Navigating Workplace Political Expression in 2024

Gravity Research

Workplace political expression has become a **more difficult issue for companies to address.**

1 **COVID-era remote work fostered employee expression.** Companies accepted employees' political engagement in 2020. Now, not so much.

2 **Employees have grown more comfortable talking politics at work.** But most still want to keep political speech out of the office.

3 **The election is stoking political and societal division.** And it's likely to worsen as Election Day nears and rhetoric intensifies.

4 **Proactive steps go a long way.** Companies with clear, consistent workplace expression policies are best equipped to mitigate risk.

A lot has changed since 2020

In 2020, companies and employees alike were outspoken on societal issues. Now, in 2024, companies are quieting their engagement down and trying to get back to business — but some employees still want to engage

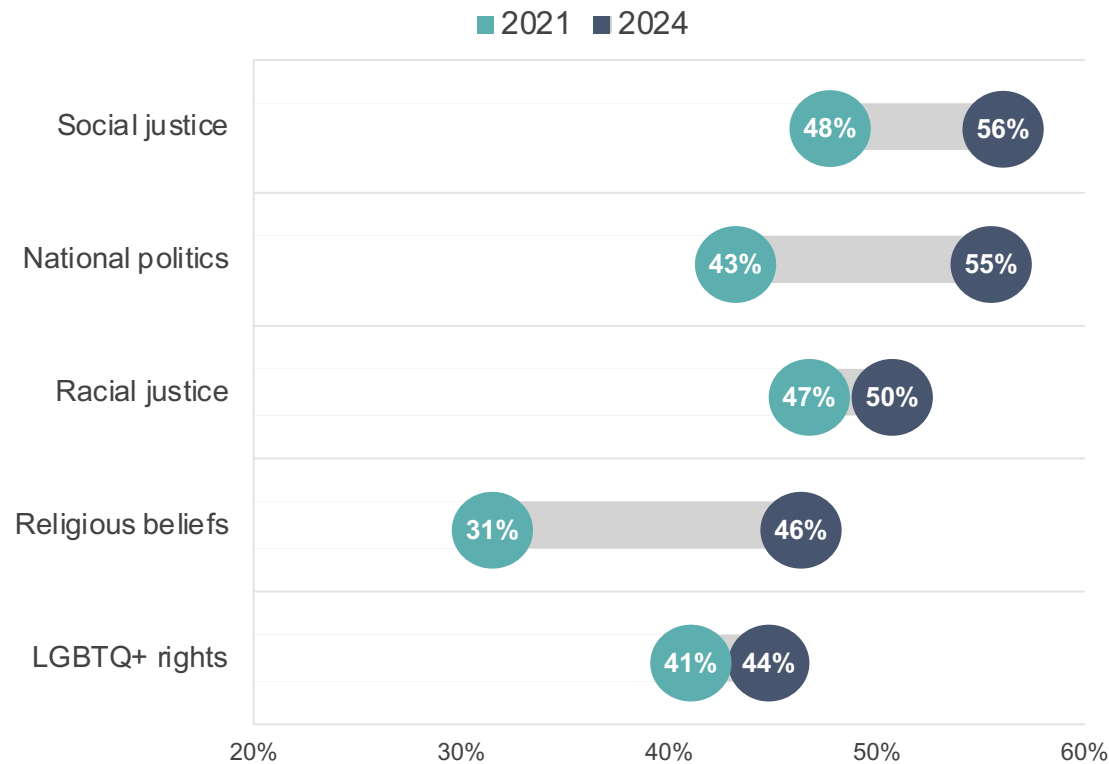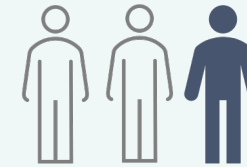|	**COMPANIES**	**EMPLOYEES**
2020	Facilitated **open discussion** about issues such as racial equity, DEI, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the workplace	Filled internal communication platforms with **discussion** about Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, and the election during remote work
2024	Quieter—taking **fewer public stances** on societal issues Engaging with societal issues that **align with business** goals or industry	RTO increases risk for **political apparel** and **in-office disruptions** Recently-hired **Gen Z** talks **more politics** and demands more from corporations

