

POLITICAL DISCUSSION IN THE WORKPLACE: AGREEMENT,  
APPROPRIATENESS, AND ENGAGEMENT

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Conversations in the workplace can often veer from job related content to more controversial subjects, such as politics. In the current political climate, views on political issues are becoming increasingly polarized, and could lead to emotionally charged discussions. This research was interested in looking at how political conversation in the workplace was perceived by employees. This study was specifically interested in whether agreement on a political conversation would lead a person to deem a conversation as appropriate to have in the workplace, and whether agreement would render them more likely to engage in that particular conversation. It was found that the degree of Agreement an individual had with the stance on the political conversation was sometimes related to whether they thought it was okay to have that conversation in a work setting, however it did not have bearing as to whether they were likely to engage in that conversation. Another area of interest was whether an individual's level of Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness would cause an individual to engage in a political conversation. It was found that those low in Emotional Stability were sometimes more likely to engage in political conversations in the workplace regardless of agreement on the political topic. Implications and suggestions for future research are further discussed.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

An organization is just like a city or town in that it has its own culture and unwritten social rules to follow. Organizational culture is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs, which control how people behave in the workplace (Jex & Britt, 2014). These shared values have a powerful influence on the employees in the organization and dictate how they behave, converse, and perform on the job. Organizational Culture can affect an employee's satisfaction as well as his or her well-being in the organization (Jex & Britt, 2014). Specifically, if there is a mismatch in the organization's actual culture, and the employee's expectation of what the culture should be, it could have a number of negative effects on the employee including: lower job satisfaction, general stress, and job strain (Jex & Britt, 2014). These negative side effects can also occur if those within the organization decide to act outside of the norms that are set in place (Hatton et al., 1999). The norms that are established within the organizational culture can dictate what is and what is not deemed appropriate to converse about at work.

People spend a large part of their lives at their place of work and many employees tend to socialize and converse with their coworkers. While at work, individuals may veer from job relevant conversation and discuss a myriad of other topics like their personal lives, values, and beliefs. There are topics that aren't job relevant, but are still considered appropriate and thus normal to discuss in the workplace, such as pop culture, sports, and family life. Then, there are conversation topics where the line between appropriate and inappropriate is blurred, and thus aren't normally discussed in the workplace. A few topics that can be deemed "taboo" or dicey to discuss in work settings include: religion, sex, and politics. While a lot of research has looked at the consequences and effects of discussing religion and sex in the workplace on organizational

culture, the research on the consequences and effects of discussing politics in the workplace is relatively light.

One of the reasons religion can be considered taboo to discuss in the workplace is due to the fact that if challenged, it can cause an emotional reaction from the person whose beliefs are being challenged. Religion can be something that is at the core of some peoples' identity, so an attack on the belief is an attack on oneself. Religion, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is defined as, "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Definition 4). Some psychological theories, such as Terror Management Theory, have posited that religious beliefs serve as a psychological function, specifically to calm the existential concerns that arise from humans' awareness of their own mortality (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). The theory states that in order for some individuals to make sense of the world, and cope with knowing that they will one day die, they turn to religion. Their religious beliefs form their construct of the world and calm their existential concerns. In this theory, disagreeing with someone's religion, challenges their construct of their world, and their foundational beliefs (Vail, Rothschild, Weise, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2009). If someone were to be challenged in this way at work, it could cause a strong emotional reaction and potential conflict in the workplace.

Another reason religion can be considered a taboo subject to discuss in the workplace is because it could open the door to potential discrimination. Per Title VII under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, organizations cannot make hiring or firing decisions based on religious orientation. Say an employee that was recently passed up for a promotion frequently discussed religion in the workplace, and that individual's religion differed from their supervisor. If it was known that those conversations made the supervisor uncomfortable, it could beg the question, "Was the

employee passed up for the promotion due to his or her religious beliefs or due to their job performance?” If the organization cannot prove that the employee was passed up for other job relevant reasons, then the organization could be vulnerable to a claim of religious discrimination (Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). Further, an individual has the legal right to discuss religion in the workplace, but it cannot reach the point where other individuals feel that the person discussing religion is being hostile, intimidating, or offensive. If the religious discussion reaches this point, then the coworker may have the right to sue the organization for a hostile work environment if the employer does not take actions to limit the instigators religious conversation (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964).

Discussing sex in the workplace can have negative effects on organizational culture and can potentially create a hostile work environment. The discussion of sexual activity in the workplace could potentially be legally considered sexual harassment. Sexual harassment creates an unlawful hostile environment (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). The discussion of sexual activity can be uncomfortable for other employees in the work area. If the other employees note to management that the discussion of sexual activity makes them uncomfortable, and management does not make an effort to stop the discussion and thus fix the uncomfortable work situation, then the organization could be sued for creating a hostile work environment. The employees could sue the organization for sexual harassment and prove to the court that complaints were made, and that management did not make an effort to relieve the situation (National Women’s Law Center, 2019).

The discussion of religion and sex in the workplace can have legally negative impacts on an organization, and thus have an effect on their organizational culture by creating hostile working environments. Unlike religion and sex, discrimination based on political beliefs is not



covered by law, so an individual could legally be let go for expressing their political beliefs at work. It's commonly believed that the First Amendment allows individuals the right to freely discuss politics in the workplace with no repercussions (deMeza & Jenero, 2016). This however is a misconception; the First Amendment generally applies the censorship of free speech in the government, and not private companies. This means the Constitution allows private companies to regulate speech in the workplace, or even ban political conversations entirely. Companies however do not typically completely ban political speech due to potential blowback from employees (Cox, 2014). Instead they may create policies on how political discussion at work can and should be framed to ensure that employees are respectful of one another, and that coercion doesn't occur (Snyder, 2016).

