

## Employers Have Vote on Politics at Work

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Never before has a presidential election had the potential to wreak as much havoc on workplaces as the 2008 election could bring to bear. Most people are accustomed to a measure of division between co-workers come election season, but this historic year will see possibilities unlike any other. For the first time ever, an African-American or a woman will lead the ticket for one of the major parties, while the other party will offer up the oldest (first time) candidate in history. The very nature of this campaign touches upon five of the touchiest subjects in the office: race, national origin, gender, sex, and age. As many employers have learned the hard way, discussions along these lines can lead to hard feelings, or could be used as evidence in a discrimination lawsuit to demonstrate a pattern of harassment.

The good news is that there are fairly simple solutions to these problems. Most employers are free to control employee chatter about presidential politics - just as they can prohibit most other forms of inappropriate communication at work. Private employers are not constrained by the First Amendment and a person's right to free speech. This means that they should not feel hampered in limiting what their employees can and can't say, even if the comments are made in the context of discussing politics. Moreover, even political debate entirely free of offensive topics can be addressed. If you notice that your employees are spending more time discussing the candidates' positions than they are focusing on work, you have the right to refocus their attention.

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