Growing comfort discussing politics at work amid **rising polarization**

More workers are comfortable talking about issues like national politics and religion in the office. While most do not regularly engage, rising polarization has caused political discussions to be more tense

Share of U.S. adults who say it's **"somewhat"** or **"very" appropriate** to discuss the following topics in the workplace[1]
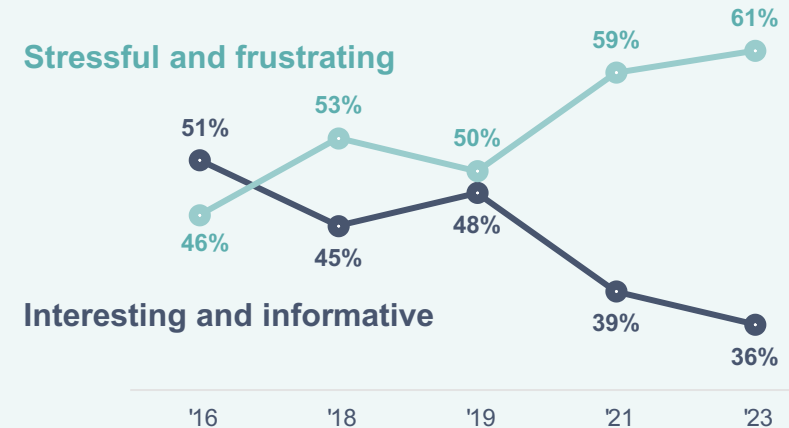
■ 2021 ■ 2024

Topic	2021	2024
Social justice	48%	56%
National politics	43%	55%
Racial justice	47%	50%
Religious beliefs	31%	46%
LGBTQ+ rights	41%	44%

20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

I talk about politics with coworkers **"always"** or **"often"**[1]

Nearly **1 in 3** workers

Talking about politics with **people I disagree** with is…[2]

Stressful and frustrating

	'16	'18	'19	'21	'23
Stressful and frustrating	46%	53%	50%	59%	61%
Interesting and informative	51%	45%	48%	39%	36%

Interesting and informative
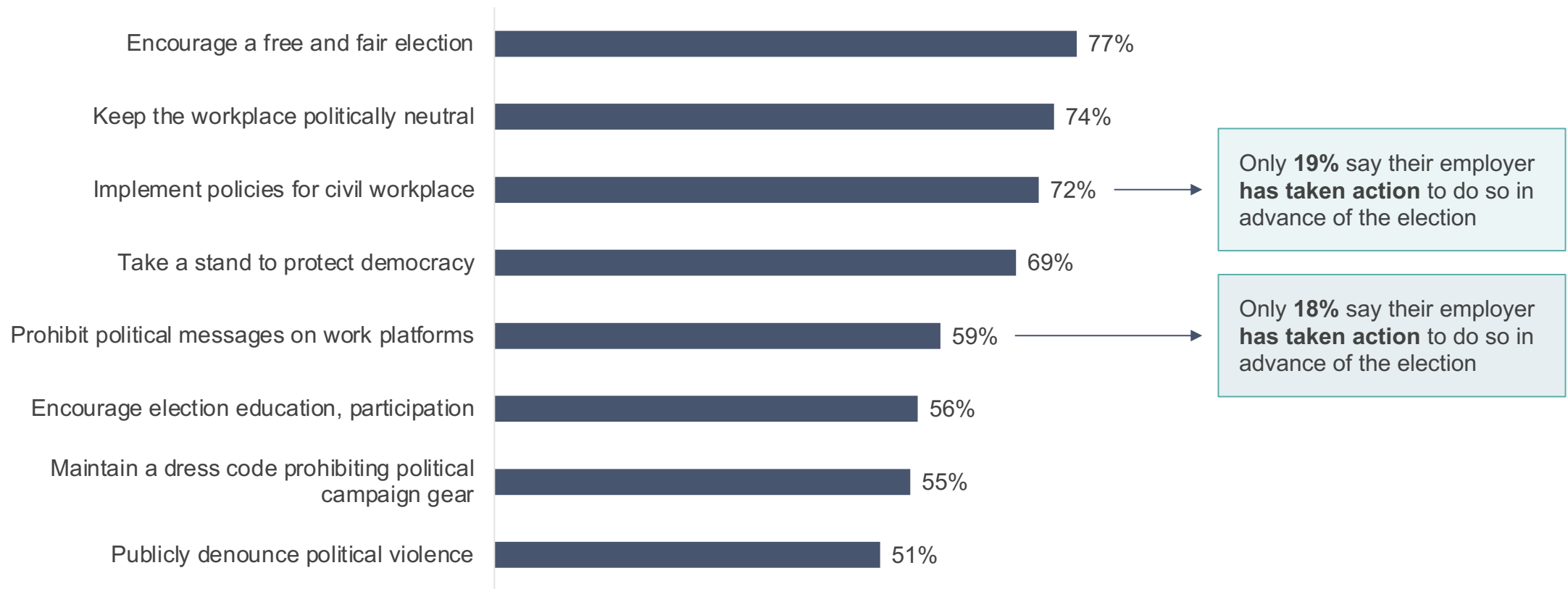
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Balance supporting civic engagement with limiting watercooler politics

