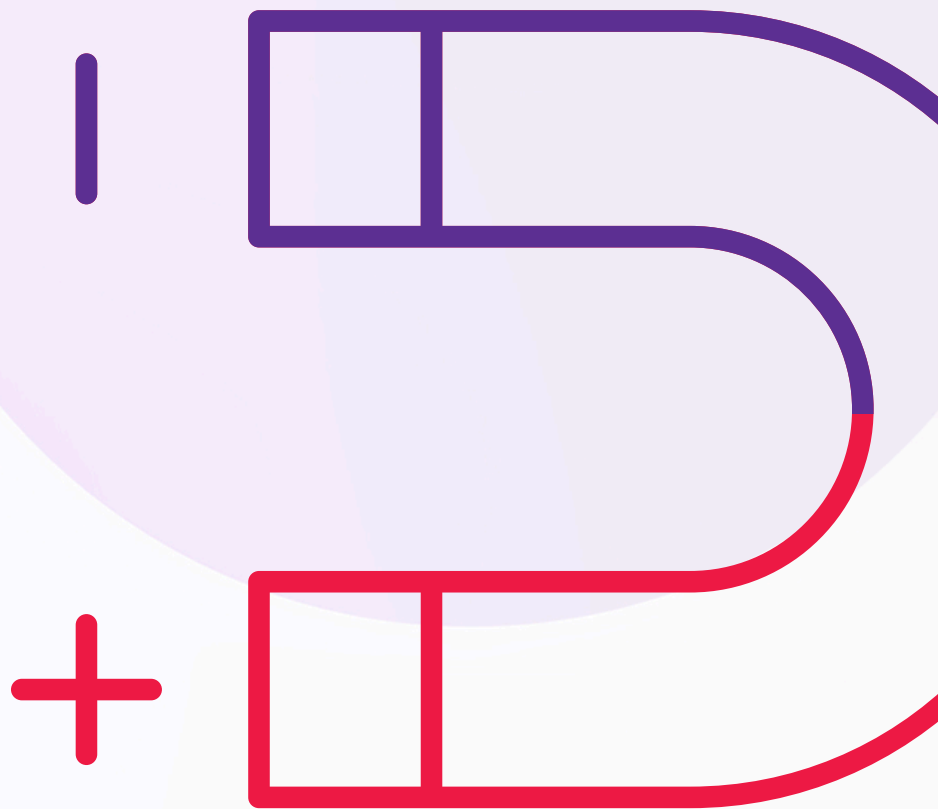




HUMAN RESOURCE  
CREDENTIALING & LEARNING

INDIVIDUAL | ORGANIZATIONAL

# Managing Political Polarization in the Workplace





HRCI is the premier credentialing and learning community for the human resource profession.

For 50 years, HRCI has set the global standard for HR expertise and excellence through its commitment to developing and advancing those in the people business. HRCI helps HR professionals and businesses achieve new competencies that drive results by creating and offering world-class learning and by administering eight global individual certifications and three organizational certifications. Today, over 500,000 HR professionals in 150+ countries have achieved HRCI certification as a mark of high professional distinction.

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**New HRCI surveys show many HR professionals are impacted by political conflict in the workplace—and most feel unprepared.**

**Here are some steps you can take.**

# Introduction: A Polarized America

The United States is arguably more politically polarized today than at any other time in modern history.

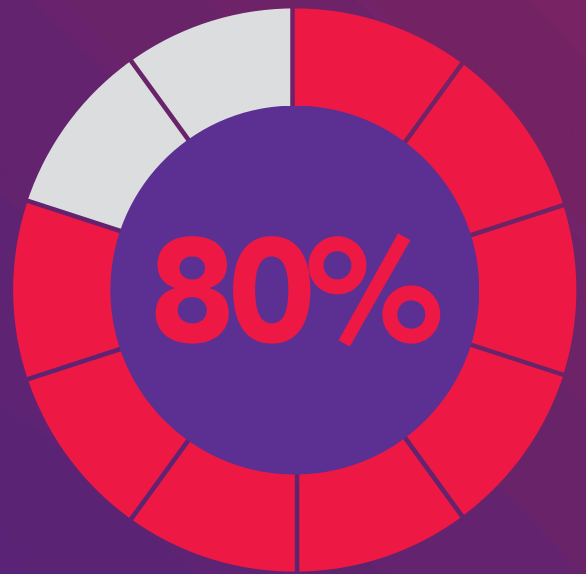
According to 2024 Gallup polling, the number of Americans who describe themselves as “moderate” was 34%, the lowest point since the organization began gathering such data in 1992.