Politics have changed throughout the years. In 2014, the Pew Research Center did an in-depth analysis on the political environment in the United States of America, and how it has drastically changed over the past 30 years. Since 1994, politics have become increasingly polarized. As of 2014, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the moderate Democrat, compared with 64% in 1994. On the other end, 94% of Democrats are to the left of the moderate Republican, compared to the 70% twenty years ago. The number of Democrats as well as Republicans that identify themselves as moderate is decreasing drastically, creating a wide gap between liberal and conservative ideologies. Furthermore, the attitudes towards those of opposing partisanship has become increasingly unfavorable. In 1994, 17% of Republicans had a very unfavorable opinion of Democrats, and 16% of Democrats had very unfavorable views of Republicans. In 2014, the animosity across political lines nearly tripled with 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats noting they had strongly unfavorable attitudes towards the opposing party (Dimock, Kiley, Keeter, & Doherty, 2014).

Due to the invasive nature of news and media, the average American is bombarded with political information, although the degree they attend to this information varies. While politics isn't an everyday topic for Americans with mixed ideological views, it is one that is discussed quite veraciously among strongly liberal and strongly conservative citizens. Further, those who do discuss politics frequently prefer to have conversations with those of similar ideological views and have aversions to speaking with those that disagree with them (Westerwick, Johnson, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2007). Part of the reason that strongly liberal and strongly conservative individuals avoid political discourse with individuals who oppose their point of view is due to the potential for conflict or negative emotional reaction to the conversation. The Pew Center study noted that opposing views weren't just seen as unfavorable, but they were also seen as threats to the well-being of the citizens of the United States. This is because politics aren't just ideas; the decisions that are made in the office can have significant effects on people's lives. Further, individual's political leanings are strongly rooted in their value sets and beliefs and can become a part of a person's identity (Bloom, 1993).

Although, the concept that politics are intertwined with peoples' value sets and their sense of identity is not a new one, it has recently come to the forefront in society. Many of the frequently discussed issues in politics are social issues, or social problems. Social issues are problems that influence a significant amount of individuals within society and are related to a characteristic that the individual holds. A social issue usually causes conflicting opinions on the grounds of what is perceived as morally right in society (Cimente, 2006). These issues can include anything from criminal punishment and gay marriage, to women's rights and attitudes towards guns. Since social issues are connected to a group of people's well-being, they can be closely linked to a person's set of values and sense of identity. Someone who identifies as being

part of the LGBTQ community would theoretically be for gay marriage, since it directly affects and benefits their lives and relates to a core sense of self. Since the social issue is intertwined with the individual's sense of self, that individual may feel as though a disagreement with the social issue is a direct attack on them personally.

Due to the linkage of political ideas with an individual's sense of identity, a heated political discourse can cause strong emotional reactions, especially if the political discourse challenges an individual's political beliefs (Mooney, 2011). If an individual is presented with information that challenged their belief, even if the information can be seen as unequivocally refutable, it could cause them to react strongly in opposition of the presented information. When an individual is presented with the opposing opinion, a subconscious negative response occurs causing the individual to pull on prior schemas and memories and rationalize that this personally-held information is correct instead of reasoning with the new information (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Essentially, the individual reacts with emotions instead of reason, and gives information more weight that supports their opinions, and works harder to refute information that challenges these beliefs, instead of changing their views. The individual would rather find information that supports their values, because it means that they were right about their values, which could be the basis from some of their beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Admitting they could have been wrong would be to admit that the values they base their beliefs and identities on are wrong (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986).

Due to the emotional aspect and polarizing nature of politics, conversations have started to occur in popular business journals and professional societies on the consequences of having a discussion about politics in the workplace. Some of the consequences include conflict between coworkers and coercion. Coercion is the notion that someone is trying to persuade another

individual to agree to do something through force or threats. Organizations want to avoid one employee, or potentially an authority figure strong arming another employee into voting for a political candidate, signing a petition, or admitting to agree with certain political issues. Political discussions can also present issues related to protected class, and create situations where employees could feel discriminated against or bullied which could create a hostile working environment and thus have a negative effect on organizational culture (Society of Human Resources Management, 2016). The Harvard Business Review (HBR) suggests that the approach to the political conversation is key, deriving the majority of its suggestions from Joseph Grenny's *Crucial Conversations* (Knight, 2016). Knight offers the following suggestions. To keep the conversation professional pay close attention to social cues and body language. Ensure that you are being respectful of your coworkers political leanings, and do not try to convert them to your ideology. If you do disagree with your coworker then disagree politely, or simply disengage from the conversation (Knight, 2016). Similarly the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has also released articles advising organizations and HR professionals on how to manage divisive political discussions in the workplace. Similarly to HBR, SHRM advises organizations to encourage respectful conversations about political disagreements in the workplace (Society of Human Resources Management, 2016). Practically speaking, organizations however, cannot prohibit employees from discussing politics at work, so SHRM suggest that an organization be proactive and adjust policies where feasible to ensure that political conversation does not lead to conflict or coercion (Pedrow & Cognato, 2017).

SHRM recommends that organizational policies explain to employees that organization respects free speech and appreciates the worker's active citizenship. The organization should acknowledge that it's reasonable to have conversation about politics in the workplace, but

encourages them to remain respectful and cooperative (Society of Human Resources Management, 2016). In some circumstances, some state employers can ban state employees from actively campaigning for candidates or propositions at work, to curtail potential coercion. There are similar regulations at the federal level such as the Hatch Act and Title V. The policies also noted that while discussions about non-job relevant topics may arise, it should not distract the employees from fulfilling their jobs (Snyder, 2016).

With the influx of suggestions on how to deal with political discourse in the workplace, SHRM conducted an in-depth analysis in 2016 to understand how organizations deal with political discourse. SHRM found that 72% of HR professionals indicated their organizations discouraged political activities in the workplace. Political activities are defined as actions or conversations in support or against a political party, candidate, group, or organization agenda. Despite organizations discouraging political activities, 67% of HR professionals reported that their organizations didn't have a policy addressing political activities in the workplace. Government organizations (77%) were more likely to have a written policy addressing political activities than public, private, and non-profit organizations, and organizations with 10,000 or more employees (46%) were more likely to have a written policy addressing political activities than smaller organizations. The policies discouraging political activity typically included clauses such as: prohibiting employees from campaigning during working hours, prohibiting employees from using their position to coerce or pressure other employees to support a candidate or cause, prohibiting the use of organizational assets in support of candidate or position, and prohibiting harassment based on political beliefs (Society for Human Resources Management, 2016).