Most people — including majorities of Democrats and Republicans — favor corporations encouraging neutral political engagement and discouraging polarizing conversations at work
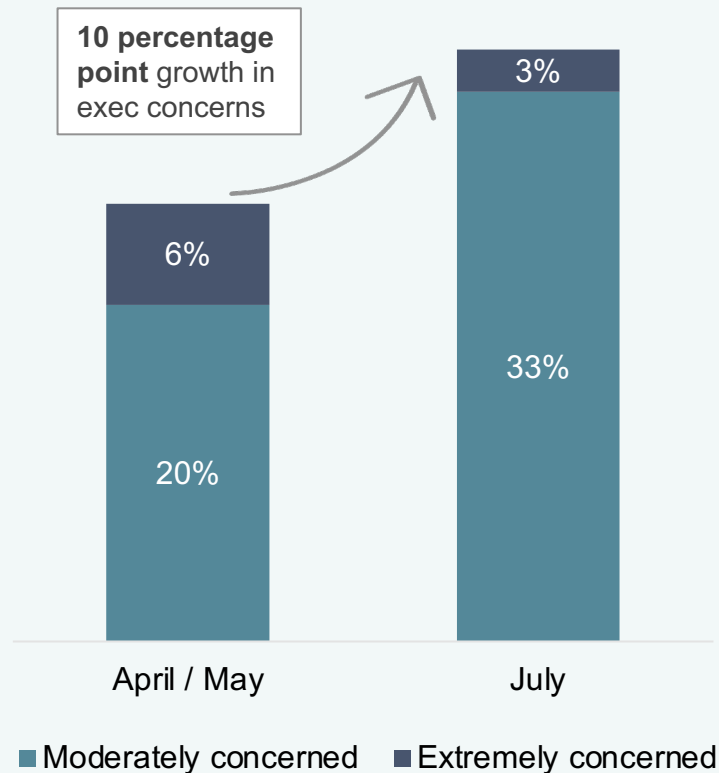
Share of employed adults who said businesses and employers should do the following during this election year

Encourage a free and fair election	77%
Keep the workplace politically neutral	74%
Implement policies for civil workplace	72%
Take a stand to protect democracy	69%
Prohibit political messages on work platforms	59%
Encourage election education, participation	56%
Maintain a dress code prohibiting political campaign gear	55%
Publicly denounce political violence	51%

Only **19%** say their employer **has taken action** to do so in advance of the election