Meanwhile, the number of Republicans who identify as “conservative” rose to 77% and the number of Democrats who identify as “liberal” rose to 55%—both all-time highs.

A polarized electorate has real-world consequences. A 2024 study by Pew Research Center showed that a large majority of Americans see little to no common ground between Republicans and Democrats in Washington on issues as varied as foreign policy, the U.S. economy, the environment, immigration, gun control, and reproductive rights.

Important, if unsurprising, is that this lack of common ground appears to extend beyond politics. In a deep dive on polarization in 2023 by the Edelman Trust Barometer, 62% of those surveyed worldwide questioned whether it was possible to achieve unity and a common purpose.

## A Sobering Statistic



*Only 20% of those surveyed in the Edelman Trust Barometer said they would be willing to serve as a co-worker with someone who strongly disagreed with them, implying that 80% would not.*





Some might argue that polarization in the U.S. is simply fallout from a series of heated elections. However, a new [study by the Polarization Research Lab](#) (a joint effort between the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, and Dartmouth College) found that polarization remains high before, during, and after U.S. elections.

“Partisan animosity appears to be deeply embedded in American society, rather than being a short-term response to electoral campaigns,” said Neil Fasching, who helped lead the research at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication.

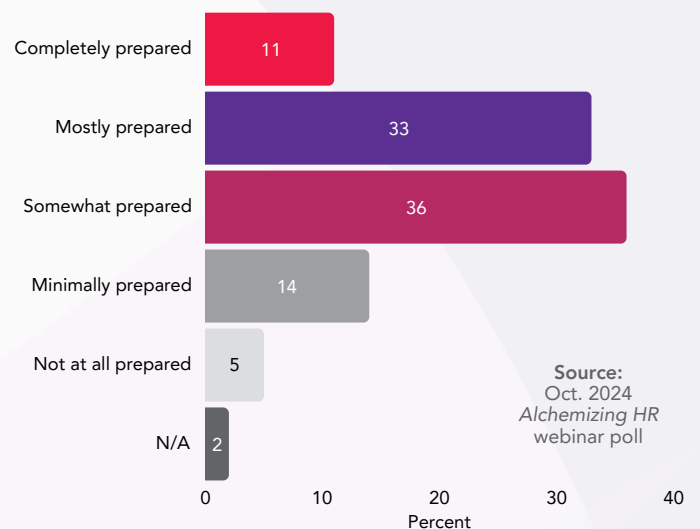
The data begs two important questions:

What will the impact of all that polarization be on America’s workforce, and how can managers respond effectively?



To get answers, HRCI queried thousands of human resources professionals around the world using multiple platforms, from email and webinar surveys to LinkedIn polls. The data shows that, while not all professionals see political problems in the workplace, many are uncertain how to manage such disagreements when they do arise.

“How prepared do you feel your organization is to handle politically charged discussions?”



A majority (55%) say they are somewhat, minimally, or not at all prepared to handle politically-charged discussions at work. About half (49%) say they do nothing specific to address such discourse.

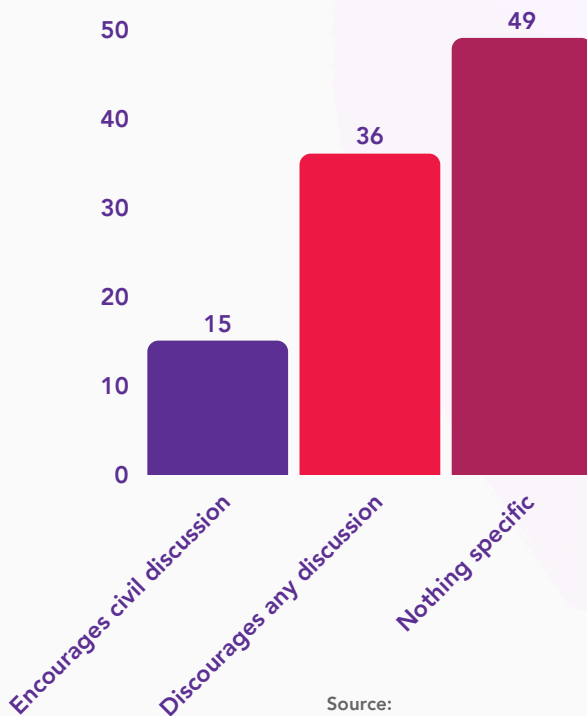
Anecdotally, some HR professionals describe a tense environment when asked about the climate around politics and political discussion in their workplace.

