

Politics in the Workplace

Brett M. Wells, Ph.D.





There are many taboo topics to discuss in the workplace that likely result in a meeting with HR: religion, money, sex...and at the very top, or at least near top, of that list is politics. With the 2020 presidential election less than a month away, we conducted a panel research study of more than 3,000 working Americans. We found that discussing politics at work is largely the norm: Nearly 7 out of 10 employees said they have discussed politics with a co-worker in the last year, and more than 4 out of 10 said they had a political disagreement at work and that a co-worker has tried to persuade them to change their political party. So, what are the repercussions of all of these politically-charged conversations at work, and what roles do the company, manager, and co-worker play on our thoughts and behaviors?

Company Support

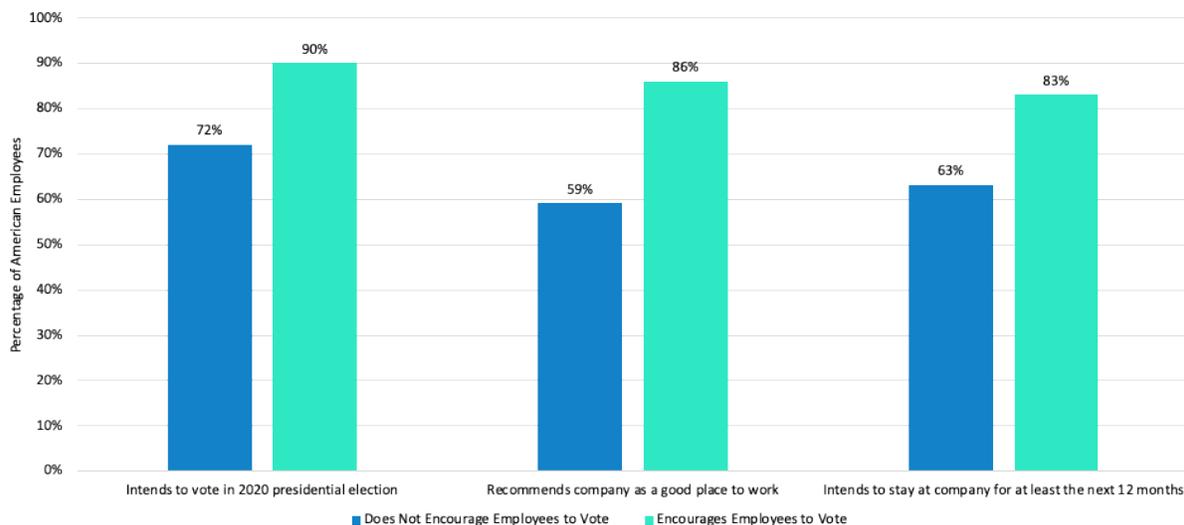
Many enterprise companies, such as Target, have publicly pledged to support voting by providing information, reminders, and paid time off to their employees. It seems many companies are following the enterprise lead:

- 67% of employees report their company encourages its employees to vote.
- 50% of employees report their company encourages its employees to be politically active outside of work.
- 65% of employees report their company gives time off/away from work to vote (15% report they do not know).

Both larger (>10K employees) and smaller companies (<1K employees) seem to lead the way in encouraging its employees to vote (70% and 63% respectively). It's the more moderately-sized companies (between 1K and 10K employees) that are lagging behind, with just 55% of employees reporting their company encourages its employees to vote.

