Talking Politics on the Job: How Corporate Activism Shapes Political Participation

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May 15, 2026

Abstract

As civil society organizations decline and become more politically homogeneous, work remains one of the main environments where Americans communicate across political lines. At the same time, corporations have shown greater willingness to take public stances on political issues and to promote political causes among their employees. We use a national survey of American workers and two tailored survey experiments to assess the consequences of these developments on citizens' political participation. We show that ideologically neutral mentions of political issues by corporations can promote political discussion among employees. Importantly, statements advocating for a specific policy position encourage discussion among like-minded employees while mostly avoiding any chilling effect on those who disagree with the corporation's stance. We further argue that downstream effects on employees' political communication outside the workplace suggest corporations can use political messaging as a form of in-kind donation to political candidates and causes.

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After two decades of corrosive political polarization, Americans are by now accustomed to the increasing politicization of society. Aspects of everyday life that seem divorced from politics——such as the car one drives or with whom one chooses to do business——are now laden with political meaning (Hetherington and Weiler 2018; McConnell et al. 2018). Although the Thanksgiving dinner table is the cliché backdrop for contentious political interactions, the workplace is often the more consequential setting for American adults. Unlike social gatherings among friends and family, workplaces involve economic dependence, hierarchical authority, and repeated interaction with colleagues, all of which heighten the stakes of political expression.

Foundational public opinion scholarship in the mid-twentieth century recognized workplaces as crucial sites where social and occupational status shaped political attitudes (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960).[1] More than six decades later, the workplace is as important to American politics as ever before. Following *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (558 U.S. 310, 2010), corporations have been free to dedicate effectively unlimited resources to support their preferred causes. Beyond these financial channels, businesses frequently take public stances on political issues, engage in politically controversial actions, and promote political causes among their employees—even on issues ostensibly irrelevant to their core mission.

Although corporations have perhaps never been more involved in politics, scholarly focus on politics in the workplace has waned since the Columbia and Michigan schools made their seminal contributions. Theoretical emphasis on occupational prestige (e.g. Stevens and Featherman 1981) has largely given way to social class, the American National Election Studies stopped collecting occupation data entirely in 2004, and scholars' current understanding of politics in the workplace is generally centered on either the top-down role of labor unions in blue-collar occupations or of corporations in white-collar ones (Leighley and Nagler 2007; Lyon et al. 2024; Steel 2026; Stuckatz 2022). In particular, contemporary scholars lack a detailed understanding of how corporate political activism affects employees, whether it exacerbates political or social divides, and how it has been affected by the paradigm shift engendered by *Citizens United*.

[1] For a more contemporary treatment, see Kitschelt and Rehm (2014).

While employers may try to explicitly mobilize their employees for political causes, such overt efforts are deeply unpopular, toe the line of legality, and risk backlash from customers and employees alike (e.g. Frye et al. 2025; Hertel-Fernandez 2018). We theorize that firms attempt to circumvent the potentially negative effects of overt workplace mobilization by engaging in "softer" strategies of influence, namely, the forms of corporate activism that have been growing in recent years (Burbano 2021; Hersh and Shah forthcoming; McKean and King 2024). We argue that despite being indirect and comparatively subtle, corporate activism has a mobilizing effect on employees' political participation—particularly their willingness to discuss politics at work—by signaling which political topics and stances are acceptable in the workplace or that particular political outcomes are critical for the firm's success.

However, we also theorize that these effects are conditional on the employer's message and its congruence with employees' preexisting attitudes. Mobilization should be strongest when employees perceive alignment between their own attitudes or identities and the firm's political stance, as value congruence enhances the degree to which corporate messaging resonates with employees (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Burbano 2021). When the firm's message runs counter to employees' attitudes, however, employees may feel alienated or fear retaliation for voicing an opinion contrary to their employer's position (Frye et al. 2025), resulting in a chilling effect on political participation.

We begin by presenting descriptive evidence from an original survey of American workers. We show that employees talk politics with their coworkers at much lower rates than they do with family and friends. However, they tend to participate more when their employers engage in political activism, despite expressing general opposition to such activism. We also find that workers who are politically cross-pressured by their employers are particularly likely to feel uncomfortable with politics in the workplace but, interestingly, are no less likely to engage their coworkers in political discussion.

We then present two tailored survey experiments that test the causal effects of corporate activism on employees' political participation. We find that ideologically neutral mentions of polit-

ical issues by corporations can promote political participation among employees. Statements advocating for a specific policy position encourage discussion among like-minded employees while evincing only modest evidence of a chilling effect on those who disagree with the corporation's stance. We further show that corporate activism can even exert spillover effects on public-facing forms of political participation outside the workplace. If companies can use their influence over employees to change their political behaviors, this would suggest a sort of in-kind campaign contribution that corporations can make in the *Citizens United* era—the ability to manipulate behavior among large swaths of the citizenry merely by exercising their right to corporate speech.

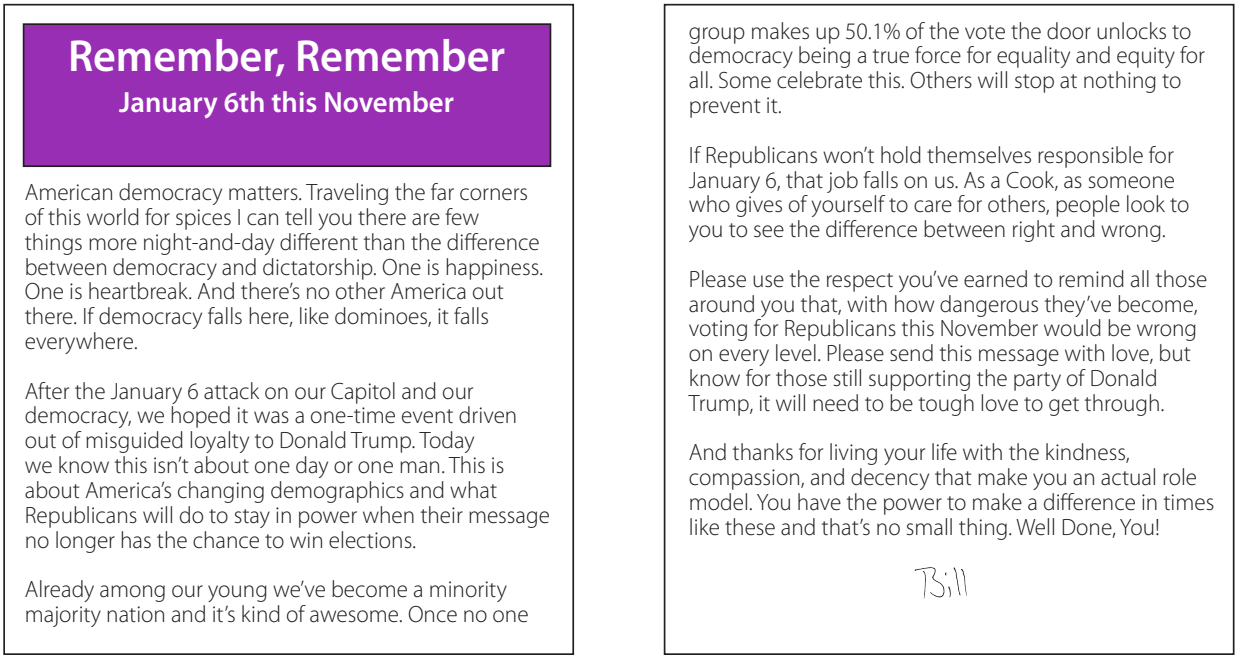
Corporate Political Activism

Social scientists have long considered the workplace one of the key arenas in which democracy and politics are enacted in the United States (e.g. Verba et al. 1995). Employers often seek to shape the political behavior of their workers, whether at the behest of politicians or in pursuit of policies that would bode favorably for their business interests. In an early, particularly brazen case, Gaventa (1982) describes how the American Association—a landholding and coal mining conglomerate—exploited Appalachian workers' economic precarity to both mobilize them for particular political causes and stifle dissent. But such inauspicious examples were rare; explicit political appeals by employers to employees were historically limited by legal standards and workplace norms. Because inherent power imbalances in the workplace make coercion more likely (*National Labor Relations Board v. Gissel Packing Co.*, 395 U.S. 575, 1969), employers were only permitted to communicate information about policies or legislation; they could not advocate on behalf of any candidate or party, direct employees to take any political action, or hold captive-audience meetings on political topics ("Citizens United at Work: How the Landmark Decision Legalized Political Coercion in the Workplace" 2014; Frye et al. 2025).

Citizens United upended this status quo. By extending First Amendment protections to corporations and treating political spending as a form of speech, the case not only relaxed campaign

finance restrictions, but it also enabled employers to directly support political candidates and appeal to their workers to take political action (Ancell 2025; Hertel-Fernandez and Secunda 2016). As a result, Hertel-Fernandez (2016, 2017, 2018) documents modern efforts by employers to influence the political attitudes and behaviors of employees. In some cases, firms aim to mobilize. For instance, Cintas CEO Scott Farmer sent an email to employees implying the company's fiscal health—and thus their jobs—would be at risk if they voted for Barack Obama's reelection in 2012 (Jamieson 2012). In other cases, their goal is demobilization; citing disruptions stemming from political discussion, Meta informed employees in 2022 that "health matters such as vaccine efficacy and abortion, legal matters such as pending legislation, political matters such as elections or political movements, and weapon ownership and righs... can no longer be discussed" among coworkers (Robison 2022). Scholars of comparative politics document similar practices in places like Argentina (Oliveros 2021), Eastern Europe (Mares et al. 2018), Russia (Frye et al. 2014), and Thailand (Nillasithanukroh 2025).