“When [people] say nothing, they speak volumes,” one Professional in Human Resources® (PHR®) reported.

Another Global Professional in Human Resources® (GPHR®) respondent was blunt, describing the political climate in their workplace in one word: “Hostile.”

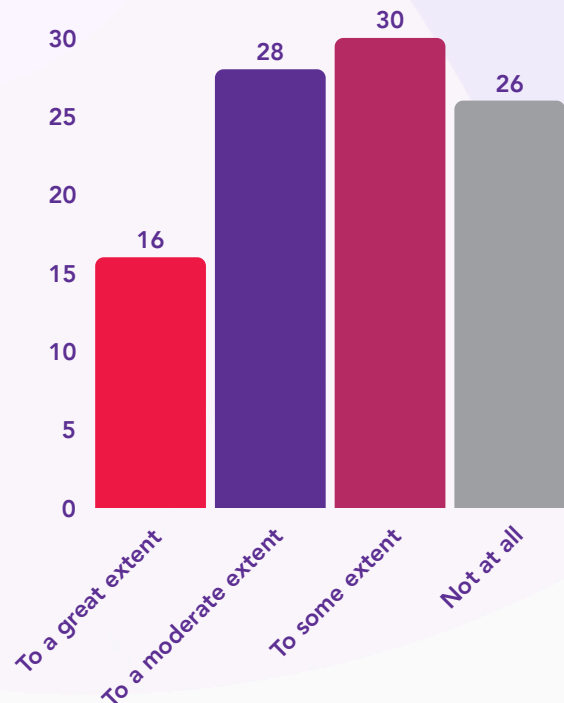
# Assessing the Data

“How does your company handle political discussion at work?”



Source:  
Feb. 2025  
LinkedIn poll

“To what extent are political differences among employees making it harder for you to perform your HR responsibilities effectively?”



Source:  
Jan. 2025  
Alchemizing HR  
webinar poll



"What we're finding is that HR professionals are uneasy about how to handle political conversation in the office, particularly now," said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI and co-author of the book [Alchemizing HR: Your Formula for the New Era](#).

"Many have not yet had direct encounters and perhaps that's a good thing. No matter the situation, it is important for HR professionals to be prepared to handle conflict and disruption in the workplace. The good news is that we can take concrete steps to do that."

## The Problem with Politics

While it may seem practical to simply ask employees to refrain from political discussion at work, such a request is often unrealistic. The reason is simple: politics are a reality in the lives of most employees, and they are going to talk about it—especially during times of transition. In a world where politics often influences identity, and elections dominate the national conversation every two years, it is naive to think that people can simply check their interest, passions, and beliefs at the office door.

The proof is in the HRCI survey data.

For example, more than a quarter of HR professionals (27%) have witnessed or heard a political argument at work—and not just recently.

"In the 2016 election, many employees and customers [had strong opinions about] the election result even though it had nothing to do with our company," one Associate Professional in Human Resources® (aPHR®) said. "Our GM had to work to discuss these issues with the media, customers, and employees. I, as HR, was also involved in these discussions—and with the union—on ways to get people back to work and to be productive."

The arguments are not only about candidates and political affiliations, nor are they limited to employees arguing with one other. They can also be about specific issues, from reproductive rights to climate change. And headlines are full of stories about workers who clash with their own companies over policy.

As one Senior Professional in Human Resources® (SPHR®) recalled, "During the height of the Israel Gaza dispute, we had employees of Palestinian descent who wanted us to be more forceful against the administration than we were."

More than half (59%) of those surveyed said that political polarization impacts relationships with clients or customers.