Company support has a variety of cascading benefits. First, companies who encourage their employees to vote have a greater percentage of employees who intend to vote (90% vs. 72%). The effect of company support is especially pronounced for younger workers (18–24 years old), increasing their likelihood to vote from 63% to 82%. Not only does company support help drive voter participation, but it also affects the employee experience. Specifically, companies who encourage its employees to vote:

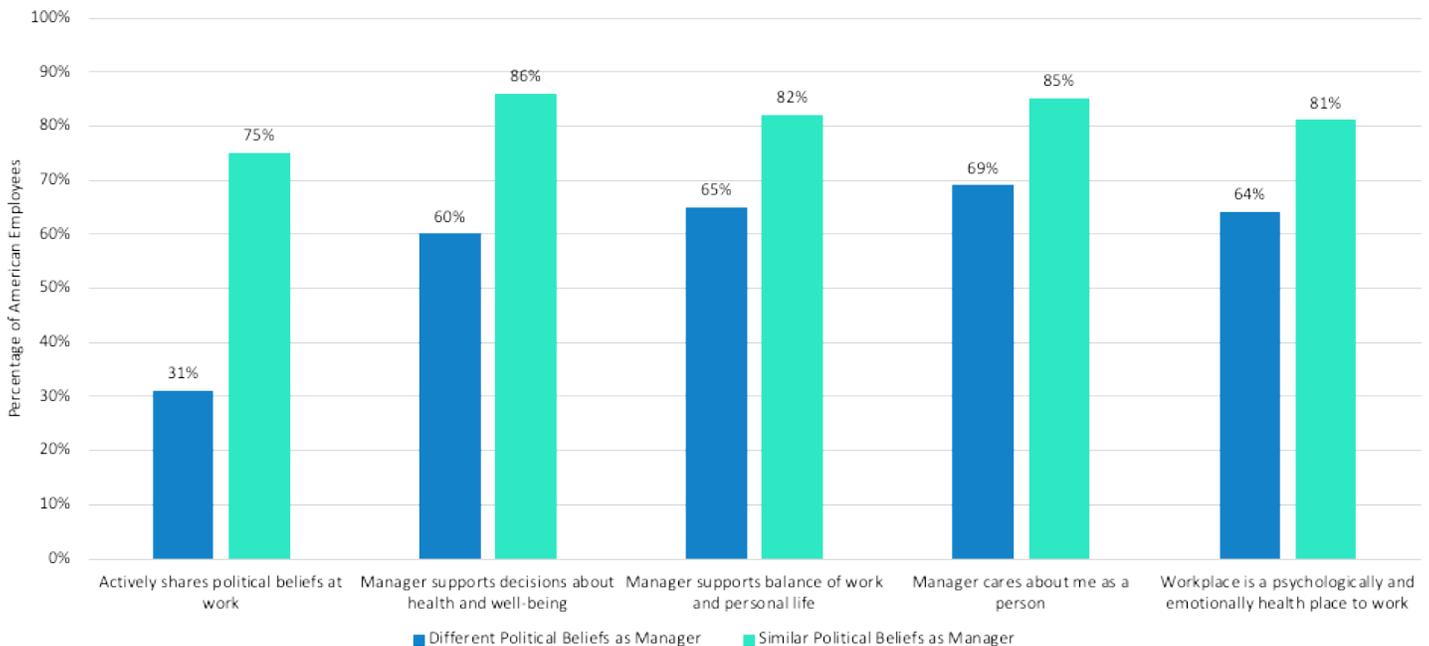
- Have a higher percentage of employees who would recommend their company as a good place to work (86% vs. 59%).
- Have a higher percentage of employees who intend to stay at their company for at least the next 12 months (83% vs. 63%).



Fear of Manager Retaliation

Relationships at work are paramount, and there is perhaps no more important relationship than the one between an employee and his or her direct manager. Nearly 50% of employees report their manager talks openly about supporting a specific candidate in the 2020 presidential election. What is the impact when an employee and manager share similar vs. different political beliefs and attitudes? Employees who share similar (vs. different) political beliefs as their direct manager are more likely to:

- Actively share their political beliefs at work (75% vs. 31%).
- Feel supported by their manager in making decisions about their health and well-being (86% vs. 60%).
- Feel their manager supports their efforts to balance work and personal life (82% vs. 65%).
- Feel their manager cares about them as a person (85% vs. 69%).
- Believes their workplace is a psychologically and emotionally healthy place to work (81% vs. 64%)