Organizations are gearing up to deal with the potential consequences of political discussion in the workplace, but before consequences can be determined the antecedents of

political discussion must be addressed. Specifically, why employees choose to engage in or avoid political discussion in the workplace.

People choose to engage in political discussion partially due to their interest in politics, their personality traits, and if their discussion partner shares similar views (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Dimock, Kiley, Keeter, & Doherty, 2014). People are more likely to engage in political discussion if they are highly interested in the political topic (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). The more left, or strongly liberal, as well as the more right, or more strongly conservative a person identifies as, the more likely they are to engage in frequent political discussions (Dimock, Kiley, Keeter, & Doherty, 2014). Although, the polarity of an individual's political views does not equate to strong interest, the Pew Center did find that those further to the left and further to the right enjoyed discussing politics more than their centered counterparts. Individuals that discuss politics cite that they like to discuss politics with their friends or coworkers to gain more political information, express their position on the issue, or to potentially change the discussant partner's position on the issue. While individuals did note that they'd like to change their partner's view on a topic if it was in opposition with their own, many noted that changing others' minds is futile. However, the benefit of merely listening to the other side creates respect for one another, and helps uncover a common ground that may not have been discovered otherwise (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2003).

Personality plays a role in the frequency in which a person chooses to engage in political conversations. Personality traits are particularly related to the degree to which people expose themselves to potential political disagreement. Mondak and Halperin (2008) looked at the effects of personality traits on political attitudes and behaviors. They found that Openness to change

(Openness) and Extraversion were positively related to political discussion. The research hasn't been as consistent with Openness. It was found in one study that individuals who were high in Openness were more likely to avoid political discussions with those that disagreed with them (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). The research has been more consistent however when it comes to Extraversion and Emotional Stability. It was found that Extraversion and Emotional Stability moderated the relationship between agreement on politics and frequency of political discussion (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). Essentially, the relationship between agreement and political discussions was weaker for those that were high in Extraversion and those that were high in Emotional Stability, indicating that these individuals are still likely to engage in political discussion despite potential disagreement on topics. Hibbing and his colleagues were also interested in how personality shaped political discussion. They found that Extraversion influenced discussion patterns in the work context. Being more extraverted meant an individual was more likely to have political discussions, especially in formal settings like the workplace. It was hypothesized that this was due to their outgoing nature, which helps them overcome institutional constraints that might discourage political discussion. Respondents with higher Emotional Stability scores were more likely to have a discussion partner with different political views. Naturally, people tend to discuss politics with close friends and relatives that generally agree with them, but those with high Emotional Stability were more likely than those with lower Emotional Stability to step out of this tendency and face the potential for disagreement in discussing politics with those with opposing views (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011).

Another antecedent to engagement in political discussion is the political views of the discussion partner. Individuals are more likely to discuss politics if they can find a political

partner that matches their political opinions and interests (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). Around 63% of strongly conservative individuals and 49% strongly liberal individuals state that their close friends, and thus those they have frequent political conversations with, share their political views. Those that are strongly conservative and strongly liberal also prefer to live in a place where most people share their same ideologies (Dimock, Kiley, Keeter, & Doherty, 2014). Typically, individuals state that they prefer to avoid conversation across party lines, so they tend to self-select into friend groups, communities, and neighborhoods. Unfortunately, it's more difficult to self-select into organizations based on political opinions. Therefore, in the US, conversations about politics across party lines occur more frequently in the workplace (Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

When some people are approached with political discussions they may choose to leave or avoid the conversation instead of engaging in it. Some of the reasons individuals choose to avoid political conversation is their lack of knowledge or interest in the area of discussion, the possibility of going against group norms, and finally, the potential for conflict with the discussant (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). Conflicts can arise when two individuals have opposing views, or if someone feels that their view is being attacked.

If someone isn't particularly knowledgeable on a political topic they may refrain from speaking up for fear of being ridiculed about their lack of knowledge, or appearing inadequate during the conversation. If someone lacks the political information, political facts, or overall political competence they may also avoid the conversation simply because they don't understand what is going on (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2003). Even if the political discussant is knowledgeable, they might not be interested in the conversation, and thus choose to avoid the



conversation because they considered it to be mundane and not worth the effort. Further, those with mixed ideologies, or those that consider themselves politically moderate noted that they don't talk about politics frequently. Only 32% of politically moderate people state they talk about politics weekly, which is significantly lower than those that are strongly liberal or conservative. Approximately 58% of average Americans only discuss politics a few times a month. This low discussion rate could reflect lack of interest in the topic (Dimock, Kiley, Keeter, & Doherty, 2014).

A major consequence of political discussion, and the main reason political conversation is avoided, is the potential for disagreement. Politics are intertwined with people's lives, and can cause quite emotional reactions if the two parties discussing an issue are in opposition. The potential for disagreement has been explored quite extensively and has linked to a few theories on the avoidance of political discussion such as expression inhibition (Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1999) and spiral of silence (Hampton, Raine, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014; Liu, & Fahmy, 2011), and cognitive dissonance (Testa, Hibbing, & Ritchie, 2014).

Expression Inhibition is the idea that an individual may feel that they should not express their opinions or values due to feelings of inadequacy, ignorance, apathy, or powerlessness. Expression inhibition also stems from an unwillingness to go against group norms and contradict the presumed majority. At the heart of expression inhibition is the idea that politics is avoided in conversation to evade emotionally harming both oneself and the discussant, and potentially becoming socially isolated. The reluctance to discuss political views is related to behavioral self-censorship (Gibson, 1992). The belief is that going against the political opinion of the discussant will cause emotional harm to the political discussant, and thus harm the relationship between the individual and the discussant. The emotional harm could come from the idea that the other

doesn't respect your beliefs or that the other person looks down on your beliefs. This could negatively change the individuals' opinions of one another, and create a wedge in the relationship. Expression Inhibition was found to be a significant predictor of politically expressive behavior in the United States, and was most prominent in the workplace (Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1999).