"I hear a lot of complaints—mostly stress and anxiety—about how the political atmosphere is impacting my business partners," one Professional in Human Resources® (PHR®) said. "But all I can do is listen and be empathetic. I cannot agree or disagree with their sentiments, which is very difficult at times."

# Assessing the Data

## 28%

Respondents who said political polarization has impacted their organization's ability to hire



Source for all:  
Feb. 2025  
HRCI survey

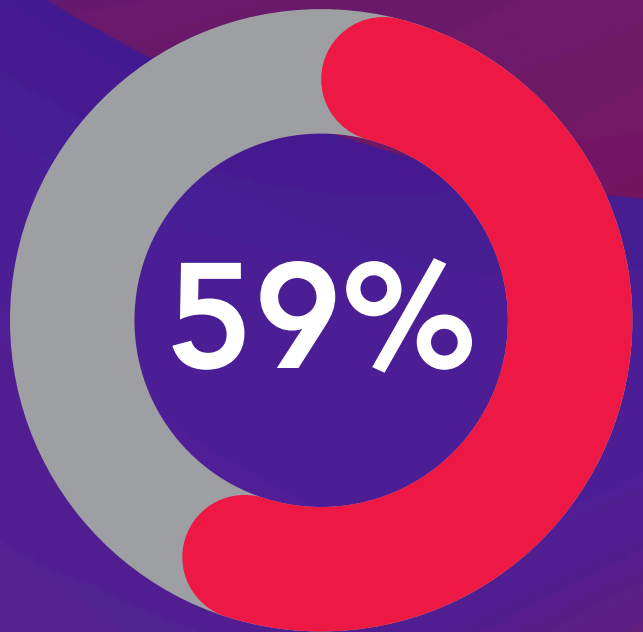
## 15%

Respondents who said differing political views have caused an employee to leave



## 59%

Respondents who said tensions over political issues are impacting relationships with clients/customers





# SPOTLIGHT:

## What Political Experts Say

The opinion of HR experts on political polarization in the workplace is important, but what do political experts have to say?

To find out, HRCI sought help from [Stratalys](#), a research firm that conducted a focus group with 33 political insiders, including congressional staffers, lobbyists, think tank executives, administration, analysts and others.

Most political professionals think partisanship is a significant, and growing, obstacle and suggest that companies should be selective about taking public positions on political issues.

Almost three quarters of respondents said increasing partisanship is a significant barrier to bipartisan engagement and almost 90% said they expect current political trends to continue. More than half (58%) say that partisanship is the biggest barrier to engaging policymakers.

Accordingly, 59% said that organizations should only take a public policy stance on issues that directly impact their business. Only 31% said they should do so on broader social or cultural issues.



In the workplace, many insiders see political discussion as inevitable and say that organizations should find ways to ensure that discussions remain civil and respectful.

For example, 44% said companies should allow political discussions but not encourage them. Another 38% said they should encourage open dialog with clear guidelines and training on civil discourse. Only 16% said companies should discourage political discussions.

**“Our experts clearly think that it is all but impossible to keep political discussions out of the workplace,”**

said Karen Buerkle Kaludov of Stratalys. “So it is important to manage those discussions and maintain a professional environment.”

## Building a Positive Culture

Today's political arguments can become heated because politics and personal identity are often tightly interwoven. Disagreements go beyond toeing the party line on politics or policy. When people discuss issues such as reproductive rights, immigration, and gun control, they are talking about personal values.

"Managing these differences starts with understanding that conflicts over political views are rarely different than many other clashes in the workplace," Dufrane said.

"Polarizing views are not unique to politics and religion," she said. "They often regard work itself—like a disagreement over a product launch or an approach to a particular business challenge."

The conflict resolution culture in your workplace will govern how all such clashes are managed, with politics being just one area. A management team that allows employees to be themselves, values all perspectives, and encourages respectful conversation will likely create a positive culture that minimizes conflict and makes resolution easier.

**"A balanced approach that combines respect, managerial culpability, and HR support can effectively manage uncomfortable or hostile interactions."**

*Amy Dufrane*

## The Case Against a Policy on Politics

Does your company need a policy on political activity? There is no one-size-fits-all answer, but HRCI surveys show that a large majority of companies (86%) do not have such a policy.

HR experts say that, while creating a hard-and-fast rule forbidding political speech may be tempting, it's rarely the best solution. Too often, these policies are heavy-handed, lack clarity, and are difficult to enforce.