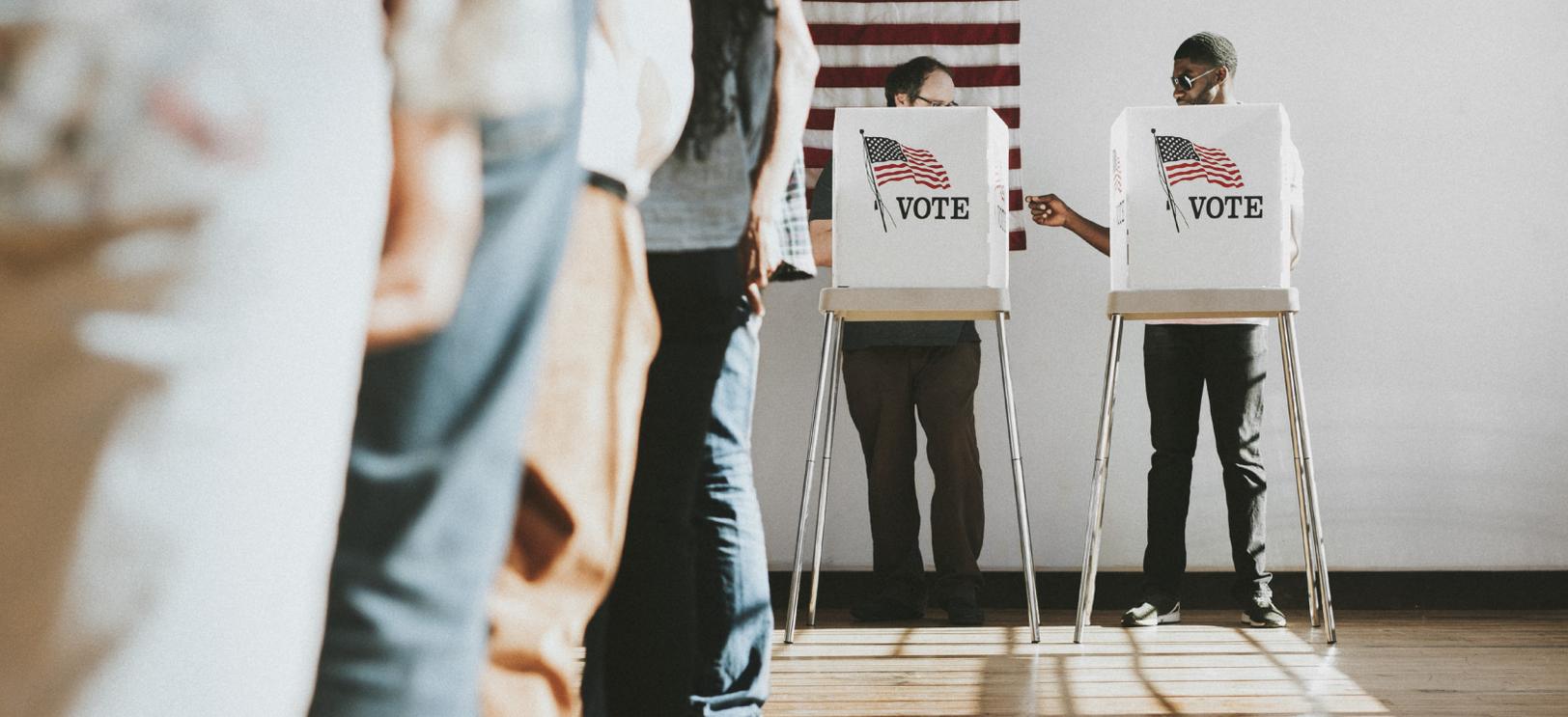


It is clear that employees' perceptions and actual behaviors are affected by the perceived degree of alignment between their own and their manager's political beliefs. In fact, 46% of employees worry they would be treated differently if they openly disagreed with their manager's political beliefs, and 53% of employees believe discussing politics at work could negatively impact their career opportunities. A manager who openly shares his/her political viewpoint is insensitive to the power distance, and does not handle the manager-employee relationship with much emotional intelligence.