Spiral of Silence is the tendency to avoid discussion about policy issues in public due to the belief that your point of view is not widely shared. The two main constructs of the spiral of silence is fear of isolation and the perceptions of the opinion climate. An individual will monitor the public opinion climate before determining opinion expression strategies. After monitoring the public opinion climate, if the individual believes they are in the minority in opinion, they will avoid political discussion to avoid being different from the majority opinion. The individual decides to stay quiet or avoid discussing their political views for fear of being ostracized and being excluded (Liu, & Fahmy, 2011).

Another aspect of avoiding political discussion is to avoid the potential for disagreement that may stem from facing ideas and values that go against the schemas that you have created about the world (Testa, Hibbing, & Ritchie, 2014). To hear opinions other than your own is to open up the idea that other ideas might be correct and that yours might be wrong. Disagreement on ideas creates a cognitive dissonance, that an individual will work to correct. The dissonance can be resolved by either changing one's beliefs, change your action, or change your perception of the action. This means that a person may avoid discussing politics with those with differing views to avoid the potential of dissonance, or they may change their perception of the discussant. By changing the perception, the individual may decide that the discussant isn't qualified to

discuss such matters, that the person is ignorant, or some other belief to discredit the opposing view of the discussant (Festinger, 1962).

The research indicates that having conversations with people with opposing views could potentially increase people's political tolerance, because it allows people to understand the rationale behind opposing views and increases respect for others (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Unfortunately, the individual must be open to having this conversation, and potential conflict, which isn't true for everyone. If the person isn't open to the conflict, and hearing other opposing ideas, the disagreement might be met with hostility because the opposing ideas challenge their own beliefs (Testa, Hibbing, & Ritchie, 2014).

At the core of expression inhibition, spiral of silence, and cognitive dissonance is the avoidance of discussing politics for fear of a disagreement and a potential conflict. The theories note however that this conflict only occurs if the individual and discussant are conversing about opposing political views. Conflict is avoided by discussing politics with similar ideologies and political beliefs. Thus, individuals are more likely to seek political partners that hold their same beliefs. This is easier to accomplish in friend settings, communities, and neighborhoods due to the ability to self-select into these environments based off of values, beliefs, and opinions. Unfortunately, it's more difficult to self-select into an organization, so workplace settings have a higher likelihood of having mixed ideologies and political opinions (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Considering the different nature of the relationship coworkers share as opposed to friends or family members, it may be more difficult to assess how a coworker might feel about certain political topics, and thus how they'll react to being approached by a political discussion.

For this study, we are interested in looking at how employees react to political conversation in the workplace. It is expected, that if the employee feels that they are in the

majority opinion, or in agreement with their coworker on a political topic they will be more willing to engage in the political conversation. Furthermore, they will deem the political discourse as an acceptable conversation to have in the workplace. However, it is expected that if the employee that is approached with the political conversation feels that they are in the minority opinion or are not in agreement with their coworker on the political topic, they will avoid the conversation for fear of going against the majority and potentially causing a conflict in the workplace. Due to the potential disagreement and the emotionality aspect of the conversation, they will refuse to discuss the topic in a workplace setting.

Personality traits, such as Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness may be able to overcome these constraints. As detailed earlier in the literature review, the relationship between agreement and political discussions was weaker for those that were high in Extraversion and those that were high in Emotional Stability, indicating that these individuals are still likely to engage in political discussion despite potential disagreement on topics. There were mixed findings regarding the relationship between agreement and political discussion for those high in Openness, making this personality trait one of interest. It was hypothesized in prior studies that those high in Openness would overcome the constraints and engage in political conversations regardless of agreement (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). While some studies found support for the hypothesis, it was not universally supported.

*H1: The degree of agreement the subject has with the stance on the political topic will positively correlate with the subject's perception of the Appropriateness of the conversation.*

*H2: The degree of agreement the subject has with the stance on the political topic positively correlates with their Engagement in the conversation.*

*H3: Subjects high in Extraversion are more likely to engage in political conversation (regardless of Agreement).*

*H4: Subjects high in Emotional Stability are more likely to engage in political conversation (regardless of Agreement).*

*H5: Subjects high in Openness are more likely to engage in political conversation (regardless of Agreement).*

The employee's feelings on the political conversation can affect how they feel about being in the workplace overall. If they deem the conversation to be appropriate and acceptable, then political conversations could be another way that the individual bonds with their coworkers. The increased understanding of the coworker and their views could lead to a more tight-knit relationship, and increase the employee's favorable opinion of the coworker. This comradery among coworkers and free-flowing communication could lead to a work environment that's open, and thus have a positive effect on the organizational culture.

If the employee deems the conversation as inappropriate, it could affect the employee's overall feelings about their workplace environment. If they are approached with political conversations that express ideas different than their own, they may begin to feel as though they do not fit into the organization. They may begin to feel isolated, believing that they're the only ones that have that point of view. Further, expression inhibition could begin to form resentment from the notion that others can express their viewpoints but they cannot for fear of being ostracized. If they do engage in the conversation, the differing in opinions could go against the group norm and cause a conflict in the workplace leading to a hostile organizational environment. These could lead to a negative organizational culture, and potentially lead to turnover.

## CHAPTER II: METHOD

### Participants

In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be 18 years or older, and work experience in the United States of America. One hundred and ninety-five individuals met these eligibility requirements. Thirty-three participants were removed for failing to complete both the minimum LGBTQ items and the Attitudes Towards Guns items. The final sample size was 161 participants. The sample was 61% female, 37% female, and 2% preferred not to specify a gender. Of the participant pool, less than 1% were between the ages of 18-20, 52% were 21-30, 16% were 31-40, 11% were 41-50, and finally, 21% were over the age of 51. For degree of political affiliation, approximately 16% of the participants indicated a level of conservatism, 53% indicated a level of liberalism, and 26% indicated they were moderate. Full demographic information of the sample can be found in Appendix A.