"Implementing formal protocols to manage differing views in the workplace can be problematic," Dufrane said. "A better approach is to create an environment that encourages respect and values each employee's perspective. The goal should be a culture that allows individuals to express themselves authentically—and diplomatically—without fear of retribution."

If your company wants to create a policy, it may be best to keep it simple. For example, explain that all political viewpoints are respected, that discrimination is not tolerated (and often illegal), and that all conversations must be civil and respectful. Practical guidelines may also be helpful, such as avoiding overtly political jackets, shirts, hats, and signs in the workplace or in work-related email or social media posts.

"Try to define what *should* take place before you discuss what *should not*," Dufrane said. "Presenting and explaining guidelines, rather than a list of prohibited activities, is key to setting the right tone."

It is also important to realize that policy alone is never enough. Managers and HR professionals must be prepared to discuss and explain any company policies, and to reinforce those policies through their actions.

"Managers have to walk the talk," Dufrane said. "Those who do can positively reinforce company values and culture. But those who don't can just as quickly undermine it."

# Building a Positive Culture

By working together, HR and leadership can ensure a harmonious workplace where differences are resolved constructively—maintaining productivity, minimizing turnover, and enhancing organizational culture. Here are some steps you can take to create a positive environment at work.

## TAKE A TOP-DOWN APPROACH

As Julius Campbell stated in the 2000 football film, *Remember the Titans*, “Attitude reflects leadership.” Employees will look to managers to discover what is acceptable—in the office, at events, and even on email and social media.

Dufrane’s co-authored book, [Alchemizing HR: Your Formula for the New Era](#), notes that communication should “demonstrate partnership, aid decision-making, air individual grievances, and act as a channel for collective bargaining.” A healthy culture can develop from the ripple effect of modeled behaviors from the C-Suite.

## COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS UP FRONT

While you may not need a formal policy on politics (see p. 8), set the expectation that all workplace communication will be respectful and appropriate. There are many ways to do this, including onboarding, company town halls, team-building events, and even meeting structure, and it will look different at every organization. The goal should be to communicate clearly and repeat often.

## ESTABLISH CHANNELS FOR DISCUSSION

While many companies understandably shy away from politics—HRCI surveys show 36% discourage political discussion—employees do need opportunities to discuss political problems when they arise in the workplace.

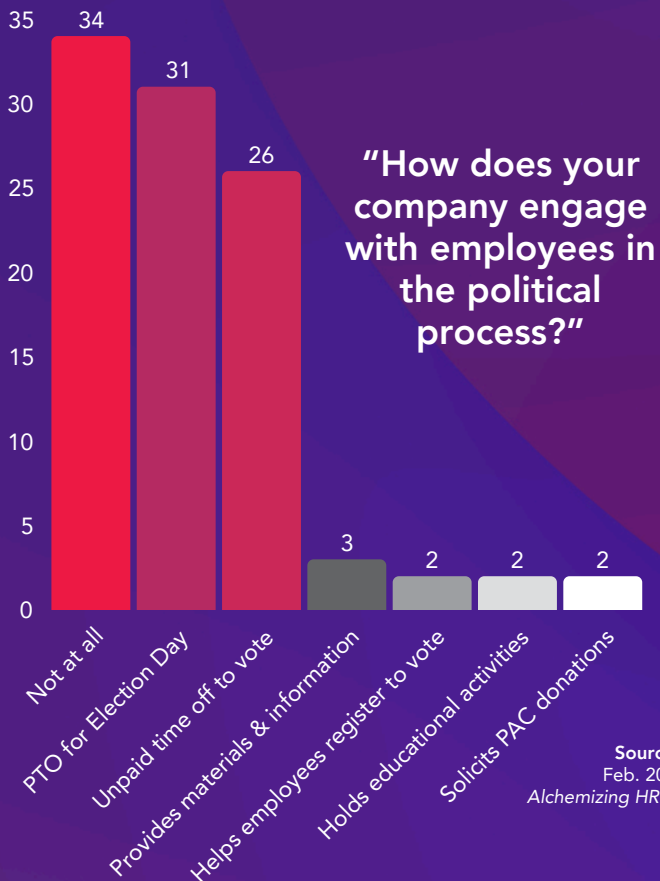
Forcing employees to “file a complaint” should not be the only avenue to constructive resolution. Accessible channels, like third-party mediation or company-appointed ombudspersons, can also be effective and may seem more personal. Additionally, conducting trainings to help employees understand conflict styles and resolution techniques can go a long way to prevent explosive arguments.

