

Think twice before talking politics at work—it could hurt your chances of promotion

By Brett Arends

Published: Oct 13, 2018 11:01 a.m. ET

With the country so bitterly divided, and feelings running so high, it's tempting to start venting in your workplace



Ed Araquel / Columbia Pictures / courtesy Everett Collection

It's tempting to vent at work. Here's why that's a bad idea.

Movie director Ava DuVernay was hugging strangers at the airport on Saturday, and fighting back tears, as Judge Brett Kavanaugh was [confirmed to the Supreme Court](#).

TV writer Ariel Dumas, who works on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* on CBS, said (before apologizing), "Whatever happens, I'm just glad we ruined Brett Kavanaugh's life."

Meanwhile, in the wake of the brutal confirmation hearings that ultimately cemented a conservative majority on the nation's highest court, millions feel the opposite. The president's job approval ratings are up to around 44%, about as high as they've been since he took office.

With the country so bitterly divided, and feelings running so high, it's tempting to start venting in your workplace. Under the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, federal agency employers are [prohibited from asking political party](#) preference questions of federal employees and applicants.

But what about when you're comfortable in your job? Should you debate the issues of the day?

Here are three reasons why that could be a bad idea:

1. It could get you fired

Google [GOOG, +2.85%](#) software engineer James Damore [learned the hard way](#) last year that if you work for a private company you have few, if any, legal protections covering free speech at work. "In the private context, there is no... first amendment right" covering political speech at work, University of Chicago law professor Randall Schmidt says.

Furthermore, he notes, many political issues in America today involve hot-button identity topics such as race, gender, national background and sexual orientation. In many cases these involve specific groups that are protected against discrimination under federal law, including the [Civil](#)

Rights Act of 1964. So arguments could raise — even inadvertently — accusations of discrimination or of creating a “hostile working environment,” which could be a violation of an official company policy.

In that instance employers might need to take legal action even if they don’t want to. There are two caveats, legal experts add. First, public sector workers may enjoy First Amendment rights, because their employer is the government. Second, you have some legal protections for discussing politics at work if it relates to your employment conditions. Companies that have fired workers for complaining about pay or conditions, even in public, have been successfully **sued by the National Labor Relations Board**.

Remember, you’re on company time. Why add political arguments that are just going to create tension at work to your to-do list? A word of caution: How we treat our colleagues and use our company’s time are just two of the most common forms of misconduct cited in **studies of workplaces**.

There is also some debate about how much time we all waste of each working day kibitzing, loafing, arguing, checking social media and the like, but the estimates are all alarmingly high. Some say **we waste over two hours a day**. Others say we **only actually work** for just over two hours a day.

2. You risk alienating valuable colleagues

Remember that time when you got into a political argument and, at the end, the other person said, “You know what? You’re right, and you’ve totally changed my mind. Thank you for making me see the light”? No, of course not. Maybe it happened somewhere, once. Or maybe that’s an urban legend.

Repeated research — such as **this study** conducted at the University of Iowa — has shown the astonishing grip that “confirmation bias” has on the human mind. People hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. It’s hard-wired into **our brains**.

“Never discuss religion or politics with those who hold opinions opposite to yours,” **argued** the nineteenth century traveler and writer Thomas Chandler Haliburton, “they are subjects that heat in handling until they burn your fingers.”

The ban on discussing religion and politics in polite company has a long pedigree, and with good reason. Our political opinions have deep roots in our personalities, **researchers argue**. Most people aren’t going to change, and the likeliest outcome is simply to create rancor.

Creating an unhappy environment in the workplace isn’t just bad because it’s unpleasant: It is also likely to be bad for business. Angry arguments can undermine teamwork and trust and reduce your office’s productivity. Paul Zak, professor of economics, psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University, says we are hard-wired to **value trust** as an essential ingredient in teamwork.

3. You could ruin your chances of promotion

Here’s a shock: Not everyone agrees with you. Actually, lots disagree. Even in Vermont, a Democratic bastion, one person in three voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. And in Nebraska, a Republican redoubt, one in three voted for Hillary Clinton. But guess what? Most people don’t want to get into a fight, especially at work. When you need a colleague’s help in the future or, worse, if the person you involved in a heated debate is promoted, you may regret taking them to task over their political views.

So if you launch a political argument, they’ll either pretend to agree, or they’ll tune out and do their jobs. You may come away thinking you’ve won an argument — only to get a nasty shock at the next election. As one liberal in the media is supposed to have commented — perhaps apocryphally — in 1972, after Republican Richard Nixon crushed Democrat George McGovern in a landslide, “But I don’t understand it! Everyone I know voted for McGovern!”

Employers don’t just promote based on how good you are at your current job. They also pay a lot of attention — often, more attention — to your leadership skills. That includes your ability to build strong teams and to get people to follow you, your empathy for others and ability to stay calm. According to **one survey**, they are actually much more likely to promote based on such “Emotional Intelligence” factors as they are on mere IQ. Political arguments can do you little good in this, and possibly a lot of harm.