### Procedures

Participants were recruited through convenient recruitment sampling. Participants were recruited through social media sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The snowball effect was used for the social media recruiting. The main investigator shared it on personal social media sites, and from there it was shared and passed through various networks and different groups of individuals. Through the various social media sites, participants were invited participate in the survey by a clicking a link that led them to the online survey platform Qualtrics. No identifying information was collected from the participants to ensure their participation was honest and anonymous. Upon clicking the link, the participant was shown a brief message displaying the purpose of the study, the participation criteria, and a consent form. They were notified that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and they were

free to exit the survey at any time. If the participant agreed to participate in the study they were presented the initial screening questions (See Appendix B, items 1-3). From there, if the participant met the eligibility requirements they were presented the survey materials and measures. A more in-depth description of the materials and measures are explained in the Materials and Measures section below.

The online survey was a mixed between and within subject design. Following the eligibility requirements, the participant was given two different scenarios each on a different political topic. In each scenario, the participant was approached by a coworker to discuss a politically charged topic. There were four scenarios total, two for each political topic relating to a pro and anti-stance. Participants were either presented with Scenario 1a or 1b (but not both), regarding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights in the workplace. Scenario 1a presents a coworker being pro LGBTQ rights, while Scenario 1b presents a coworker being against LGBTQ rights. The participant was then presented with either Scenario 2a or Scenario 2b (but not both), regarding attitudes towards guns in the workplace. Scenario 2a presents a coworker being pro-guns, while Scenario 2b presents a coworker being against guns. The scenarios the participant received were randomized to ensure an even distribution of scenarios. There were two possible pairings. The participant either received the Pro-LGBTQ Scenario 1a and the Pro-Guns Scenario 2a or they received Anti-LGBTQ Scenario 1b and the Anti-Guns Scenario 2b. This ensured that the participant viewed both a liberal and conservative viewpoint on the respective political topics.

Following each scenario, the participant was asked a few questions regarding their perceived appropriateness of the conversation, their likelihood to engage in the discussion with their coworker, as well as to explain why they would or would not engage in the conversation.

Following the completion of the scenarios section, the participant was presented with the Big Five Inventory to assess the participant's degree of Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness. The participant was then presented a portion of the American National Election Survey to determine their stance on LGBTQ rights. The three items used to determine the participant's stance on LGBTQ rights was compared to the stance the coworker took on LGBTQ rights in the scenario presented to the participant to determine the degree of Agreement the participant had with the coworker. The participant then answered 3 items on Attitudes Towards Guns that were developed for the purpose of this study. These items were used to determine the participant's stance on Guns and to determine the level of Agreement the participant had with the coworker in the scenario the participant was presented regarding Guns. Finally, the participant was presented with demographics questions. The scenarios and measures used for this study are in Appendix B and summarized below.

## **Materials and Measures**

### **Political discussion scenarios.**

The Political Discussion Scenarios were created for the purpose of this study. The survey presented the participant with two different scenarios, one on LGBTQ rights (1a or 1b) and one on attitudes towards Guns (2a or 2b). The scenarios took place in the workplace. The scenario involves a coworker "approaching" the participant to discuss a controversial opinion. Each scenario described a coworker discussing a political topic: LGBT rights and attitudes towards guns. The scenarios are meant to be provoking to at least some people, but still be in the realm of what is allowable in the workplace. The participant received one scenario for one of the political topics, and another scenario against the other political topic to ensure they are presented with a



variety of different political opinions. Each scenario was coded based on the political stance it takes on LGBT rights and attitudes towards guns as either: Pro or Anti.

### **Perceptions of the scenario appropriateness.**

Following each scenario, the participant was asked the degree to which they felt that the conversation the coworker was attempting to have was appropriate to have in the workplace. This one item was used as the variable to measure Appropriateness in Hypothesis 1.

### **Willingness to engage.**

Following each scenario, the participant was also asked their Willingness to Engage in the conversation with their coworker. This one item was used as the variable to measure Engagement in Hypothesis 2. To understand why the participant chose or did not choose to engage in the conversation, the participant was given an open-ended question to explain why they chose or did not choose to engage in the conversation. This question is not directly linked to any hypothesis but was included to further explore future research.

### **Personality.**

The Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI) (John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to assess the participant's personality. For the purpose of this study, we looked specifically at the items used to assess the participant's degree of Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness. The BFI reportedly has significant reliability, measured through internal consistency (alpha) reliability for Extraversion ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), Emotional Stability ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), and Openness ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). The BFI is also a significantly reliable measure overall with mean reliability of 0.83 (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008).

**Political stance - LGBTQ rights.**

Portions of the American National Election Study (ANES) were used to measure the participant's political stance on LGBTQ rights. The purpose of the American National Election Survey is to provide researchers with a view of the political climate in the United States during the election year including measures on voting, public opinion, and political participation. The survey, as well as the data collected in a cross-sectional time series design is available to social scientists and teachers for research purposes. To ensure consistency among the LGBTQ items for data analysis purposes, all items were converted to a 5-point Likert Scale type question which ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. There were three items used to measure the participant's political stance on LGBTQ Rights. The participant's stance on LGBTQ rights was be found by averaging the three items. The participant needed to answer at least 2 of the 3 items to be included in the analysis. The participant's stance on LGBTQ rights was compared to the stance the coworker took in the particular scenario the participant was presented to determine if the participant agreed with their coworker in the scenario. In Scenario 1a, the coworker takes a pro-LGBTQ rights stance. If the participant had a high average score on the LGBTQ items then it was determined that they were pro-LGBTQ rights, and thus in agreement with the coworker in Scenario 1a. For scenario 1b, the coworker takes an anti-LGBTQ rights stance. If the participant had a lower average score rating it was determined that they were anti-LGBTQ rights, and thus in agreement with the coworker in Scenario 1b. If the participant had around an average of 3 on the scale it was determined that the participant neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and was considered neutral on their agreement. The degree of Agreement the participant had with the LGBTQ scenarios was used to assess Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 for Scenarios 1a and 1b.