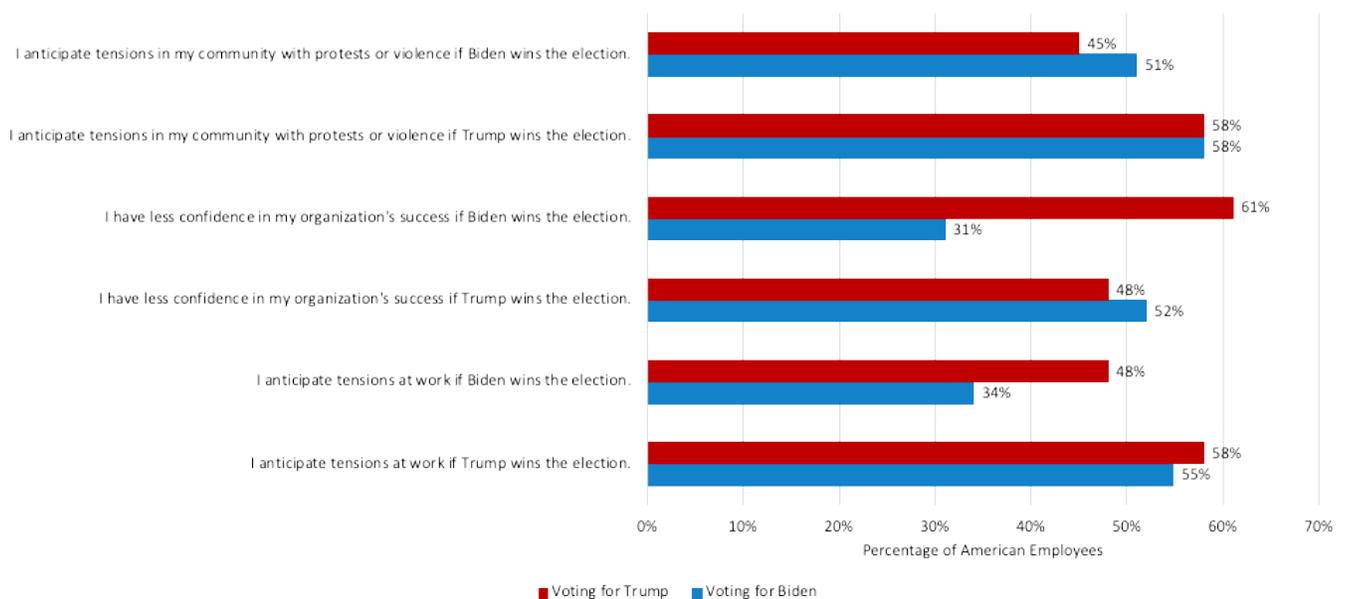
Majority vs Minority Political View in the Workplace

For 48% of employees, it is important to work at a company where most people share one's own political beliefs and attitudes, and 42% of employees have considered looking for a new job because of the political beliefs of people they work with. Some employees find themselves in the majority political opinion, where more than 75% of their co-workers share their political attitudes and beliefs; but for other employees, they find themselves in the minority political opinion, where less than 25% of co-workers share their political attitudes and beliefs. To not stand out, and potentially be ostracized, employees in the minority (vs. majority) political group are more likely to keep their political beliefs themselves while at work (81% vs. 67%). Interestingly, employees in the majority (vs. minority) political group are 2X more likely to avoid and try not to work with certain people at work because of their "other side of the fence" political beliefs (51% vs. 26%). For the majority group, this strong in-group favoritism may actually push diverse, opposed thinking out of the organization and attract like-minded job candidates, further strengthening the majority imbalance over time.