We draw attention to a subtler but more public form of corporate political messaging that has become commonplace in recent years (Cassidy and Kempf 2025): using press releases, advertisements, and the like to signal positions on political issues (Burbano 2021; Hersh and Shah forthcoming; McKean and King 2024), including social causes that seem unrelated to a firm's bottom line. Examples of corporate political activism abound. In the months following the death of George Floyd, the fifty largest companies in the United States committed nearly $50 billion to racial justice causes (Jan et al. 2021). The CEO of Goya Foods falsely claimed Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election (Salcedo 2021). In 2022, Disney publicly feuded with the Florida state government over a bill prohibiting schools from discussing gender identity (Fisch and Schwartz 2024). During election season that same year, Penzeys Spices released a "January 6" gift box, complete with a card making a not-so-subtle electoral plea to its customers, seen in Figure 1 (Penzeys Spices 2022). These examples illustrate how business leaders tend to pursue political goals by engaging with the broader public (Hersh and Shah forthcoming).



Remember, Remember
January 6th this November

American democracy matters. Traveling the far corners of this world for spices I can tell you there are few things more night-and-day different than the difference between democracy and dictatorship. One is happiness. One is heartbreak. And there's no other America out there. If democracy falls here, like dominoes, it falls everywhere.

After the January 6 attack on our Capitol and our democracy, we hoped it was a one-time event driven out of misguided loyalty to Donald Trump. Today we know this isn't about one day or one man. This is about America's changing demographics and what Republicans will do to stay in power when their message no longer has the chance to win elections.

Already among our young we've become a minority majority nation and it's kind of awesome. Once no one group makes up 50.1% of the vote the door unlocks to democracy being a true force for equality and equity for all. Some celebrate this. Others will stop at nothing to prevent it.

If Republicans won't hold themselves responsible for January 6, that job falls on us. As a Cook, as someone who gives of yourself to care for others, people look to you to see the difference between right and wrong.

Please use the respect you've earned to remind all those around you that, with how dangerous they've become, voting for Republicans this November would be wrong on every level. Please send this message with love, but know for those still supporting the party of Donald Trump, it will need to be tough love to get through.

And thanks for living your life with the kindness, compassion, and decency that make you an actual role model. You have the power to make a difference in times like these and that's no small thing. Well Done, You!

Bill

Figure 1: Card Included in "January 6" Gift Box from Penzeys Spices

We see at least three reasons why an activism-based strategy is likely to be more efficacious for firms than mobilizing workers directly. First, corporate activism can be financially attractive to businesses. Maks-Solomon and Drewry (2021) describe how corporations expressed support for LGBT rights in response to employee-led interest groups, viewing such activism as a way to attract and retain talented workers, even at lower wage rates (Bode et al. 2015; Burbano 2016). Fisch and Schwartz (2024) argue that firms engaging in activism can spur competitors to follow suit out of perceived competitive pressure. Corporate activism can even help raise capital, particularly from left-leaning investors (Cassidy and Kempf 2025; Mkrtchyan et al. 2024).

Second, practical considerations may push firms to participate in indirect activism instead of direct mobilization. Employers must carefully navigate the patchwork of legal standards and gray areas that emerged in the wake of *Citizens United* (Frye et al. 2025; Hertel-Fernandez and Secunda 2016). Employee speech in non-work settings is consistently protected (Garden 2022), but restrictions on employer conduct vary across states, making heavy-handed actions risky (Burke and Lenhard 2016).

Finally, overt employer mobilization—which tends to be private and clientelistic—is deeply unpopular among employees and the general public (Hersh and Shah forthcoming). Taking coercive political actions thus risks backlash from a business's workforce and customer base. For example, when the owner of an Ace Hardware store in California urged her employees to vote for Mitt Romney in 2012, she was met with negative publicity and a customer boycott (Chun 2012). In addition, the market economy, high asset mobility, and freedom of the press make overt mobilization more difficult to conduct in the United States than in other contexts (Frye et al. 2019, 2025). Employers are less likely to get away with such actions when employees can easily switch jobs and firms can be publicly shamed for engaging in coercive behavior.

In contrast, the public-facing nature of corporate activism carries a pretext of innocence; it allows employers to communicate preferences to both employees and the public under the guise of taking social responsibility or positioning their brand in response to market demands (Fisch and Schwartz 2024). Such actions are less likely to be perceived as coercive because they do not directly request action from employees or threaten negative consequences for non-compliance. Instead, they can be passed off as attempts to drum up support for important causes among the general public.

Curiously, however, such activism likely has little to no influence on *consumers'* political attitudes. Marsh and Peterson (2026) show through three experiments that exposure to corporate political messaging on transgender and abortion issues can increase support for corporate political engagement among those who already agree with the stance communicated by the firm, but the messaging has no effect on subjects' issue positions themselves. If corporate activism does not change consumers' attitudes, then why do firms engage in it? We argue that a key target of corporate activism is not consumers, but employees.

Effects of Corporate Activism on Political Participation

How do these corporate actions shape employees' political participation? We primarily focus on one particular form of participation: employees' willingness to discuss politics at work (Phillips 2026). Early theories of public opinion identified political discussion in the workplace as important for the development of political attitudes and behaviors. The sociological model of voting placed great emphasis on the social environments in which citizens spent their time (Berelson et al. 1954). Because social and occupational status were viewed as crucial determinants of political attitudes in the mid-century United States (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), workplaces were integral to understanding how one's social environment structured one's attitudes. The social-psychological model of voting placed less emphasis on such social structures, but still allowed for relationships among coworkers to affect the formation and change of political attitudes (Campbell et al. 1960).

The decline and political homogenization of civil society organizations in the United States has made the workplace even more valuable to contemporary civic life (Putnam 2000). Citizens typically avoid talking politics when they expect to disagree with their interlocutors (Gerber et al. 2012), instead prioritizing the maintenance of social relationships that could be damaged by interpersonal conflict (Carlson and Settle 2022). But this ability to self-select in or out of interactions is drastically reduced in the involuntary collectives of workplaces, where individuals have little freedom to choose their interlocutors or to physically remove themselves from undesirable interactions (Cramer Walsh 2004). The "water cooler discussions" at work therefore tend to be more politically heterogeneous than discussions among friends or family (Mutz 2006), and the social pressure experienced in such settings can push citizens to engage in politics (Abrams et al. 2011).

In fact, work is one of the main environments where Americans still participate in in-person conversation across political, racial, or other demographic lines (Conover et al. 2002; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Wyatt et al. 2000). Such political talk (or lack thereof) can impact citizens' political attitudes and behavior, enhancing political knowledge (Eveland 2004), increasing political trust (Geurkink et al. 2024), and even changing attitudes and vote intentions (Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Phillips 2026; Ryan 2011).

We argue that corporate political activism ought to have a mobilizing effect on employees' willingness to discuss politics at work. By publicly signaling a firm's stance on political issues, firms indirectly signal that political topics are acceptable in the workplace. This normalizes and encourages political talk by lowering the perceived social costs of engaging in discussion. However, we also expect these effects to be conditional on the employer's message and its congruence with employees' preexisting attitudes. Mobilization is likely to be strongest when employees perceive alignment between their own attitudes or identities and the firm's political stance, as value congruence can enhance the legitimacy and persuasiveness of the corporate message (Burbano 2021). When the firm's message runs counter to employees' attitudes, however, the effects could be attenuated or even reversed, as employees may feel alienated or fear retaliation for voicing an opinion contrary to their employer's position (Frye et al. 2025).

Individuals derive meaning, self-esteem, and behavioral guidance from membership in socially salient groups (Tajfel 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Indeed, one of the most ironclad findings in public opinion research is that citizens tend to follow cues from political elites who share their party identity and are more likely to discount cues from counterpartisan sources (Lenz 2012; Levendusky 2009; Zaller 1992). Messages perceived as identity-congruent are evaluated more favorably and are more likely to influence attitudes or spur engagement, whereas identity-incongruent messages are discounted or rationalized to fit with prior beliefs (Huddy et al. 2015; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Nelson and Garst 2005).[2]

Scholars of industrial and organizational psychology have extended the central findings of social identity theory to show how identity affects individuals' attitudes and actions at work through "value congruence" (Ashforth and Mael 1989). According to value congruence theory, messages are most mobilizing when they resonate with recipients' preexisting identities, values, and self-conceptions (Edwards and Cable 2009; Oyserman and Destin 2010). When employees perceive alignment between their own values and those of their employer or direct supervisors, they tend to trust the organization more, display greater commitment to their employer, and—most important

[2]These conditions can be overcome in some cases, such as those generating anxiety (Marcus et al. 2000; Mehlhaff et al. 2024). We contend only that the general pattern, *ceteris paribus*, is one of congruence enhancing responsiveness.

for our purposes—be more willing to engage in expressive or participatory behaviors. By contrast, misalignment can generate feelings of alienation, withdrawal, or self-censorship (Burbano 2021; Kristof 1996; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). From this perspective, shared values not only motivate employees but also signal which behaviors are sanctioned by the employer or safe within a given workplace environment.