**Political stance – attitudes towards guns.**

The Attitude Towards Guns items were created for the purpose of this study. The three items were created from scratch. All 3 items were on a 5-point Likert Scale type question which ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The items were created assess the participant's attitude towards guns to compare to the attitudes the coworker had towards guns in Scenarios 2a and 2b. The participant's stance on guns was found by averaging the three items. The participant needed to answer at least 2 of the 3 items to be included in the analysis. The participant's stance on guns was compared to the stance taken in the scenario they were presented to determine if there was Agreement between the participant and the coworker. If the participant had a higher average score on the attitudes towards guns items it was determined that the participant is pro-guns, and thus was in agreement with the coworker in the Pro-Guns Scenario 2a. For Scenario 2b, the coworker takes an anti-guns stance. If the participant had a lower rating, then it was determined that they anti-guns and thus agreed with the coworker in Scenario 2b. An average of 3 on the scale determined that the participant neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and was considered neutral on their agreement. The participants Degree of Agreement on guns was used to assess Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 for scenarios 2a and 2b.

## CHAPTER III: RESULTS

### Preliminary Analysis

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were run for the following variables: Appropriateness, Engagement, LGBTQ Agreement, Attitudes Towards Guns Agreement, Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness for each Scenario (See Appendix C). Reliability was tested on those scales altered for the purpose of this study, the LGBTQ items, and those created for the use of this study, Attitudes Towards Guns scales (See Table 1). The LGBTQ items and the Attitudes Towards Guns items were used to create the LGBTQ Agreement variable and the Attitudes Towards Guns Agreement variable. Pearson correlations were run between the Appropriateness and Engagement variables for each scenario to better understand the relationship between the two variables (Table 2). Finally, participants were asked to provide an open-ended response on why they chose to engage or not engage with their coworker in each scenario. These open-ended responses were content coded for a qualitative analysis to further understand the reasons individuals choose to engage or not engage in political discussions at work (See Appendix D).

Table 1

*Reliability Analyses for LGBTQ and Attitudes Towards Guns Agreement Variables*

| Variable                         | Number<br>of<br>Items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| LGBTQ Agreement                  | 3                     | .87              |
| Attitudes Towards Guns Agreement | 3                     | .97              |

Table 2  
*Correlation Analyses Appropriateness and Engagement*

| Scenario   | <i>r</i> |
|------------|----------|
| Pro-LGBTQ  | .56**    |
| Anti-LGBTQ | .15      |
| Pro-Guns   | .76**    |
| Anti-Guns  | .76**    |

*Note:* \*Significant at the  $p$ -value<.05 and \*\* Significant at the  $p$ -value<.01

The reliability coefficients ranged from .87 and .97 and were conducted to check whether any items needed to be excluded from the analyses. Due to the high reliability coefficients for LGBTQ Agreement and Attitudes Towards Guns Agreement no items were removed. As previously noted in the Method section, descriptive statistics and frequencies regarding the demographic information can be found in Appendix A. The Pearson correlation results noted there was a significant relationship between the Appropriateness and Engagement variable for the Pro-LGBTQ, Pro-Guns, and Anti-Guns scenario.

### **Primary Analyses**

#### **Hypothesis 1.**

Hypothesis 1 asserts that the degree of Agreement the subject has with the stance on the political topic will positively correlate with the subject's perception of the Appropriateness of the conversation. To test this hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was run on each scenario using the participants' level of Agreement with the political scenario as the predictor, and the participants' perception of the Appropriateness of the conversation as the dependent variable. Level of Agreement was found to be a significant predictor with the participants' perception of the Appropriateness of the conversation in the both the Pro-LGBTQ 1a Scenario ( $r(84) = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the Anti-LGBTQ 1b scenario ( $r(73) = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Level of Agreement was not a

significant predictor in the Pro-Guns 2a Scenario ( $r(83) = .03, p = .81$ ) nor the Anti-Guns 2b Scenario ( $r(73) = -.05, p = .67$ ). Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Agreement was found to be a significant predictor for conversations in the workplace regarding LGBTQ issues, but not with conversations in the workplace regarding guns.

### **Hypothesis 2.**

Hypothesis 2 states that the degree of Agreement the subject has with the stance on the political topic positively correlates with their Engagement in the conversation. To test this hypothesis, a Pearson correlation was run on each scenario using the participants' level of Agreement with the political scenario as the predictor, and the participants' Willingness to Engage in the conversation as the dependent variable. Agreement was found to be a significant predictor with Willingness to Engage in conversation for those participants in the Pro-LGBTQ 1a Scenario ( $r(84) = .39, p < .001$ ). However, Agreement was not found to be a significant predictor for Willingness to Engage in conversation for the Anti-LGBTQ 1b Scenario ( $r(73) = .07, p = .56$ ), the Pro-Guns 2a Scenario ( $r(83) = .07, p = .53$ ), and the Anti-Guns 2b Scenario ( $r(73) = .07, p = .56$ ). With only one scenario yielding a significant result, it can be determined that Hypothesis 2 was partially supported only by the results for the Pro-LGBTQ scenario.

### **Hypothesis 3, 4, and 5.**

Hypothesis 3, 4, and 5 asserted that if a participant was high in either Extraversion, Emotional Stability, or Openness, they would be likely to engage in a political conversation regardless of agreement on the political topic. For the Pro-LGBTQ Scenario, Agreement was found to be a significant predictor in determining if a participant was likely to engage in the political conversation. For this scenario, to determine if the personality traits account for extra variance, the personality traits and the level of Agreement were included as predictors in the

model. Overall, the multiple regression model was significant ( $R^2=.20$ ,  $F(4,81)=4.91$ ,  $p=.001$ ). The only significant predictor in the model was Agreement ( $\beta=.43$ ,  $p<.001$ ), so it was found that when the level of Agreement is included, the personality traits do not uniquely predict the participants' likelihood to engage in the conversation. More specifically, these personality betas were: Extraversion ( $\beta=.14$ ,  $p=.13$ ), Emotional Stability ( $\beta=.04$ ,  $p=.99$ ), and Openness ( $\beta=.01$ ,  $p=.65$ ).

