

Don't Get Stuck In The Political Bubble

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There is a famous quote attributed to New York film critic Pauline Kael about the 1972 presidential election: "I can't believe Nixon won. I don't know anyone who voted for him." That year, Nixon carried 49 states – at the time, it was the largest electoral landslide in U.S. history. Clearly, a lot of people the critic did not know had voted for Nixon. The quote still resonates and often is cited as an example of provincialism and how living in a bubble can cause one to miss the big picture. Recently, a video surfaced of a company meeting in which the management team reacted to the November 2016 election. From the video (which appears to have been recorded soon after election day), it is evident that management was unhappy about the election results. Senior officers expressed their sadness, said that they were offended that President Trump had won, and that they believed people who voted for Trump were extremists or were motivated by fear and xenophobia. After the video became public, the company issued a statement that the views expressed during the meeting expressed the personal feelings of the individual corporate officers and not the company as a whole. So, you may ask, what does all this have to do with employee relations? There is no question that the last election was extremely divisive and that the current political climate is, frankly, toxic. Putting aside one's feelings about politics or the last election, for employers, this example represents a teachable moment. Put yourself in that post-election meeting. Say you are an employee who voted for Trump. The company's senior leadership had no qualms discrediting your viewpoint and even referring to you as a xenophobe or extremist. In that type of atmosphere, would you be more or less likely to share your view in the workplace? Would you be concerned for your future at the company if you did? This isn't about one side or the other. Let's look at this the other way, as well. Say you voted for Hillary Clinton, and management held a party after the election celebrating Trump's victory, dismissed those who voted for Clinton, and called them names. How would that make you feel? Most companies pride themselves on promoting diversity, and on making employees feel welcome and comfortable in the workplace so they will want to perform their best for themselves and their employer. Therefore, management statements that could be seen as dismissing an employee's political choices or ostracizing employees for those choices doesn't help promote any of these positions. Aside from concerns over employee well-being or morale, there is another important point to consider: Almost every state prohibits voter intimidation or coercion, and many states have laws that expressly prohibit political discrimination or threatening to discharge an employee because of political beliefs. If an employee is disciplined or terminated and claims the decision was prompted by political discrimination in violation of one of these state laws, an election post-mortem vent session in which their political views were discredited will provide evidence to substantiate their allegations.

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Notably, this does not mean that management can't have political views or should feel compelled to suppress those views with their employees. However, these are very discordant times and politics have infiltrated aspects of society that used to be immune from such concerns (*i.e.*, sports and shoe sales). In today's heated environment, prudent employers think outside their political bubble. They recognize that not everyone in the audience may see things the same way, or votes the same way. To paraphrase the Kael quote, just because no one on the board knows anybody who voted for Trump or Clinton doesn't mean that none of the company's employees did.