Results of the Election on Business

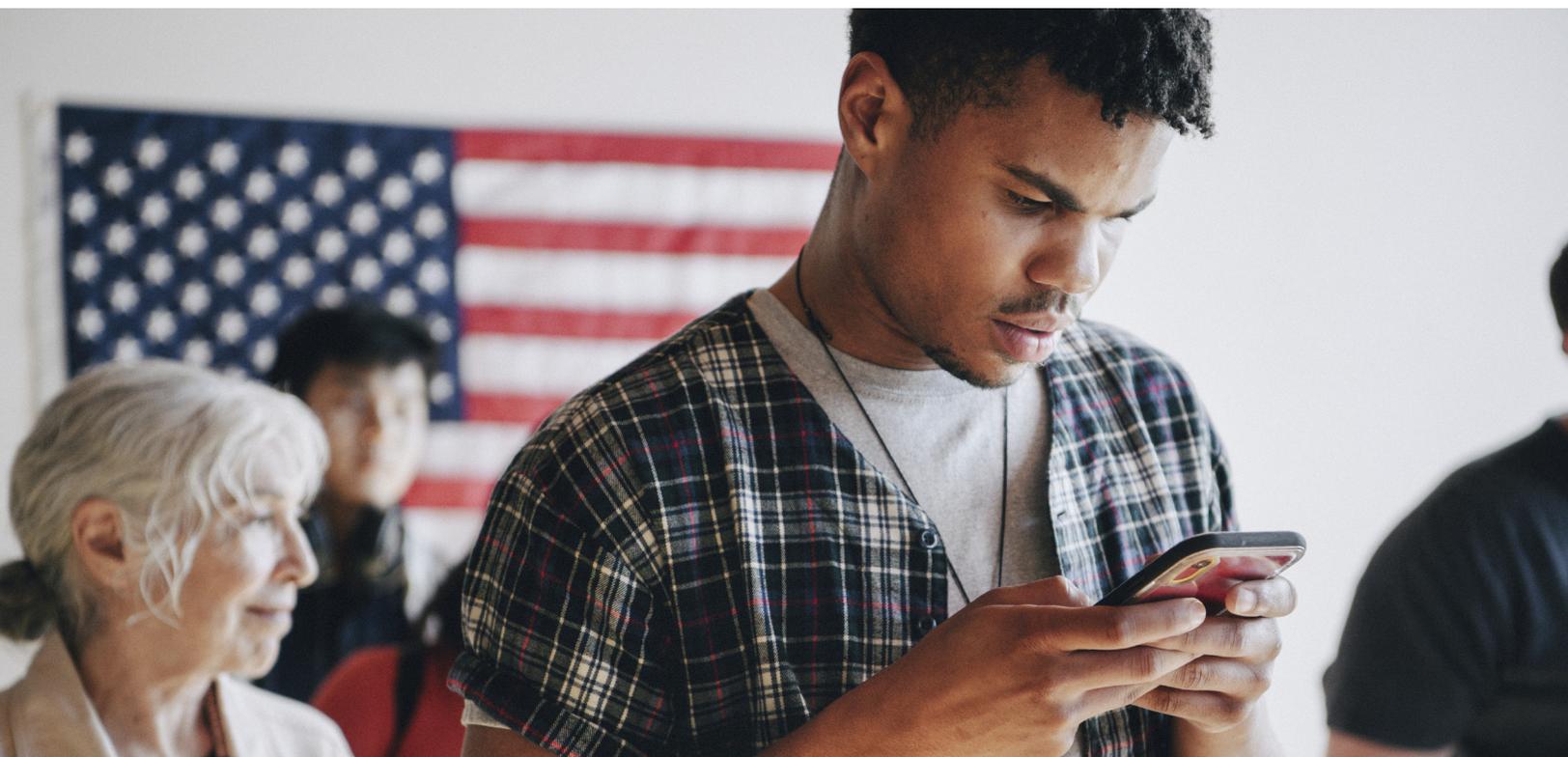
Employees who are voting for Biden, and even those who are voting for Trump, anticipate greater tensions in both the workplace and in the community if Trump wins the election. The seemingly largest difference between Trump and Biden voters is the election's impact on their organization's success: 61% of Trump voters have less confidence in their organization's success if Biden wins the election (compared to 31% of Biden voters), and 52% of Biden voters have less confidence in their organization's success if Trump wins the election (compared to 48% of Trump voters).