Identity and value congruence serve as a central mechanism through which social and political signals mobilize and demobilize in an organizational setting (You et al. 2026). Although corporate activism can impact employees' political attitudes (Chatterji and Toffel 2019), we do not see attitude change or persuasion as necessary. Corporations are more likely to attempt to influence employees' political participation when they have a mechanism to monitor compliance and employees are more likely to follow their employers' guidance when they are financially vulnerable (Hertel-Fernandez 2018), suggesting any behavioral change results from coercion more than persuasion.

Hypotheses

When it comes to their involvement in corporate political activism, firms have three options: they can avoid political topics altogether; they can acknowledge political issues without taking a stance; or they can take a position on one side of the issue, thus making their stances identity-congruent for some employees and identity-incongruent for others. We expect each of these options to have different effects on employees' willingness to engage in politics.

When firms choose to make politically neutral statements that acknowledge an issue but do not advocate a particular position on it, we expect that action to normalize discussion of politics at work by modeling appropriate political discourse and signaling a commitment to protecting political speech. We also expect such statements to have similarly salubrious effects among all employees regardless of political predispositions, as remaining neutral would avoid discouraging participation for anyone who might disagree with one position or another.

Hypothesis 1 *Taking a neutral stance on a political issue in a corporate statement has a positive effect on employees' willingness to engage in politics, relative to an apolitical control.*

By contrast, when corporations mention a political issue *and take a stance* on it, the corporation conveys to its employees that there is a particular position that is desired or aligned with corporate priorities. We expect these types of statements to have countervailing effects on employees' willingness to engage in politics. On one hand, it may encourage individuals whose view on the issue aligns with the corporation to participate in discussion because they feel supported by the firm.

Hypothesis 2a *Taking a pro-attitudinal stance on a political issue in a corporate statement has a positive effect on employees' willingness to engage in politics, relative to an apolitical control.*
Hypothesis 2b *Taking a pro-attitudinal stance on a political issue in a corporate statement has a positive effect on employees' willingness to engage in politics, relative to a neutral control.*

On the other hand, taking a public stance on an issue may discourage individuals who disagree with the corporation's position from speaking about politics out of fear of conflict, ostracization, or negative consequences from corporate leadership.

Hypothesis 3a *Taking a counter-attitudinal stance on a political issue in a corporate statement has a negative effect on employees' willingness to engage in politics, relative to an apolitical control.*
Hypothesis 3b *Taking a counter-attitudinal stance on a political issue in a corporate statement has a negative effect on employees' willingness to engage in politics, relative to a neutral control.*

Finally, the effects of corporate activism may not dissipate when employees clock out for the day. We expect corporate activism to affect forms of political participation that occur outside the workplace, such as posting political content on social media or writing to one's Congressperson (Selenko et al. 2025; Wowak et al. 2022). However, we also expect political discussion at work will be affected more strongly than other forms of political participation, including discussing politics with friends and family. Workplaces are involuntary collectives where employees have limited ability to self-select in or out (Cramer Walsh 2004). Employees may therefore feel greater

social pressure to conform to workplace norms and expectations regarding political discussion. In contrast, individuals have more agency in choosing with whom they discuss politics outside of work, allowing them to avoid potentially contentious conversations.

Hypothesis 4 *The effect of each attitudinal treatment on discussing politics with coworkers is greater in magnitude than its effect on discussing politics with friends and family.*

Underlying this final hypothesis is a general expectation that corporate activism should have a greater effect on public forms of participation, as employees change their observable behavior to signal compliance with business priorities. We expect similar patterns to hold elsewhere—with respect to social media, for example. By contrast, more private forms of participation, such as writing a letter to one's representative, are less visible to employers and coworkers and thus less likely to be used as a signal of conformity with corporate expectations. However, we register a specific hypothesis pertaining only to discussion-based forms of participation, as they are the most directly comparable to each other.

Workers' Experiences with Corporate Activism

Before proceeding to experimental tests, we conduct preliminary examinations of our theory using observational data from an original survey of American workers. Scholars have surveyed workers to assess their political engagement at work (Hertel-Fernandez 2017; Hertel-Fernandez and Secunda 2016) as well as the ideological heterogeneity of their discussion networks (Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Klofstad et al. 2013). However, this existing evidence pre-dates the hyperpartisan turn in American politics (Conover et al. 2002; Mutz and Mondak 2006; Wyatt et al. 2000), contemporary updates to this cross-cutting discussion literature have been rare (Mutz 2025), and previous work has left the nexus of corporate activism and political discussion largely unexplored. To gather information about citizens' experiences with politics in the contemporary workplace, we contracted

with Verasight in November 2025 to survey 3,050 American adults who were employed at least 15 hours per week in a wage-paying job.[3]

We first assess how frequently employees engage in political talk with coworkers. Figure 2 plots the proportion of respondents reporting each degree of frequency and compares them to the frequency of political talk among family, friends, and social media acquaintances. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. In line with prior work (Carlson and Settle 2022), respondents report discussing politics with family and friends at much higher rates than other groups, with less than five percent saying they "never" talk politics with these groups. Discussion with coworkers is less common; 21.5 percent say they never talk politics with coworkers, and another 37.6 percent say they do so "rarely." At the same time, however, rates of political talk on social media are even lower, despite 94 percent of Americans encountering political content on those platforms (Pew Research Center 2016). Political talk with coworkers is still a meaningful mode of political participation for many Americans—a small majority engage in it on some regular basis—but it is far from ubiquitous in modern American workplaces.

Interestingly, these findings may suggest a decline in the prevalence of political talk with coworkers over the preceding decades. Mutz and Mondak (2006) analyze six surveys from 1984-2000, showing that political discussion at work was about as common as talk with a variety of other groups. If the general polarization of American politics since the turn of the century was primarily responsible for driving down discussion rates, we would expect talk with all interlocutors to fall at similar rates. Instead, we see a clear separation between talk with family and friends—which is still common—and talk with coworkers, which is less common.

Our theory suggests this divergence could result from workers reacting to increases in political actions taken by their employers. To assess this conjecture, we asked respondents whether their employer had taken a range of political actions within the previous two years. Some of these actions, such as privately advocating for a political candidate in internal communications, align

[3]Respondents were recruited through a combination of random address sampling, random digit dialing, and online targeting in order to obtain a sample that is approximately representative of the American labor force. See the Supplementary Information for survey items.

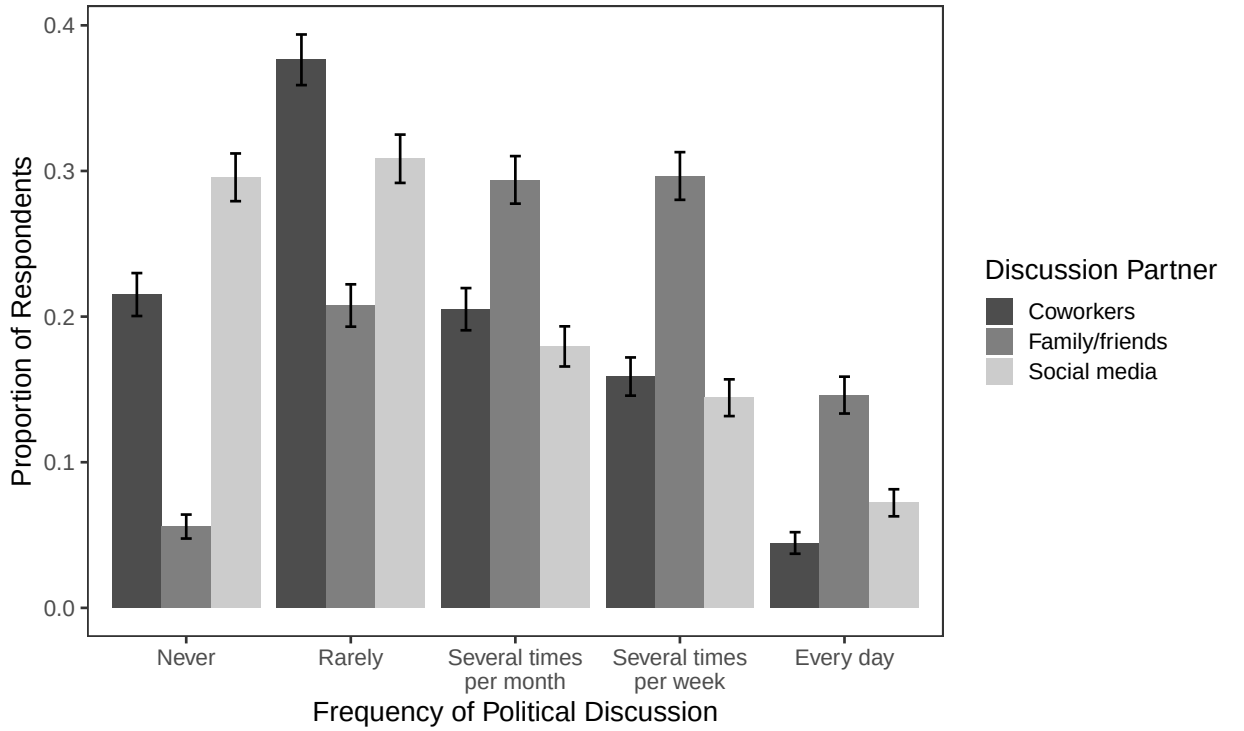


Figure 2: Frequency of Political Discussion across Groups. Error bars give 95% confidence intervals.

more closely with the overt forms of mobilization studied by other researchers. Others are more public-facing and less blatantly coercive than vote solicitation. For instance, publicly supporting a policy or donating to a political campaign can signal an employer's preference without directly requesting action from employees.

