went too far and remind them to keep conversations professional,” he added.

A refresher on taking control of the conversation

- Use the universal “please stop speaking” hand gesture while saying, “All right ...”
- Inform the employees they’ll have to agree to disagree
- Move on by changing the conversation

Refocus the conversation around emotional intelligence (EQ)

Now is the time to tap into emotional intelligence and empathy, says Bay Area Executive Coach Leila Bulling Towne.

“It’s close to impossible to avoid all election discussion. HR leaders should encourage employees to recognize when they do feel a need to speak up and give them the skills to manage themselves,” Towne said. “It’s a great time to learn about EQ.”

Teach employees to be mindful of their physical reaction, thoughts, and feelings when engaged in a heated conversation. They can learn the signs that they are losing control and take steps to mitigate this, like by excusing oneself from the conversation and taking a walk.

“Instead of attempting to create an environment where civil discourse about the election can occur — I don’t think it can — help employees to learn about EQ and their ability to become self-aware and self-manage,” Towne said.

When the inevitable happens

If and when you receive employee complaints that stem from talking politics in the workplace, have a plan in place. Record and respond to every complaint. Be sure to provide updates to the individual making the complaint, so they understand how it’s progressing.

Review to determine whether or not company policies have been violated and take the appropriate disciplinary action.

“If you didn’t already have the policy in place, don’t discipline that employee but rather, use this opportunity to train and implement your new policy with all of your employees” Hamilton said.

Lastly, remember conflict is an opportunity. After any particularly tense exchange, send a quick email to remind everyone of the company policies and reaffirm your org’s commitment to providing a professional workplace built on trust and respect.