Social Media's Polarizing Effect

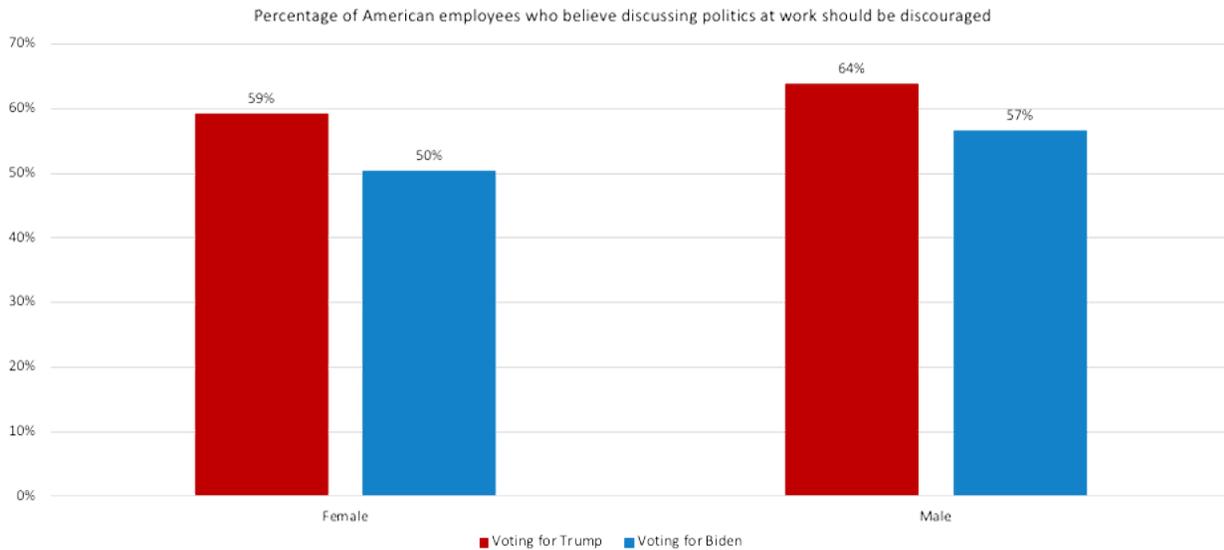
Netflix's "The Great Hack" and "The Social Dilemma" shed light on how social media companies harvest personal data to target users with ads, sometimes for political gains. And Congress agrees with their recent 451-page report on Big Tech antitrust, concluding "these firms wield their dominance in ways that erode entrepreneurship, degrade Americans' privacy online, and undermine the vibrancy of the free and diverse press. The result is less innovation, fewer choices for consumers, and a weakened democracy." With 61% of employees receiving most of their news and information about candidates for the 2020 presidential election on social media, it has the capability to further drive political polarization, especially when fueled with unregulated, deceitful news. Compared to employees who do not receive most of their news and information about candidates for the 2020 presidential election on social media, employees who receive most of their news and information on social media:

- Are more likely to have tried to persuade a co-worker to change their political party preference (60% vs. 15%).
- Feel more comfortable disagreeing if someone makes a political statement at work, regardless of their job position (65% vs. 39%).
- Are more likely to avoid and try not to work with certain people at work because of their political beliefs (62% vs. 23%).
- Say it is important for them to work at a company where most people share their political beliefs and attitudes (63% vs. 26%).
- Are more likely to not trust the voting process in the United States, and believes the election is rigged (53% vs. 29%).