The left facet of Figure 3 plots the proportion of respondents who reported their employer taking each form of action. We find that corporate activism is as common as more overt forms of mobilization. 17-18 percent report their employer supporting a political candidate or policy in public-facing communications, with slightly fewer reporting similar statements made internally within the organization. Approximately eleven percent knew their employer had donated to a political campaign, and only five percent said their employer partnered with a political figure in advertising. Another eleven percent said their employer took some political action about which we

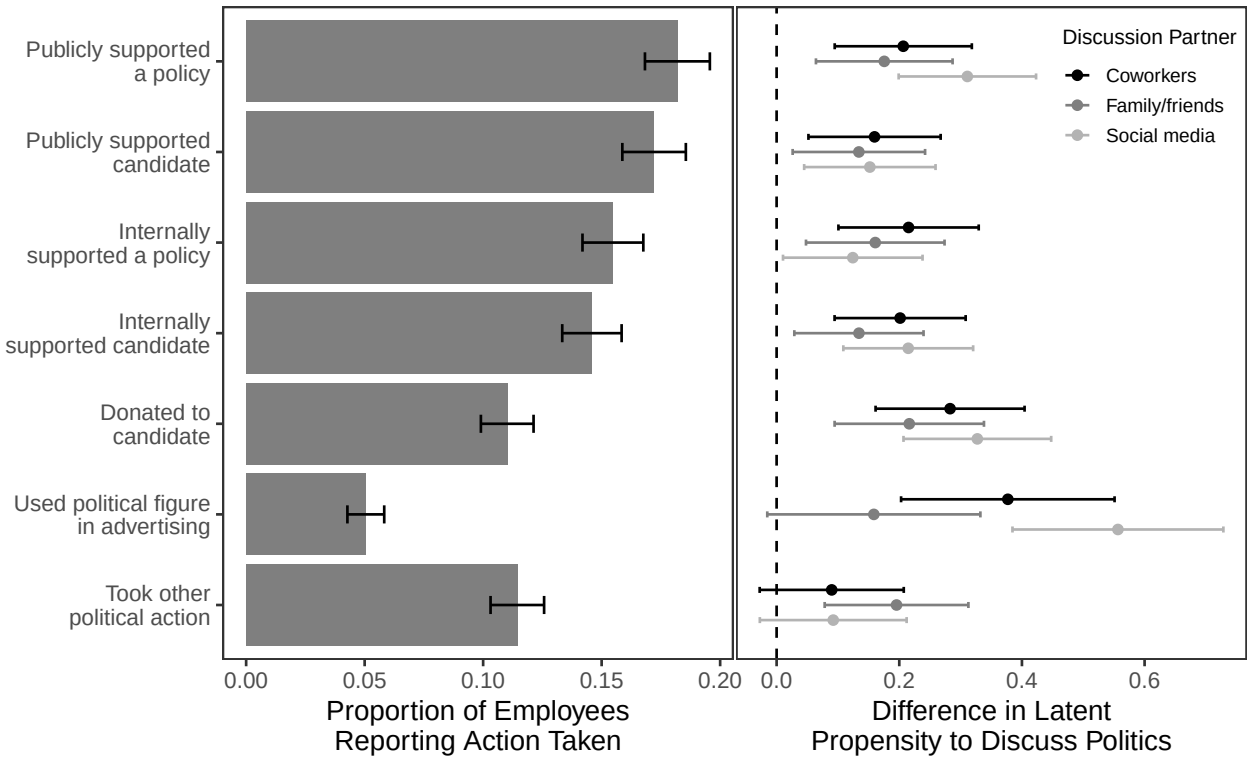


Figure 3: Prevalence and Effects of Corporate Activism. Proportion of employees reporting corporate activism in past two years (left); difference in latent propensity to discuss politics among employees experiencing corporate activism, broken down by discussion partner (right). Error bars give 95% confidence intervals. Estimates in right panel are standardized, covariate-adjusted output from ordered logit models.

had not asked directly.[4] These findings are almost identical to those of Hertel-Fernandez (2018, p. 72); when asking about specific types of employer mobilization, he finds approximately fourteen percent of workers report having experienced them.

We also investigate the association between these corporate actions and employees' engagement in political talk. To do so, we fit a series of ordered logit regression models to the data on discussion frequency shown in Figure 2. The explanatory variables are the employer actions shown on the vertical axis of Figure 3. The right facet of Figure 3 displays the standardized difference in respondents' latent propensity to discuss politics with each group when their employer takes each action—relative to when their employer takes no action—after adjusting for covariates.[5] We see

[4]Employees may not observe all political actions taken by employers, or they may interpret innocuous actions as political. Either source of error would bias these estimates of employer actions. For our purposes, however, what matters most is whether employees *perceive* employers as engaging in mobilization.

[5]See full model results in the Supplementary Information.

consistent, positive associations between employers' political actions and their employees' discussion habits, with effect sizes between 0.1 and 0.5 standard deviations. Further, effects do not differ meaningfully across discussion partners. This could suggest that corporate activism has spillover effects on political communication outside the workplace but, because our data are observational, we cannot rule out the possibility that politically active workers self-select into politically active firms.[6]

To dig deeper, we asked respondents seven questions capturing whether they thought political views were respected in their workplace as well as the extent to which they believed businesses should be involved in politics. We also asked respondents which party they identify with and which party they thought their managers at work identified with. As we theorized above, workers who are politically aligned with their managers ought to feel less threatened by employer mobilization than those for whom mobilization would represent counter-pressure. If respondents are political independents, if they perceive their managers as politically independent, or if they are unable to pin down any party identity for their managers, we categorize their party congruence as "ambiguous." To maintain visual parsimony, we omit the ambiguous category from the results in Figure 4, but include it in a further analysis below.

Two findings in Figure 4 stand out. First, workers tend to oppose political actions by employers. Even among respondents who share their managers' party affiliation, 63.3 percent "somewhat" or "strongly agree" that businesses should stay out of politics. Among that same group, only 24.9 percent support their employer taking public stances on political issues. These responses may reflect a general opposition to *any* employer involvement in political topics, as respondents are more likely to agree than disagree that businesses should restrict political speech in the workplace, just as Meta and Google have done in recent years (Elias 2024; Robison 2022). These findings comport with cross-national studies showing that workers feel uncomfortable with employers taking political actions (Frye et al. 2025; Hersh and Shah forthcoming). In fact, employees so dislike overt

[6]Experiment 2 below causally demonstrates that activism does, in fact, have more wide-ranging effects on political participation.

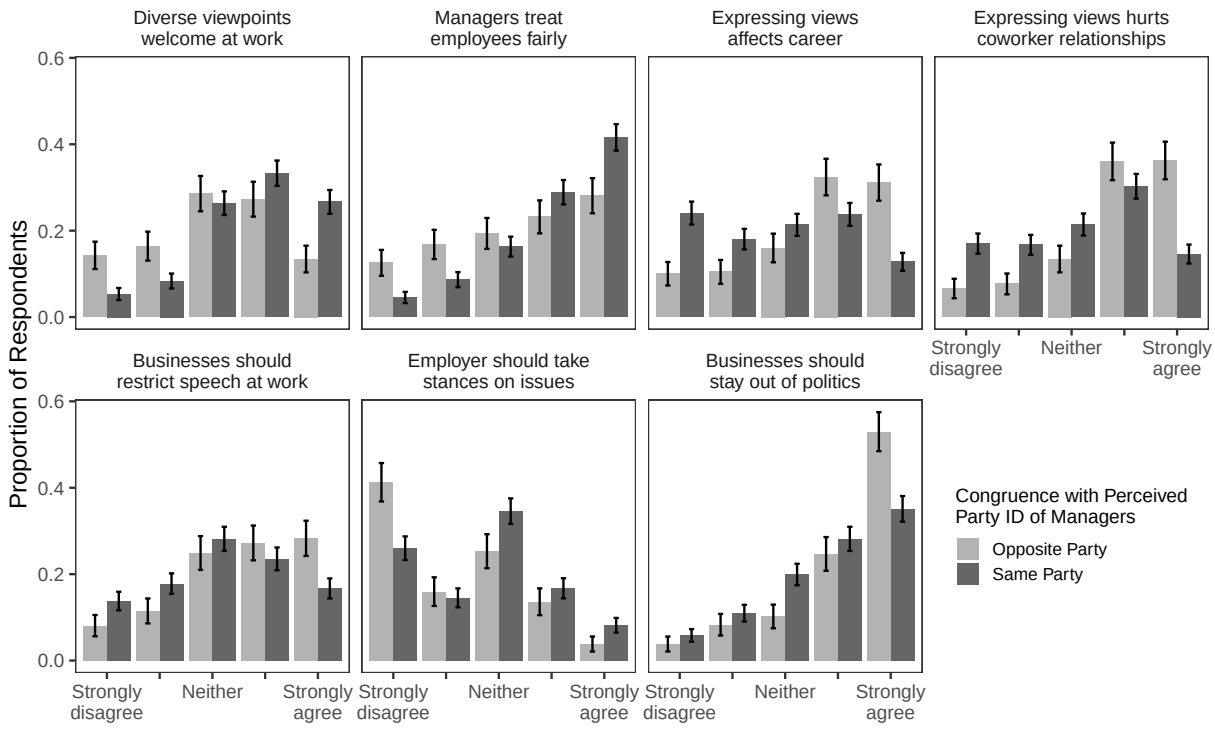


Figure 4: Views of Workplace Culture Regarding Politics. Error bars give 95% confidence intervals.

employer mobilization that such actions can actually *decrease* support for the political candidates employers are seeking to promote (Frye et al. 2025).