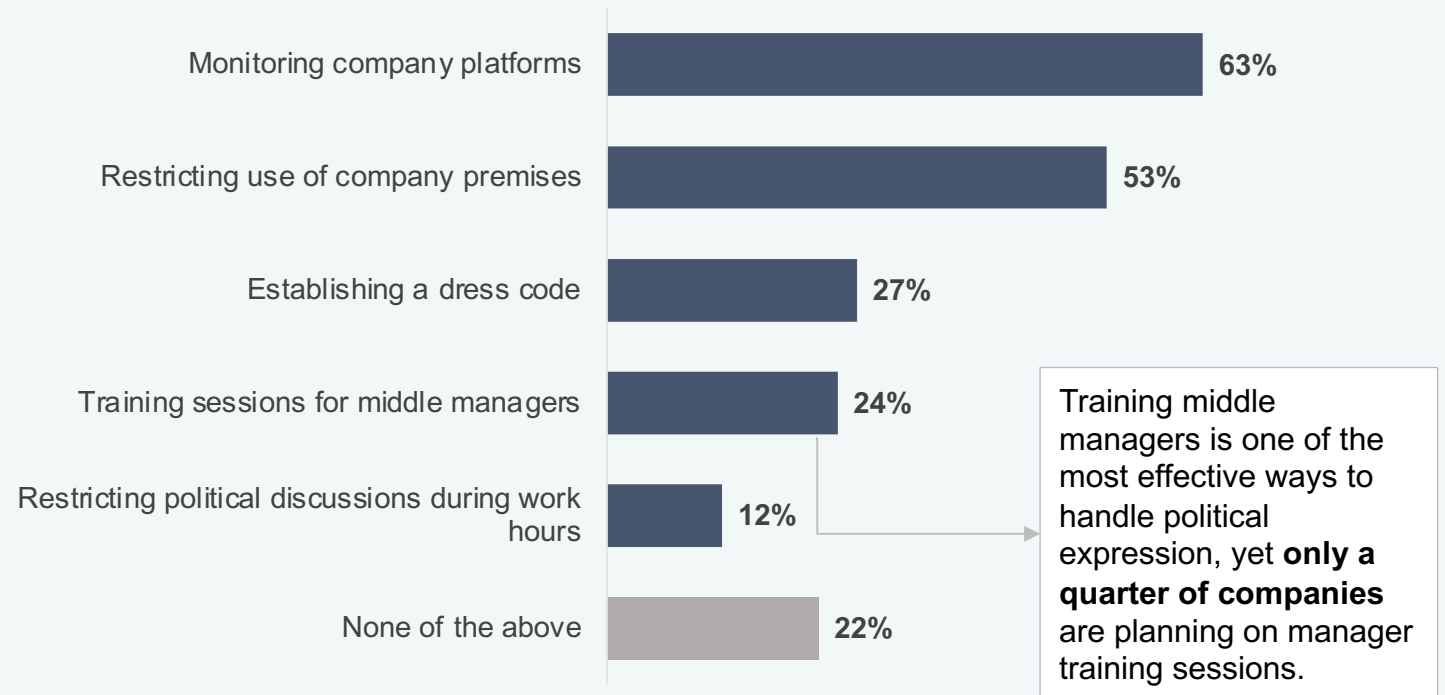Only **18%** say their employer **has taken action** to do so in advance of the election

Growing political expression concerns, but few proactive steps

That's according to Gravity Research's recent survey of our Corporate Insiders Group, a sample of senior executive decision makers and communicators, including leading voices in the Fortune 500. See our full methodology here

Share of executives who said they are **concerned about political expression in the workplace**

10 percentage point growth in exec concerns

April / May: Moderately concerned 20%, Extremely concerned 6%
July: Moderately concerned 33%, Extremely concerned 3%

- Moderately concerned
- Extremely concerned

Share of executives who said they **considering any of the following actions** as the 2024 election nears

Action	Share
Monitoring company platforms	63%
Restricting use of company premises	53%
Establishing a dress code	27%
Training sessions for middle managers	24%
Restricting political discussions during work hours	12%
None of the above	22%

Training middle managers is one of the most effective ways to handle political expression, yet **only a quarter of companies** are planning on manager training sessions.

Failing to address workplace political expression can serious consequences for your business.