## ESTABLISH COOPERATION BETWEEN HR AND LEADERSHIP

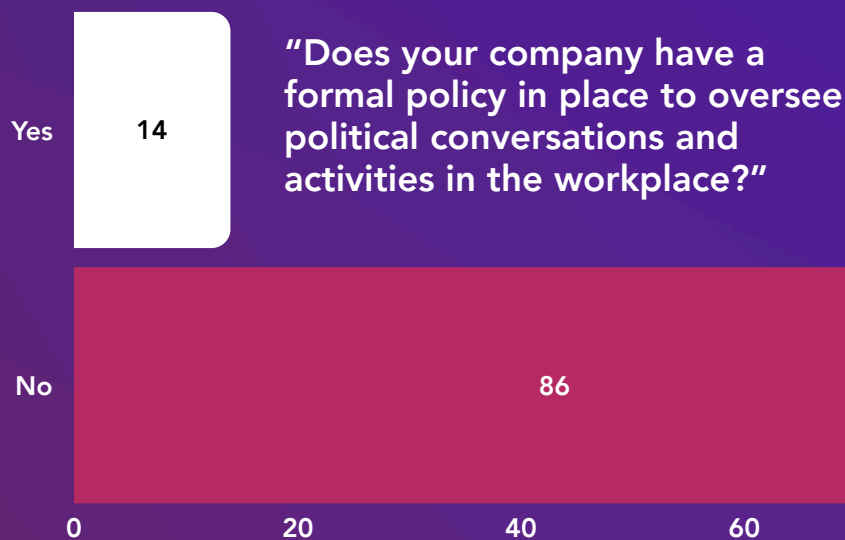
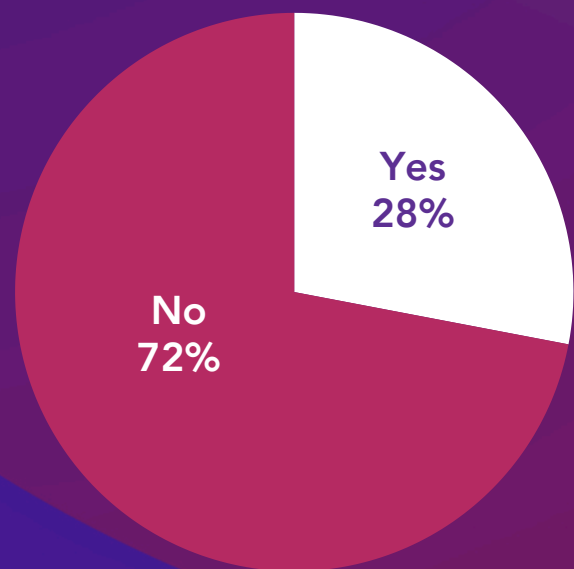
It is common for executives to delegate conflict management to HR, but effective resolution should involve both HR and management working in tandem.

While HR can provide the necessary training and guidelines on effective communication and conflict resolution, the primary responsibility lies with managers, who interface daily with their teams. Managers are directly responsible for ensuring team members adhere to behavioral standards and commitments. Without their accountability, conflicts are bound to escalate.

# Assessing the Data



**"Does management at your company hold a particular political point of view?"**





# Corporate Politics and Advocacy



Navigating political conflict can be more complex for organizations whose functions lie in politics and advocacy. Thousands of companies lobby at the federal, state, and local levels to protect their interests, shape regulation, support or oppose legislation, and impact policy. That is how the American system is designed to work, and so long as companies stay within the law—and most do—there is nothing inherently wrong with that.

In recent years, however, the waters have muddied as to whether it is advisable for organizations to declare positions on social issues. While it was once axiomatic to avoid weighing in on divisive topics for fear of alienating stakeholders, many businesses have stated their positions in recent years—with widely varying results.

“Examples of political posturing are everywhere,” University of Pennsylvania professor Jill E. Fisch and University of Utah professor Jeff Schwartz wrote in the [Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance](#). “Today, we know where corporations stand on almost every politically contentious issue.”