Second, opposition to politics in the workplace is even stronger for workers who are politically cross-pressured. More than three-quarters of such respondents want businesses to stay out of politics entirely—14.4 percentage points more than workers who share their managers' party affiliation. Cross-pressured workers are also significantly more likely to feel that political diversity is not welcome at work, think that managers treat employees unequally on the basis of their political beliefs, and fear negative consequences for expressing their views at work. These asymmetries add important nuance to existing work demonstrating employees' distaste for employer mobilization.

One of our key theoretical expectations is that politics in the workplace can affect employees' likelihood of engaging their coworkers in political talk, and that those effects are likely conditional on employees' position within their workplace's political ecology. Building on results in Figures 2 through 4, we test this expectation by regressing respondents' frequency of political discussion

Table 1: Party Congruence at Work and Political Discussion with Coworkers

	Dependent variable:			
	Political discussion with coworkers			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Opposite party (corporation)	0.221*			0.172
	(0.093)			(0.107)
Same party (corporation)	0.654*			0.383*
	(0.081)			(0.098)
Opposite party (managers)		0.181		0.105
		(0.099)		(0.121)
Same party (managers)		0.621*		0.169
		(0.079)		(0.102)
Opposite party (coworkers)			0.054	−0.058
			(0.102)	(0.114)
Same party (coworkers)			0.718*	0.505*
			(0.079)	(0.091)
Party strength	0.187*	0.190*	0.190*	0.143*
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.035)
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,980	2,973	2,974	2,968

Note: *p<0.05; standard errors in parentheses.
All models are ordered logits.

with coworkers on the party congruence between respondents and their coworkers, managers, and their corporation or organization as a whole. Table 1 displays the main quantities of interest from the ordered logit models fit on these data. In all cases, the reference category is those respondents whose party congruence is ambiguous. We control for gender, education, age, social class, race, and strength of party identity, though we present only the last of these for parsimony.[7]

[7]Full model results are available in the Supplementary Information.

Although results support our overarching theory—that political participation in the workplace is contingent on workers' party congruence with their coworkers and overseers—we find unexpected patterns related to political counter-pressure. On one hand, sharing a party identity with one's corporation, managers, and coworkers consistently predicts increased engagement. This points toward a mobilizing effect of corporate activism for politically like-minded workers, who may feel supported and empowered to voice their own views when they perceive alignment those around them. On the other hand, we find no evidence that opposing the views of one's firm, managers, or coworkers has a chilling effect on political discussion. If anything, opposing the stance of one's corporation or firm is associated with *more* frequent discussion, suggesting that workers do not, in fact, worry that their jobs could suffer from speaking against political positions favored by executives. Finding that polarizing dynamics from elsewhere in contemporary American society do not carry over into the workplace would be a valuable update to existing literature, but we must not over-claim in an observational setting. In two experiments below, we show these relationships largely—though not entirely—extend to causal effects.

Experimental Evidence

We conduct two experiments to test the causal effects of corporate activism on employees' political participation. In Study 1, we find that corporative activism generally has a salubrious effect on employees' willingness to discuss politics in a workplace setting. As in the descriptive survey data, we show this effect is especially pronounced for workers who agree with the corporation's political stance. Even for those for whom the stance is less aligned, we observe only limited chilling effects on political talk. In Study 2, we show that effects of corporate activism are more pronounced for political discussion at work than for other forms of political participation that occur outside the workplace, but that activism can nevertheless shape employees' political engagement more broadly. Like in Study 1, we find asymmetric effects in line with the value congruence theory we proposed above: Workers who share the corporation's political stance are particularly

likely to change their political behaviors both in and out of the workplace, but chilling effects on counter-pressured workers are limited.

Experimental Design

Both studies employed four-arm, non-factorial experiments, with subjects assigned to each treatment arm in equal proportions.[8] Our target population is part- and full-time employees, as those are the people most likely to be deeply embedded within the workplace, invested in a career in their current industry of employment, and dependent on their employer for salary, benefits, and the like. We therefore restrict our samples to American adults who are gainfully employed. We further aim to meet Census benchmarks on gender, age, race, and income, but we relax our quotas on income to account for the fact that subjects in the lowest income brackets are likely to be screened out by our employment requirement. Subjects employed across all industries are eligible to participate.

Subjects begin the study by providing information about the industry and occupation in which they work. They then respond to pre-treatment dependent variable items. Since the precise items differ across the two studies, we describe them in the respective sections below.

Next, we identify the political issue that is most important to each subject, and about which they are therefore likely to hold the strongest attitudes. In most behavioral studies, researchers select one or two issues around which to build the experiment (Combs et al. 2023; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Taber and Lodge 2006). These popular designs hold the *issue* constant across subjects, but not the *importance* of that issue to each subject (e.g. Ryan and Ehlinger 2023). This unobserved heterogeneity imposed by the design can critically affect estimates of average causal effects (Velez and Liu 2025; Vidigal and Jerit 2022).

Instead, we use an attitude elicitation task from Velez and Liu (2025) in which subjects are asked to describe a political issue about which they care deeply and provide their position on that issue in an open-ended format. This information is used later by a large language model to generate

[8]Hypotheses and analyses for Studies 1 and 2 are pre-registered at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/9M7SB and https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/FD49K, respectively.

a treatment that is uniquely relevant to each subject. To check whether the task identifies sensical issues as well as subjects' positions on them, we use GPT-4o to reformat the unstructured textual input into a Likert-style survey item, asking subjects the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement about the policy they just provided. On a six-item scale, approximately 91% of subjects in both studies indicate they "strongly agree" with the statement, and about another 6% indicate they "agree," suggesting the task successfully retrieves information about subjects' strongly held political attitudes.[9] Subjects respond to batteries designed to estimate their levels of agreeableness and conflict avoidance, as well as a standard set of demographic items, before proceeding to the treatment.

All treatment stimuli are generated using a call to GPT-4o with three pieces of information: the subject's industry of employment, the issue they identified as being important to them, and their position on that issue. In each treatment arm, GPT-4o generates a one-paragraph public statement from a business in the subject's industry, designed to mimic statements that might be actually released by real companies.[10] All names of companies or corporate executives included in the generated statements are fake.

The precise content of the public statements varies by condition. Subjects in the control condition read a statement about recent activities undertaken by the firm, such as a new product or last quarter's earnings report. We use this condition to provide an (at least ostensibly) non-political baseline. Subjects in the "neutral" condition read a statement in which the fictional business discusses the subject's preferred political issue but avoids taking any sort of stance on it or using any language that could signal political ideology. We use this condition to assess how subjects' willingness to discuss politics may be affected by the mere mention of politics (Bondi et al. 2025), a topic which citizens often imbue with a sense of conflict (Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021). We then include "pro-attitudinal" and "counter-attitudinal" conditions, in which the firm takes a stance on the issue that is either consonant or discordant, respectively, with the subject's pre-treatment

[9]Less than 1% of subjects in either study indicated any form of disagreement.

[10]We built redundancies into the experimental pipeline in order to salvage any cases that might have experienced technical issues with GPT-4o calls. However, these redundancies were never needed.