EXAMPLE #1

Total political speech restrictions sparked internal & external backlash

Coinbase's move to halt statements on societal issues and politics, along with new workplace speech policies, sparked backlash from employees and competitors

Coinbase's 2020 ban on political speech drove business leader and employee backlash

CEO LIMITS POLITICAL SPEECH

- The CEO implemented a "political neutrality" approach
- The company limited corporate statements and employee speech on social or election issues

BUSINESS LEADER SCRUTINY

- Former Twitter CEOs Jack Dorsey and Dick Costolo criticized the company for neglecting its social responsibility

COINBASE DOUBLES DOWN

- Coinbase offered employees a severance package, rather than rescinding the "mission-first" policy
- ~5% of employees resigned over the policy

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Corporations must balance **over and under-regulating** employee speech

- Corporate **silence** — and silencing — on social and election-related issues **may alienate some employees**

- Failing to adequately address political expression concerns can cause **internal upheaval** and **external backlash**

EXAMPLE #2

Inconsistent dress code sparked Trump to call for brand boycott

Allegations that Goodyear banned MAGA and Blue Lives Matter attire but allowed Black Lives Matter and Pride spurred Trump to call for a brand boycott

Leaked Goodyear workplace policies led to viral social media scrutiny and boycotts in 2020

POLICY LEAKED ONLINE

- An internal doc. permitting Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ Pride attire, but banning Blue Lives Matter and MAGA items, sparked backlash

VIRAL BACKLASH

- Former President Trump called for boycotts, intensifying conservative criticism
- Trump's tweet caused Goodyear share price to fall by 6%

CLARIFICATION & POLICY CHANGE

- Goodyear affirmed its policy banning all political attire
- Updated rules allowed apparel supporting law enforcement, in addition to BLM and Pride
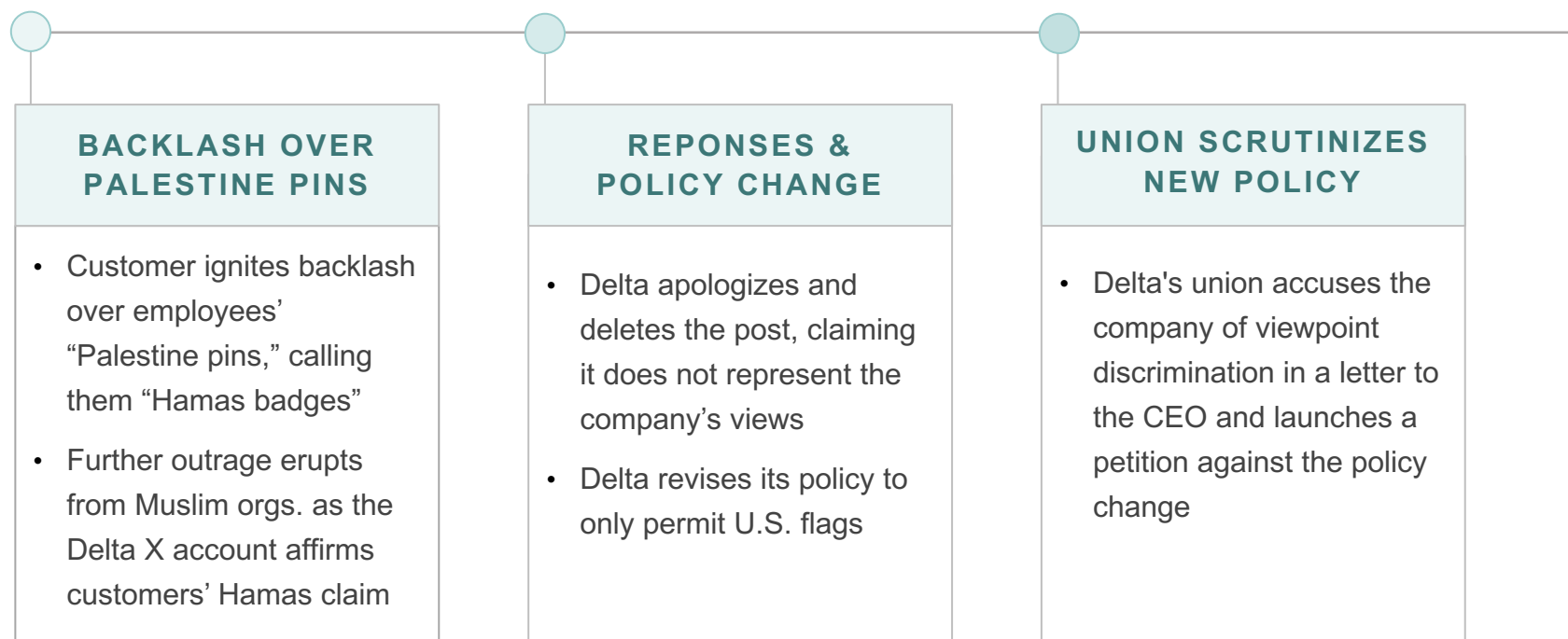
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Inconsistently applied** political attire policies won't work in 2024
- Candidates, especially Trump, **aren't afraid to call out companies by name** over their internal practices
- **Don't underestimate the power of the groundswell** and its impact on real metrics such as revenue and stock prices