For the Anti-LGBTQ 1b Scenario, the Pro-Guns 2a Scenario, and the Anti-Guns 2b Scenario Agreement was not found to be significant predictor in determining whether an individual would engage in a political conversation. Since Agreement was not found to be a significant predictor, it was not included in the multiple regression model for these three scenarios. For these scenarios, to determine if Extraversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness were related to an individual's likelihood to engage in conversation, a multiple linear regression was run for each scenario that included each personality trait as a predictor.

The overall model for the Anti-LGBTQ 1b Scenario was found to be significant ( $R^2=.16$ ,  $F(3,70)=4.57$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Emotional Stability ( $\beta=-.32$ ,  $p<.01$ ) was the only significant predictor in determining the participants Willingness to Engage in the political conversation. Openness ( $\beta=.20$ ,  $p=.08$ ) and Extraversion were not found to be significant predictors ( $\beta=-.04$ ,  $p=.71$ ). The overall Anti-Guns 2b Scenario multiple regression test was also found to be statistically significant ( $R^2=.11$ ,  $F(3,71)=3.00$ ,  $p=.04$ ), meaning personality was related to Willingness to Engage regardless of Agreement. Emotional Stability was the only personality predictor found to be a significantly unique predictor ( $\beta=-.28$ ,  $p=.02$ ). Extraversion ( $\beta=.06$ ,  $p=.62$ ) and Openness ( $\beta=.06$ ,  $p=.20$ ) were not significant predictors of Willingness to Engage in the Anti-Guns 2b Scenario. Finally, the overall Pro-Guns 2a Scenario ( $R^2=.08$ ,  $F(3,81)=2.42$ ,  $p=.07$ ) multiple

regression model was not found to be statistically significant. Bivariate regressions were run for each scenario examining the individual's willingness to discuss the political topic, and each personality trait to further examine the relationships between the variables. See Table 3 for the results.

It was found that those low in Emotional Stability were more likely to engage in political conversations for the Anti-LGBTQ and the Anti-Guns scenarios. It was predicted that those high in Emotional Stability were more likely to engage in political conversations regardless of Agreement, thus, it can be determined then that Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Due to the findings on the other two personality traits, it cannot be determined that individuals high in Extraversion (Hypothesis 3) or high in Openness (Hypothesis 5) are likely to engage in political conversations in the workplace regardless of Agreement.

Table 3

*Bivariate Regression Analyses for Personality Variables and Political Topic Scenarios*

| Variable              | Extraversion | Emotional Stability | Openness |
|-----------------------|--------------|---------------------|----------|
| Pro-LGBTQ Engagement  | .15          | -.12                | .16      |
| Anti-LGBTQ Engagement | -.06         | -.36**              | .24*     |
| Pro-Guns Engagement   | .15          | -.27**              | .06      |
| Anti-Guns Engagement  | .04          | -.29**              | .20      |

*Note:* \*Significant at the  $p$ -value<.05 and \*\* Significant at the  $p$ -value<.01 level



## CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

### Overall Findings

The results indicate that two of the five hypotheses were partially supported. Whether the level of Agreement an individual has with a political topic has some relation to the degree they feel that conversation is appropriate to have in the workplace setting depended on the nature of the topic (Hypothesis 1). More specifically, it was found that this hypothesis was supported for the Pro and Anti-LGBTQ scenarios but did not hold true for the Pro and Anti-Gun scenarios. Essentially, it was found that the participants deemed the conversation about LGBTQ rights as appropriate to have in the workplace only if their coworkers' opinion on the topic was in line with their own. Agreement on the topic did not predict whether an individual would deem the conversation appropriate regarding Guns. Thus, the type or topic of the political conversation can have differing effects on the employee's opinion of appropriate conversation.

There are many different avenues a political conversation can take, whether it's about political candidates, new political policies, or social issues. Typically, social issues tend to illicit more of an emotional response, because they are connected to a group of people's well-being, and they can be closely linked to a person's set of values and sense of identity (Cimente, 2006). LGBTQ rights and attitudes towards guns are considered to be under the category of a social issue, because they link to personal identity and value sets. As Bloom indicated in his research, when personal identity is linked to a political topic, an individual may have a stronger emotional reaction (Bloom, 1993). Although the both LGBTQ rights and attitudes towards guns are both linked to value sets, LGBTQ rights are more closely linked to a person's core identity. While someone can be very passionate about being pro-guns or anti-guns, that person isn't necessarily born with that opinion. That value set is shaped by their interpretation of the Second

Amendment, and what they have learned about gun use in society. It is argued that sexual orientation however, is innate and something that is formed from birth. A person's sexual identity isn't something that can be changed, and thus is closely linked to their sense of identity. Thus, an attack on LGBTQ rights could be seen as a personal attack on individuals apart of the LGBTQ community, and seen as potential discrimination. Not wanting to offend a coworker, or be accused of discrimination, especially if you are unaware of your coworker's sexual orientation may be why participants are more likely to deem conversations about the LGBTQ community as appropriate only in situations where they agree with their coworkers. This is in line with research that SHRM recently released stating that individuals were uncomfortable having political conversations in the workplace due to fear of blowback and potential discrimination issues (Society of Human Resources Management, 2016). Further, when participants were asked why they would engage in a conversation regarding guns, they stated that this conversation was directly linked to workplace safety making it an appropriate conversation to have in the workplace. Participants also stated that a person's sexual identity did not have a clear link to work performance, and thus wasn't appropriate to engage in at work.