Table 2: Examples of Treatment Stimuli

Control
At Apex Analytics, we are excited to share some of our recent activities that underscore our commitment to innovation and excellence in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry. Under the leadership of our CEO, Dr. Emily Harper, we have successfully launched a state-of-the-art data analytics platform, Streamline Insight, designed to provide our clients with deeper, more actionable insights to drive their business decisions. Additionally, our team has been actively engaged in a series of groundbreaking research projects in collaboration with leading academic institutions, focusing on sustainable technologies and advanced AI solutions. These initiatives reflect our dedication to pushing the boundaries of what is possible and enhancing the value we deliver to our clients.
Neutral
Elicited attitude: "I care about the environment because we all share this planet."
At GreenBuild Construction, we recognize the importance of our shared responsibility in caring for the environment. As a company dedicated to constructing safe and sustainable structures, we are committed to implementing practices that minimize our ecological footprint. Our CEO, Sarah Thompson, emphasizes that our actions today will shape the world of tomorrow. We are continually exploring innovative methods and materials to enhance the environmental sustainability of our projects. By fostering a culture of environmental stewardship, we aim to contribute to the well-being of our planet and future generations.
Pro- or Counter-Attitudinal
Elicited attitude: "I believe that healthcare should be free for all."
At Maplewood Health Services, under the leadership of CEO Dr. Jane Ellison, we firmly believe in providing high-quality healthcare that is accessible and affordable to all. However, we respectfully argue against the notion that healthcare should be entirely free for everyone. Our experience has shown that a sustainable healthcare system relies on a balanced model where contributions from individuals, employers, and the government ensure that resources are available for ongoing innovation, the latest medical technologies, and comprehensive care. Completely eliminating costs could lead to overburdened systems, reduced quality of care, and diminished incentives for healthcare professionals. We advocate for a model that maintains affordability while ensuring the highest standards of care and continued advancements in medical treatment.

position. Table 2 shows illustrative examples of treatment stimuli in each condition. In the case of neutral and pro- or counter-attitudinal treatments, Table 2 also notes the exact text entered by the subject during the attitude elicitation task. Manipulation checks, presented in the Supplementary Information, show the treatments were successful in cueing the intended corporate stances.

Our flexible treatment pipeline allows us to ensure each subject receives a stimulus that is relevant to them, both in terms of their career focus and their preferred political issues. At the same time, however, it introduces the possibility that we could be presenting compound treatments; corporate statements generated through this process could inadvertently cue other factors that affect subjects' political participation intentions. One method of mitigating the risk of biasing effect estimates from compound treatments is to use many different versions of the treatment text (Fong and Grimmer 2023). Treatment effect estimates are thus calculated by effectively marginalizing over all unmeasured stimuli unintentionally introduced through the treatment generation process. In this sense, creating a fresh stimulus for each subject may actually minimize any threat posed by our flexible design.

We enforce treatment compliance by removing subjects who spend fewer than six seconds reading the stimuli. In a pilot study, our stimuli averaged 110 words in length, meaning subjects spending fewer than six seconds on the treatment would need to be reading at more than quadruple the pace of an average American adult (Brysbaert 2019). 183 subjects were dropped for this reason in Study 1, and 168 were dropped in Study 2. The results we present in the main text are thus local average treatment effects. We present intent-to-treat estimates in the Supplementary Information, alongside balance tests showing that compliance is not systematically related to treatment assignment.

Study 1: Corporate Activism and Political Talk

We first aim to assess the overall effect of corporate political position-taking on employees' willingness to discuss politics at work. After reading the corporate statement that comprises our treatment, subjects respond to two dependent variable items. Our first dependent variable seeks to capture behavioral preferences. We tell subjects the research team is organizing a follow-up study where participants will discuss the subject's preferred political issue in a five-minute virtual chat with a worker from the business that purportedly produced the statement. Subjects are asked, on a binary scale, whether they would be willing to participate in the follow-up study. Relative to more

standard survey items, we view this as a higher-stakes decision for subjects. Choosing whether to come face-to-face with a colleague in their industry to discuss a political issue approximates more closely the decisions employees must make in their own workplaces, including potential ramifications for their social relationships and career trajectories.

The second dependent variable mirrors a pre-treatment item and asks subjects, on a Likert scale, how often they would like to discuss politics with their coworkers if they were to take a job at the firm that produced the statement. This item clearly elicits a more hypothetical consideration, but one that nevertheless helps us capture behavioral preferences.

This dual-variable design enables us to test our hypotheses in three different ways, all of which we pre-registered. The binary behavioral measure lends itself to two methods: a simple difference-in-means test and a quasi-repeated measures design (Mutz 2011), in which we use logistic regression to control for pre-treatment willingness to engage in political discussion at work. The Likert-style self-reported attitude item facilitates a repeated measures test, which we conduct with a difference-in-differences estimator.

We administer our experiment to 2,010 subjects from the CloudResearch Connect panel. We calculate our sample size to achieve 80% power to detect an average treatment effect of 0.1 on the difference-in-means test (i.e. ten percentage points, as this dependent variable is binary), under the presumption that the repeated measures test is likely to be much more precise (Bowers 2011; Clifford et al. 2021). This same sample size provides 80% power to detect a minimum treatment effect between 0.192 and 0.223 standard deviations on the repeated measures test, depending on the hypothesis being tested.[11]

Figure 5 shows the effect of each treatment on subjects' willingness to discuss politics at work. Since most of our hypotheses are directional, we plot 90% confidence intervals to facilitate one-tailed hypothesis tests at the pre-registered $\alpha = 0.05$ level. These intervals are represented by the thick error bars in Figure 5. We also provide 95% confidence intervals, represented by the thin error bars, which correspond to two-tailed tests at the same significance level.

[11] Standard errors were estimated from a small pilot study.

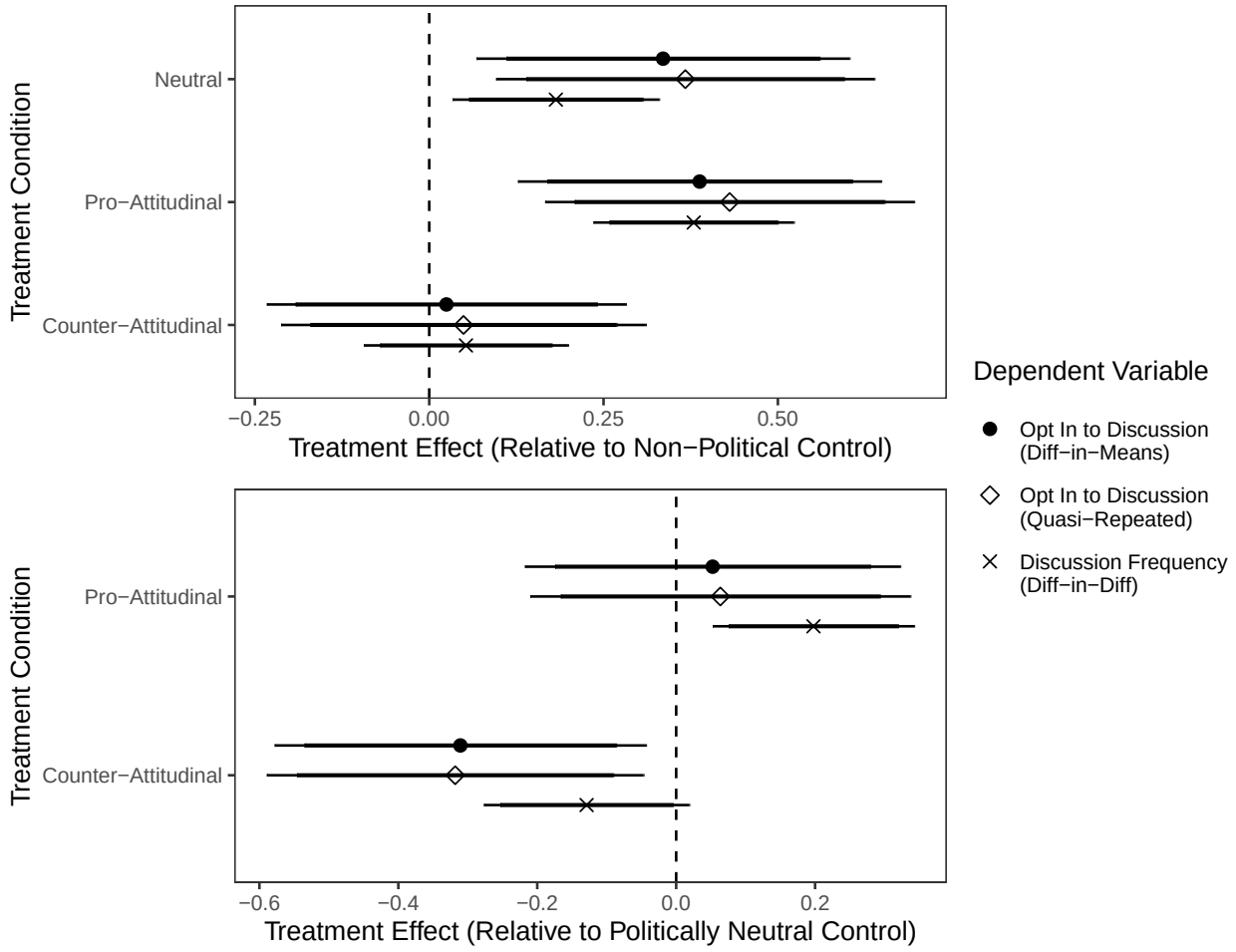


Figure 5: Effect of Treatment on Willingness to Discuss Politics, Relative to Non-Political (Top) and Neutral (Bottom) Controls. Thick and thin error bars give 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Full tabular results in Supplementary Information.