EXAMPLE #3

Prioritizing customers over employees can lead to internal scrutiny

Delta limiting employee political expression for customers' comfort led union members to drive claims that the company discriminates and fails to protect workers

DELTA   In July, Delta's unclear response to uniform backlash drove scrutiny from its union

BACKLASH OVER PALESTINE PINS

- Customer ignites backlash over employees' "Palestine pins," calling them "Hamas badges"
- Further outrage erupts from Muslim orgs. as the Delta X account affirms customers' Hamas claim

REPONSES & POLICY CHANGE

- Delta apologizes and deletes the post, claiming it does not represent the company's views
- Delta revises its policy to only permit U.S. flags

UNION SCRUTINIZES NEW POLICY

- Delta's union accuses the company of viewpoint discrimination in a letter to the CEO and launches a petition against the policy change

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Companies with face-to-face consumer interactions face **higher risks of backlash** over political attire

- Policies **can't be situational**, as reactionary decisions can alienate staff or consumers

- Policy enforcement is vital to ensure employees' **personal views are not shared as company statements**

EXAMPLE #4

Disciplinary actions can be sensationalized, even for safety reasons

Terminations shocked some employees, as past employee protests proved successful; this shift away from tech's typical culture of free expression fueled the high volume of employee backlash and media attention

2024 protests from Google workers led to firings, legal action, and media backlash

KEY TAKEAWAYS

EMPLOYEE PROTESTS ON CORP. PREMISES

- Employees protested Google's contract with Israel on company premises
- Google fired employees citing safety reasons and workplace disruptions

POLICY CHANGE

- CEO Sundar Pichai urges employees to not discuss politics at work
- This marks a shift from the company's culture of free expression

EMPLOYEE LEGAL CHALLENGES

- Dismissed employees filed an NLRB suit, claiming protests were tied to duties and legally permitted
- Media coverage and social media criticisms ensue

- Companies **with a history of allowing political expression** will have a harder time walking it back than those that don't

- High-profile brands will draw **high-profile media coverage** vis-à-vis workplace political expression missteps

- **Disciplinary actions may expose companies** to alleged workers' rights violations

Proactive measures can prevent backlash and reputational harm

Companies implemented the following policies to proactively moderate workplace political expression

1

Limiting controversial topics on internal chat platforms

Salesforce created a policy limiting employee conversations on the the war in Gaza on Slack channels

2

Training employees to deescalate conversations

Hilton expanded employee training programs, teaching them to "lower the temperature" on political conversations

3

Leveraging ERGs to moderate expression

Apple decided with ERGs to suspend internal channels discussing the Israel-Hamas conflict

4

Restricting politics on company premises

Starbucks banned employees from promoting personal or political beliefs on or around company premises

Consistency is key when navigating workplace political expression

Companies must prepare and institute policies in advance to prevent conflict and misunderstanding around employee expression on the election

BE PROACTIVE

- **Be clear, proactive, and consistent in your policies** that limit political communication, attire, and demonstrations in the office

- **Ensure that employees understand** that political activity must not be linked to the company

- **Know your employees' rights**, as different states and even municipalities have different protections for workers' political speech

LEAN ON EMPLOYEES

- **Train managers and company leadership** on how to spot and address sensitive political discussions

- **Leverage ERGs** to gauge and manage employee expectations on political issues

- **Consider collaborating with employees** to make decisions on moderating internal political communication