



Election Year Politics Protocols for Office Talk

Most are familiar with the old adage cautioning against discussing religion or politics in polite company, but a recent survey indicates that many are not heeding this advice when it comes to talking politics at the office.

According to a 2007 survey by Vault, 66% of respondents say that their co-workers discuss politics at work, while 46% have witnessed a political argument at the office.

Passion and Politics

With election season in full swing, impassioned political debate has the potential to escalate into conflict of a deeply personal nature, some of which may create bad will among co-workers that can far outlast the current issues of the day.

While a certain amount of political discussion at work is unavoidable, it's not surprising that such talk often leads to heated and emotional argument. Political viewpoints often serve as umbrellas that cover a spectrum of deeply held personal beliefs that are formed by an individual's religion, culture, upbringing, economic class and other influences.

Appropriateness: When and How

Best practice dictates that employees avoid political discussion of any form during the regular conduct of business. Interjecting political commentary into meetings, work-related e-mail and/or other official communication is highly unprofessional and grossly inappropriate. Doing so drags down productivity, creates unnecessary distraction, and can potentially alienate fellow employees and/or clients.

While the line is clear in the conduct of official business, it's not as clear when socializing with coworkers while on the job. The following are a few guidelines to help you steer clear of any unintended harmful side-effects that may come about when expressing your political views.

■ **Be mindful of those around you.**

While a boisterous political discussion may seem to you to be the perfect way to spend your lunch break, others may not share your enthusiasm for politics. Never take an individual's silence as agreement. It is equally likely to signal discomfort.

■ **Before launching into a political discussion, ask all within earshot two questions:** 1) Are you comfortable having a political discussion with me? 2) Do you mind overhearing me talk about politics? If the answer to either of these questions is no, then it is not appropriate to continue.

■ **Remember that others may feel as strongly as you.** While it can be frustrating when someone refuses to be swayed by your seemingly reasonable arguments, it's important to remember that others have deeply and honestly held convictions as well. Bullying and/or pestering others until they come around to your viewpoint is inappropriate behavior and will likely create conflict, workplace disruption, and hard feelings.

Avoiding escalation always begins with respecting the rights of others to believe differently than you. When in doubt, it's

best to "agree to disagree" and drop the issue.

■ **Never make it personal.** People of good faith can disagree on all manner of things. A particular political viewpoint is nothing more than a set of ideas and has no bearing on an individual's integrity or intelligence.

Never allow political disagreement to become personal. Always take care to avoid inflammatory language, personal insults, and sweeping generalizations.

Allow your sensibilities to be guided by basic courtesy. A good rule of thumb is to follow the same conversational etiquette that you would follow if you were a dinner guest in your coworker's home.

Handling Harassment

No employee should feel compelled to agree with or remain silent in the face of aggressive political advocacy. Attempts to embarrass, ostracize, harass or punish employees for their political ideologies can create a hostile work environment.

If you are uncomfortable with the discussion of politics at your workplace, it's recommended that you make your feelings known and politely assert your wish to avoid political discussion at the office. If met with resistance or retaliation, report your discomfort to a supervisor or a Human Resources representative.