The top plot in Figure 5 provides treatment effect estimates relative to the control (applying to Hypotheses 1, 2a, and 3a) and the bottom plot provides estimates relative to the neutral condition (applying to Hypotheses 2b and 3b). As discussed above, we pre-registered three analyses for our two dependent variables, which are differentiated by shape. Difference-in-means and quasi-repeated measures tests apply to the binary behavioral dependent variable, while the difference-in-differences test applies to the self-reported attitude variable. The latter is scaled to be distributed standard normal in order to enable visual comparison across models.[12] Results are similar across

[12]Interpretations, however, are slightly different. Difference-in-means and quasi-repeated measures models are interpretable in terms of percentage points, while difference-in-differences models are interpretable in terms of standard deviations.

all analyses, although the repeated measures test tends to produce smaller standard errors, as expected.

Relative to the non-political control, politically neutral statements have a positive effect on employees' willingness to discuss politics in the workplace. Effect estimates range from 0.153 standard deviations in the repeated measures test to 0.367 percentage points in the quasi-repeated measures test, and all are statistically significant.[13] This relatively strong evidence for Hypothesis 1 suggests that corporations can promote political talk among their employees by simply signaling that politics is an appropriate topic in the workplace.

Interestingly, the effects of the neutral statement are very similar to those of the pro-attitudinal one. The two binary dependent variable tests are nearly identical across conditions while the effect estimated by the difference-in-differences model nearly doubles in magnitude. Somewhat contrary to expectations, corporate statements had no effect on discussion intentions when they ran counter to subjects' stated attitudes, with null effects across all three tests. We therefore find support for Hypothesis 2a but not for Hypothesis 3a. Examining results for pro- and counter-attitudinal statements holistically, however, still provides some support for our theory of value congruence; despite having null effects relative to the control, counter-attitudinal statements still produce less political talk than pro-attitudinal ones do.

The countervailing effects on workplace conversation are a bit clearer when comparing pro- and counter-attitudinal statements to politically neutral (instead of non-political) ones. As seen in the bottom plot of Figure 5, when subjects were randomly assigned to read a corporate statement that went against their pre-treatment attitudes, they were about 31 percentage points less likely to volunteer to engage in a conversation with an employee on the topic of the statement. Pro-attitudinal statements had no effect on the behavioral measure.

The self-reported attitudes test shows even clearer effects moving in opposite directions. When the statement *affirms* subjects' pre-treatment attitudes, their self-reported willingness to engage in discussion increases. When the statement *goes against* their pre-treatment attitudes, it decreases.

[13]The Supplementary Information contains full results in tabular form, including p-values calculated using permutation tests to avoid assumptions about functional form in our discrete dependent variables.

The two effects viewed in conjunction indicate countervailing forces, whereby employees who learn they disagree with their employer retreat from engaging in political conversation. We thus find mixed evidence for Hypothesis 2b and mostly consistent evidence for Hypothesis 3b. In sum, these two treatment conditions suggest the potential for corporate activism to divide workplace political talk by ideology, where employees who feel supported by their employer are more likely to speak out while those who feel counter-pressured experience no effect on their participation. The downstream effect of this asymmetric mobilization, however, is that the political views expressed in the workplace will not be representative of those actually held by employees. In the Supplementary Information, we show that these treatment effects are not moderated by any pre-treatment variables, including conflict avoidance, party ID strength, and demographic characteristics.

Study 2: Effects on Participation Outside the Workplace

Study 1 established that corporate activism can affect employees' willingness to discuss politics at work, and that these effects are at least partially conditional on the degree of value congruence between employees and their employers. In Study 2, we seek to understand whether corporate activism has spillover effects on political participation outside the workplace. We use the same experimental design as in Study 1, but modify our dependent variables to include a wider range of political actions.

We ask subjects, on a Likert scale, how likely they would be to take a range of actions if they were to take a job at the firm that produced the statement they read. In addition to discussing the political issue with coworkers at the fictional business, we also asked how likely subjects would be to discuss the issue with family and friends, post about the issue on social media, write a short letter to their Congressional representative explaining their opinion on the issue, vote in the upcoming national election, and donate to non-profit organizations that share their opinion on the issue.[14]

[14] After fielding the study, we noticed a typographical error in one of the answer choices. To rule out the unlikely possibility that our results were distorted by this error, we fielded a corrected version of the battery on a smaller sample. Results of the corrected study are available in the Supplementary Information and suggest that, if anything, results from the main study are conservative.

Expanding the menu of political actions enables us to isolate the effect of activism on workplace actions, relative to similar actions occurring outside the workplace. We cannot tell from Study 1, for example, whether corporate activism affects employees' political participation more broadly or whether there is a particular feature of the workplace environment that helps drive the effect on political talk at work.

During the pre-treatment survey battery, we also asked subjects *how often* they typically engage in each of the six political actions. Since the pre- and post-treatment batteries differ slightly in their wording, this is a quasi-repeated measures design (Mutz 2011). Like in Study 1, we estimate treatment effects using regression to control for subjects' pre-treatment willingness to engage in each political action.

We recruit 1,999 subjects, again from CloudResearch Connect. Any subjects who participated in Study 1 were ineligible for Study 2. Using standard errors estimated from Study 1, we calculate our sample size to achieve 80% power to detect a treatment effect of 0.15 standard deviations.

Figure 6 shows the effect of each treatment on subjects' willingness to engage in each political action, which are represented by different shapes. As in Figure 5, thick and thin error bars give 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively, to facilitate one- and two-tailed hypothesis tests at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level. The top plot provides treatment effect estimates relative to the control, and the bottom plot provides estimates relative to the politically neutral condition. Variables are standardized and models estimated with OLS, so effect sizes are interpretable in terms of standard deviations.[15]

Focusing first on subjects' likelihood of dicussing politics with coworkers, we again find strong mobilizing effects of politically neutral and pro-attitudinal corporate statements. Relative to the non-political control, neutral statements increase subjects' engagement with coworkers by 0.25 standard deviations. Effects of pro-attitudinal statements are more than double that.[16] The coefficient representing the effect of the counter-attitudinal treatment even carries a positive sign,

[15]Results using ordered logit models are very similar and are available in the Supplementary Information.

[16]As with Study 1, full tabular effects are presented in the Supplementary Information, including p-values calculated using permutation tests.

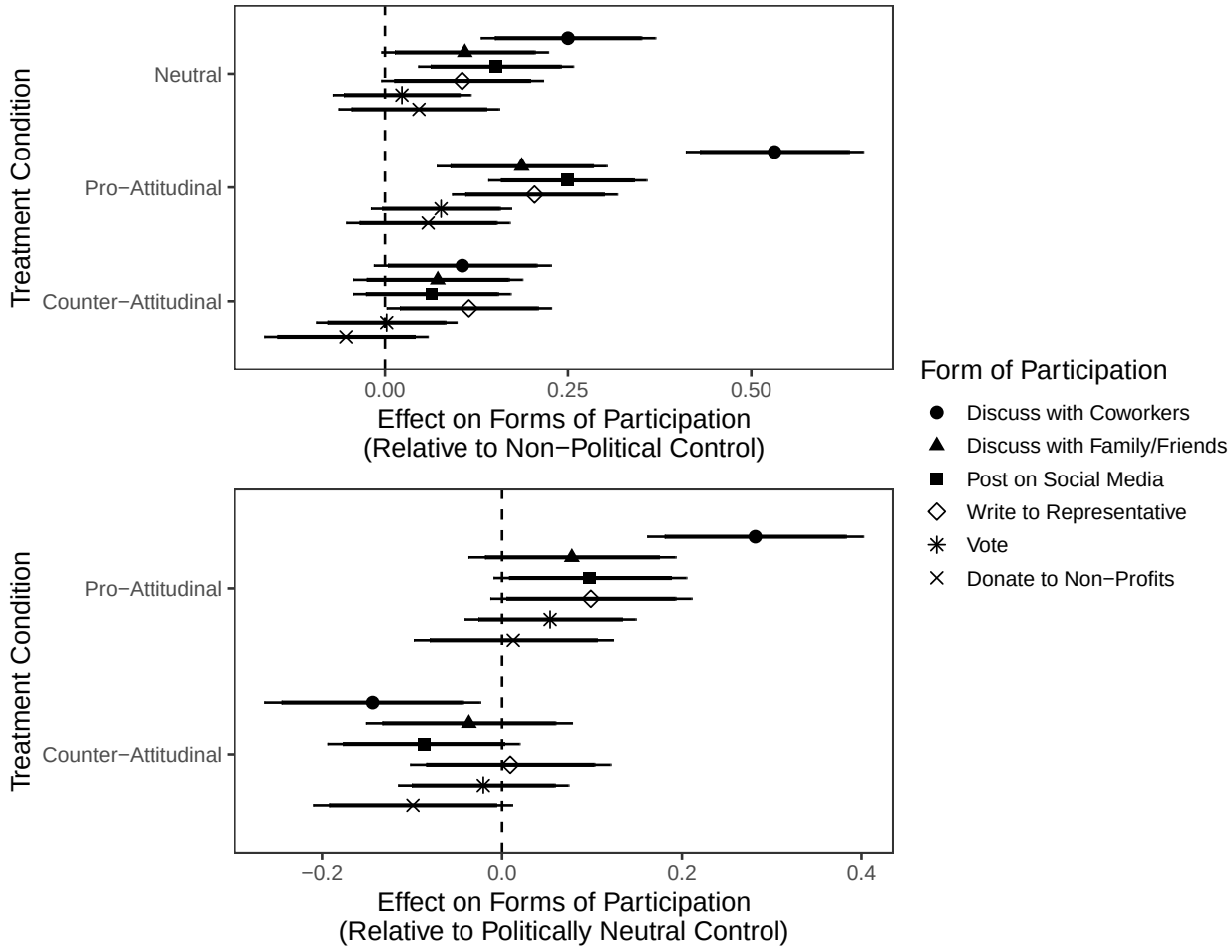


Figure 6: Effect of Treatment on Forms of Political Participation, Relative to Non-Political (Top) and Neutral (Bottom) Controls. Thick and thin error bars give 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Full tabular results in Supplementary Information.

indicating increased discussion with coworkers. Relative to the neutral condition, pro-attitudinal statements still have a strong positive effect on discussion with coworkers, while counter-attitudinal statements have a slightly smaller—but still statistically significant—negative effect. These results replicate our findings from Study 1 and provide additional support for the notion that corporate activism has, overall, a salubrious effect on employees' political talk at work, despite some evidence of a chilling effect on counter-pressured workers.

