



When Bosses Recruit Employees into Politics - Evidence from a New National Survey

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In 2012, journalists reported that Georgia Pacific, Cintas, and other large companies were sending election campaign endorsements to their workers and predicting job losses or plant closures if favored candidates lost in that year's election. Are similar efforts by bosses and managers happening in the run up to the 2016 election? Results from a new national survey reveal that one in four American employees has been contacted by his or her boss about politics. Detailed findings suggest the need for reforms to protect a small but significant minority of U.S. workers who are subject to inappropriate political pressures in the workplace.

A New Look at Workplace Politics

As part of my doctoral research on the many facets of shifting business involvement in U.S. politics, I recently commissioned the research firm SRSS to conduct a nationwide, statistically representative telephone survey of more than 1,000 U.S. employees. Survey respondents were asked whether their bosses or supervisors had tried to engage them in politics and, if so, how and with what kinds of messages. **Overall, a quarter of employees reported that their bosses have tried to engage them in politics** – and their specific experiences offer more detail about what is going on in workplaces:

- Slightly more than one in ten employees reported receiving relatively neutral information about registering and turning out to vote on Election Day.
- Another six percent of employees received information about specific legislation, policies, or other current political issues.
- Another seven percent of employees received information from higher-ups at work about specific political candidates, including endorsements of politicians running for office.

Startlingly, about seven percent of employees reported clearly coercive kinds of political contact at work – messages that made workers uncomfortable or included threats of plant closures, cuts in hours, or layoffs. Given the overall margin of error in my survey, the bottom line result is that **somewhere between 3% and 10% of all U.S. employees – about 4 to 14 million Americans – are experiencing intimidating forms of political contact at work.**

A New Workplace Political Landscape

Newly hired employees are commonly advised to avoid talking about contentious topics like politics, sex, and religion. But it may be increasingly difficult for employees to keep their politics to themselves thanks to a little-known effect of the Supreme Court's controversial 2010 *Citizens United* decision. Most commentary about
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Citizens United has focused on the new leeway it grants corporations to spend on elections. However, *Citizens United* also makes it legal for corporate managers to campaign for their preferred political candidates in the workplace. Businesses can even go so far as to mandate that their workers participate in politics in certain ways – such as attending a rally for a favored politician. That happened during the 2012 election, when an Ohio coal mine required its workers to attend a rally for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Miners were not paid for their time, but some said they were afraid they could lose their jobs if they did not participate in the rally.

Federal law currently provides no protections for employees who refuse to comply with their managers' political requests. Some states have protections in place for private employees, reinforcing their rights in political speech or activities, but not all states do. Moreover, many of the state-level protections only shield an employee's political speech or activities during off-work hours, but do not address political coercion from a manager on the job.

Addressing Workplace Political Coercion

It is important to stress that most employees participating in my survey either reported no political contact at work or felt comfortable with the sorts of contact they received. Most who said they were contacted by their employers about politics did not feel intimidated. In fact, many firms have constructive political engagement programs, including nonpartisan efforts to help workers to register and turn out to vote. For instance, some firms work with well-respected non-profit organizations like the League of Women Voters to help get workers to the polls.

Still, there are good reasons to be concerned about the significant minority of 4 to 14 million Americans who are exposed to coercive political messages from their bosses. Political endorsements and requests from an employer are different from similar messages from voluntary social contacts such as friends or religious leaders. Bosses have control over employees' economic livelihoods in a ways that friends and pastors or rabbis do not. Threats to livelihood are especially vivid when workers are told by bosses that job losses or plant closures could hinge on election outcomes. And such pressures are especially worrisome in states that do not shield employees who engage in political activities against economic retaliation by their managers.

What can be done to curb the most coercive political communications from employers while leaving constructive firm efforts untouched? One solution might be state or federal laws that clearly define what employers can and cannot do in the workplace. A precedent exists in the state of Oregon, where the Worker Freedom Act prohibits employers from holding mandatory meetings at work related to political issues, and protects employees from retaliation if they choose not to receive workplace political communications. The law includes exemptions for political organizations, like parties, as well as for communications among corporate executives. My national survey revealed broad bipartisan support for such legal guidelines, with 70% of employees saying that they favor protections against coercive mobilization, including majorities of both Republicans and Democrats. The United States has long prided itself on being a model democracy, so the upward creep of workplace political intimidation should be a major concern for anyone who cares about citizen rights in the workplace as well as at the ballot box.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from the author's ongoing Employer Mobilization Research Project.