In March 2025, the [University of South Carolina’s Center for Executive Succession](#) reported that, when compared to initial opinions, “individuals’ positive opinion of the firm declined by 18% on average when the CEO took a partisan stance.”

The report further indicated that “taking an apolitical stance by stating that the company would not engage in political discourse increased positive opinions by 10%...especially when the company’s industry and location led participants to expect a political leaning.”

Whatever the case, the trend begs an important question: If an organization is vocal on social issues, how can it ask its employees to stay silent?

The answer, Dufrane says, is it can’t. She contends that the solution comes back to creating a respectful and inclusive culture that allows for discourse but discourages unproductive conflict.

“A company that is taking positions on polarizing issues is going to have a harder time managing value disparities in the workforce because they are injecting these issues directly into the office. Employees are going to discuss it.”

AMY DUFRANE

## Steps to Take:

### Fully explain the company’s position

Do not announce positions without first explaining them internally and providing context. Reiterate how the position relates to the company’s business and aligns with its corporate and cultural values, and how those values are demonstrated in the workplace.

### Keep an open dialog

Understand that, no matter what position your company takes, there will be employees who disagree. Ensure there are forums where these employees can be heard, have questions answered, and feel engaged despite a differing viewpoint.

### Be wary of overt partisanship

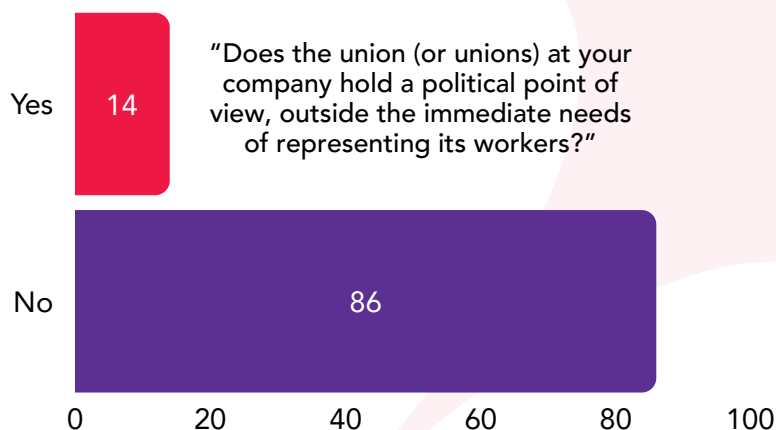
While many issues will be perceived as partisan, actual partisan behavior such as endorsing a candidate or a political party can be a much louder statement. Although it may be advantageous for your industry, such activities (and their internal implications and contingency plans) should be carefully considered.

# SPOTLIGHT: Union Activity

Union membership in the United States has declined substantially in the last 40 years, from about 20% of U.S. workers in 1983 to about 10% in 2023, [according to a Pew Research Center report](#).

Yet labor organizations still play a major role in many industries and are an important part of the workplace at many companies. Because many unions are heavily involved in politics, they can also add complexity to managing polarization.

HRCI surveys show that, among the professionals who deal with a union, 39% said that union holds a political point of view. Making matters more complicated, the political affiliation of many unionized workers appears to be in flux.



Source:  
Feb. 2025  
HRCI survey



While organized labor is traditionally a stronghold for Democrats, about four in 10 union members now lean Republican, according to a separate [Pew Research report](#). Many political experts say it is revealing that labor leaders were featured speakers at both political party conventions in the last presidential election.





The situation can add an additional dimension—and sometimes a challenge—to reducing political conflict in the workplace.

"HR professionals need to be very careful to recognize and accommodate workers rights and their relationship with their labor organization," said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI. "That means knowing the law and working together with employees and union representatives to ensure that everyone feels heard and respected while maintaining appropriate boundaries on political activities at work."

# Methodology:

HRCI administered surveys to thousands of certified HR professionals across multiple platforms between February 2 and March 3, 2025. This included multiple questions on HRCI's *Alchemizing HR* webinars, which drew 5,453 responses; the HRCI LinkedIn community, which drew 1,511 responses; and an email survey that received 308 responses. To ensure candor, respondents were allowed to reply anonymously.

# Get in touch

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