Examining other political actions employees could take outside the workplace, we see some evidence that corporate activism has spillover effects on political participation more broadly. Politically neutral statements increase subjects' likelihood of discussing politics with family and friends,

posting about the issue on social media, and writing to one's representative. The same is true of pro-attitudinal statements, though the effect on discussion with family and friends is statistically significant only when compared to the non-political control. Counter-attitudinal statements' effects on other dependent variables are generally null when considered in totality. Nevertheless, when compared to the neutral condition, effect estimates for many other dependent variables are of notable magnitude and in the expected direction—positive for pro-attitudinal statements and negative for counter-attitudinal ones. This divergence is suggestive of the possibility that corporate activism may have a polarizing effect on political participation outside the workplace, but since effect sizes are slightly smaller than the 0.15 minimum detectable effect for which we powered the study, we cannot draw strong conclusions either way.

Finally, we explicitly compare effect sizes across forms of participation. In most cases, the effect of corporate activism on employees' likelihood of discussing politics with coworkers outstrips its effect on likelihood of discussing with politics with family and friends, providing support for Hypothesis 4. On one hand, discussion with coworkers could simply have more room to move; we established in Figure 2 that contemporary American workers talk politics with family and friends much more frequently than with coworkers. On the other hand, it is notable that we observe such strong effects on an action in which Americans are generally loathe to participate in the first place.

We speculated at the outset that a broader consideration underlying this pattern is that workers may feel particular pressure to participate in (or abstain from) political actions that could be considered more public in nature. If an employee suspects their manager or even corporate leaders could catch wind of their political views and actions, they may be especially likely to toe the company line or refrain from participation entirely (Hertel-Fernandez 2018). Through this lens, it makes sense that we observe stronger treatment effects on discussion with coworkers, discussion with family and friends, and posting on social media—all actions about which an employer could learn through surveillance or word-of-mouth. By contrast, writing to one's Congressional representative, voting, and donating to non-profit organizations tend to be more private actions and could even be undertaken anonymously. The more muted effects we see for those dependent

variables may reflect the fact that subjects are less likely to expect either reward or blowback from their employers for engaging in such actions.

Discussion

Taken together, the descriptive survey data and two experimental studies of American workers we present here reveal three main insights into corporate political activism and patterns of employee political participation. First, corporate political activism shapes employees' willingness to engage their coworkers in political discussion, regardless of whether effects are evaluated relative to a non-political or politically neutral control. Because a corporate political statement represents a departure from everyday business updates, the non-political control most closely approximates a firm that takes no proactive political action. Our finding that positional statements of any kind do not reduce willingness to participate in discussion relative to that baseline suggests that a firm's public engagement with a political issue—regardless of the position taken—communicates that political topics are appropriate in the workplace, thereby lowering perceived social costs of expression on average.

Second, this mobilization is asymmetric, concentrated among workers whose views align with their employer's stance. While we find minimal evidence that corporate activism is demobilizing among any segment of the workforce, the effect of asymmetric mobilization is to produce a distorted representation of employees' political views. The workplace has historically been valued as one of the few settings in which Americans regularly encounter political outgroup members—a source of heterogeneous exposure that may be particularly valuable as residential sorting and media fragmentation have reduced cross-cutting contact elsewhere (Mutz and Mondak 2006). To the extent corporate activism selectively mobilizes ideological allies while chilling—or at least not facilitating—the expression of dissenters, it risks eroding precisely the form of political interaction that makes workplaces democratically valuable. The magnitude of this distortion would vary based on the opinion homogeneity of a workplace, an aspect that may become more consequential

as partisan sorting by occupation continues to intensify (Chinoy and Koenen 2024; Frake et al. 2024).

Our observational data reinforce this picture from the employees' vantage point. Workers who are politically cross-pressured relative to their managers express greater fear of retaliation, perceive their workplaces as less welcoming of political diversity, and are more likely to endorse the view that businesses should stay out of politics entirely. Yet the same workers do not substantially reduce their observed frequency of political discussion at work. One possible explanation for these inconsistent findings could be that the chilling effects of counter-attitudinal corporate speech primarily operate on affect rather than behavior; employees who feel cross-pressured may become more anxious about political talk without immediately withdrawing from it. Whether that anxiety accumulates over time into genuine behavioral withdrawal, or whether it affects the quality and candor of the discussions that do occur, are important questions for future work.

Third, the effects of corporate political speech are not confined to the workplace; activism also shapes employees' likelihood of engaging in political participation beyond the firm, though effects are strongest for forms of participation that employers can plausibly observe. Politically neutral and pro-attitudinal corporate statements increased subjects' willingness to discuss the issue with family and friends, post about it on social media, and write to their Congressional representative—suggesting that corporate messaging can prime political engagement more broadly. These spillover effects are consistent with the idea that employers can function as civic mobilizing agents, activating political identities and lowering psychological barriers to participation even in domains well beyond the firm (Hertel-Fernandez 2018). To the extent this behavior occurs outside the workplace, it signals firms' potential to make in-kind contributions to their preferred political causes. Even in a post-*Citizens United* era, corporations need not expend large sums of money to have an impact on the political sphere—they can activate their employees to do it for them.

Within this pattern, effects on workplace discussion consistently outstrip effects on other forms of political participation. The involuntary nature of workplace social networks may amplify this asymmetry (Cramer Walsh 2004); unlike friendship and family ties, work relationships cannot eas-

ily be curated to minimize ideological friction, so corporate political messaging carries an outsized influence over the perceived norms and costs of political talk in those relationships. More broadly, effects were notably weaker for private forms of participation—voting, donating, and writing to one's Congressional representative—than for publicly observable actions such as discussing politics with coworkers or posting on social media. Workers may be especially responsive in domains where their employer can plausibly observe and reward or penalize their behavior, while retaining greater autonomy in more private political acts. The finding that treatment effects are strongest precisely where political discussion is currently least common—among coworkers—suggests that corporate political activism has the potential to meaningfully reshape patterns of political interaction in the American workplace.

We see several avenues for future research. Our experiments necessarily abstract away from the social dynamics that shape real workplace political interactions. Because most employees occupy a subaltern role and frequently do not share the same social group memberships as their superiors, the power dynamics and identity relationships between workers and management may substantially condition the effects of corporate messaging beyond what our designs capture. Future work should examine how source characteristics—including the perceived identity of corporate leadership, the social distance between employees and the executives who make political statements, and whether messaging arrives from direct supervisors or distant executives—moderate the effects documented here (Frye et al. 2025). Employees who are more financially vulnerable or lack alternative employment options might also be especially sensitive to corporate political cues, as the coercive potential of employer pressure plausibly scales with workers' economic precarity (Hertel-Fernandez 2018).

Our design also elicits behavioral intentions toward a fictional firm in an anonymous survey setting, which removes the economic coercion that features in prior work on employer mobilization. Effects in this setting could be driven by fear of retaliation or by the legitimating and signaling functions of corporate speech; we are unable to distinguish between the two pathways here. Relatedly, our experiments present a single corporate message in isolation, whereas real employees receive multiple, potentially conflicting political signals from employers, coworkers, and

the broader media environment over time. Understanding how cumulative and competing signals interact to shape political behavior represents an important direction for future research. Finally, political party is not the only group delimiter that weighs on political participation. To the extent our findings also vary along demographic lines, they promise to contribute to important literatures on race, ethnicity, and political behavior (Carlson, Abrajano, et al. 2020).

Our results carry implications for corporate decision-makers. The fact that employees respond to corporate political messaging even in a contrived setting where economic coercion is less acute implies that corporate speech carries genuine civic power, with implications for how we understand businesses as actors in democratic life (Chatterji and Toffel 2019). Firms navigating the tension between corporate civic responsibility and employee relations may find that acknowledging political issues without advocacy achieves the goal of promoting political engagement while avoiding the ideological resentment that can accompany positional statements. If the alternative is making no political statement at all, engaging in corporate activism appears to have minimal trade-offs when firms opt for neutrality: The overall climate for political participation improves without concentrating its benefits among employees who already agree with the firm's position.

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