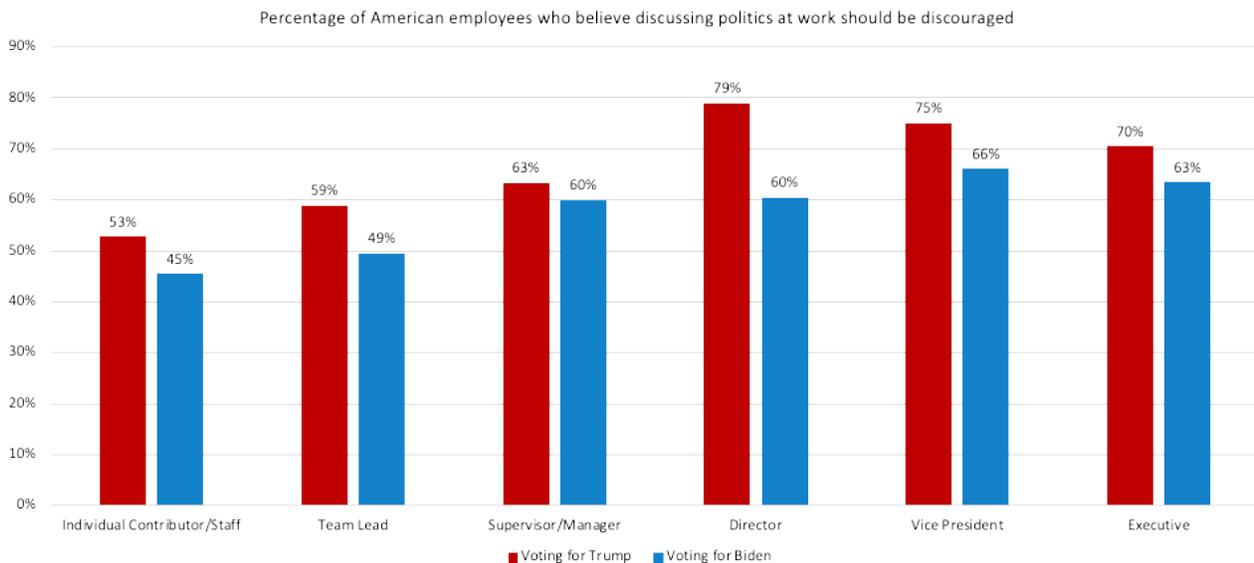


To Discuss or Not Discuss Politics in the Workplace

Despite nearly 7 out of 10 employees engaging in a political discussion with a co-worker, most (57%) still believe discussing politics at work should be discouraged. This is especially true for males and those voting for Trump.



One's level within the company hierarchy also seems to affect one's belief in discussing politics in the workplace. Executives, for example, are 1.4X more likely to believe discussing politics at work should be discouraged as compared to individual contributors. Finally, certain industry sectors, such as 1) management of companies and enterprises, 2) mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction, and 3) finance and insurance have an especially high percentage of employees who believe discussing politics at work should be discouraged (73%, 69%, and 68%, respectively).





In Summary

Perhaps like never before, companies can help increase voter participation, especially among their younger workforce, and more than 1,500 companies have pledged to support their employees' right to vote at Time to Vote. Dan Schulamn, president and CEO of PayPal said, "No American should have to choose between earning a paycheck and voting. Business leaders around the country must step up and do what's needed to ensure all of their employees will have the opportunity to have their voices heard this November."

While employees openly embrace their company's support to vote, they largely believe discussing politics in the workplace should be discouraged. From being ostracised to hindering career progression, there are major implications for discussing politics at work.



Find out why nearly one-third of the Fortune 100 already rely on Perceptyx, and why 95% of organizations that come to us stay with us.

Employee surveys and people analytics to help you **See the Way Forward.**

WWW.PERCEPTYX.COM