Hypothesis Two stated that the degree of Agreement the individual had with the stance on the political topic would positively correlate with their Willingness to Engage in the conversation and was also partially supported. This hypothesis was only found to be true in the Pro-LGBTQ scenario, stating that those that were pro-LGBTQ rights were Willing to Engage with their coworkers that felt similarly, and those that did not agree chose not to discuss the matter with their coworker. The hypothesis was not supported for the Anti-LGBTQ scenario, or the Pro and Anti-Gun scenarios. Meaning, for these scenarios, Willingness to Engage in political conversations in the workplace was not tied to agreement with the views expressed in these

scenarios. It was hypothesized that individuals would not engage in political conversations with individuals they disagreed with due to the potential for disagreement and conflict. A further dive into the question asking the participant why these chose to engage or not did give more insight on the participant's reasoning behind Engagement.

Only the Pro-LGBTQ scenario was found to be significant when it came to the relationship between Agreement and Willingness to Engage in the conversation. Those that were in agreement with the Pro-LGBTQ scenario were more willing to discuss the rights with their coworker, while all of the participants that did not agree stated they did not want to engage in the conversation due to potential backlash or disagreement. This is reflective of the research indicating that individuals choose not to engage in conversation mainly due to potential for blowback or disagreement (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). Although the Anti-LGBTQ scenario did not find a significant relationship between Agreement and Engagement, it is interesting to note that of the 75 participants that left comments, the majority of the participants stated they would not engage in the conversation. The two main reasons participants didn't want to engage in the conversation was that they viewed the conversation as inappropriate/not work related or they didn't want to cause an argument. With LGBTQ rights being closely linked to a person's identity, outwardly disagreeing with a person's way of life could cause an emotionally charged argument, cut ties, and potential social isolation, as predicted by expression inhibition (Gibson, 1992). Openly engaging with statements that certain coworkers should not have rights in the workplace due to their personal identity, even if you are in agreement, could have damaging effects and create workplace hostility, causing individuals to avoid the conversation altogether (Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1999).

Individuals may have been more willing to discuss when they were for LGBTQ rights because it didn't personally attack any individual in the office setting.

In both the Pro- and Anti-Gun scenarios, it was a fairly even split between those willing to engage in the conversation versus not. When participants were approached about their attitudes towards guns the three main reasons individuals gave for wanting to discuss the topic were: it was directly related to work, they wanted to explore each other's ideas on the topic, and they wanted their opinion known regarding guns. This is more in line with the research that indicates that having conversations with people with opposing views could potentially increase people's political tolerance, because it allows people to understand the rationale behind opposing views and increases respect for others (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Since the right to bring a gun into the workplace was seen as a more direct connection to work due to safety implications, and not as core to a person's identity, individuals may have been more willing to discuss the conversation and understand each other's points of view on the topic.

There was not a significant relationship found between those high in Extraversion and Willingness to Engage in political conversation regardless of Agreement, thus not supporting Hypothesis 3. Prior research stated that those high in Extraversion were more likely to engage in political discussions in the workplace due to the frequency of conversation that those high in Extraversion are involved in (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011) but it was not supported in this research.

There was a link between Emotional Stability and Willingness to Engage in political conversation, but the direction of the relationship was not predicted by Hypothesis 4. Based on prior research, it was hypothesized that those high in Emotional Stability were more likely to engage in political conversation, but there was instead a significant relationship between those

low in Emotional Stability and Willingness to Engage in political discourse at work. This may be due to the inability to regulate behavior. Another potential explanation is that those low in Emotional Stability may have less of an idea of social norms and thus more willing to overlook what is appropriate conversation to have in the workplace.

Finally, there was not a relationship found between those high in Openness and Willingness to Engage in political conversation regardless of Agreement. Prior research was mixed on the degree Openness related to frequency and Engagement of political conversation. One study indicated that individuals who were high in Openness were more likely to avoid political discussions with those that disagreed with them (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). Thus, Openness may be linked to political discourse is disagreement on the topic is involved.

### **Limitations**

A potential limitation of the current study relates to the sample which consisted of participants from social media sites. Individuals tend to form relationships with those that are similar to them, so the online link was shared among similar groups of individuals, which may not be reflective of the current US population. A broader sample size ensuring all individuals in the US population is represented in the study is needed. The participant pool skewed liberal, so further research with a broader political ideological pool would be beneficial. Finally, the LGBTQ items were broader and less focused on the workplace compared to the Attitudes to Gun items, which may have had an effect on the results.

### **Practical Implications**

This study was just the beginning for exploring political conversation in the workplace. This is a relatively new topic with little previous research. This study shows that there is a link

between different types of political conversations and the types conversations employees feel comfortable having in the workplace for at least some political topics. Further studies are necessary to fully understanding the effect political conversations can have on an employee's work life and the organizational culture.

With politics so prevalent in today's society, the chances of politics being brought up in workplace setting is great. Organizations are not able to ban all conversation concerning political topics, but these findings can help organization better direct political conversations for a healthier work environment. Conversation regarding a person's identity, like LGBTQ issues and potentially race and gender issues, have a direct link to a person's sense of self, thus disagreement on a topic could be seen as a direct attack. Organizations' can highlight this fact in their policy, as well as discuss Title VII and why it was put in place. This can educate employees on why negative conversation on those topics could harm relationships with fellow employees, as well as highlight the laws in place that protect those individuals.

An organization is a melting pot of political ideologies, so employees are bound to disagree on certain topics. An organization does not want to promote conversations that could lead people to feel like they can't express their opinions because they differ from their coworkers. Employees were more willing to engage in political conversations with those they disagree with if it was seen as something directly linked to their work life and work setting. An organization could suggest framing political conversations to highlight how they could affect the workplace to create open dialogue and potentially create political tolerance across employees. Finally, an organization can highlight that political conversations can lead to emotionally charged reactions, and state that while those feelings are valid and important, the employee should consider how they react to certain conversations and opinions. If an employee knows they

are not as emotionally stable in stressful situations, like political disagreement, to consider a way to disengage from the conversation.

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## **Appendices**

### Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables

| Variable                    | <i>N</i> | Pro-     | Anti-    | Pro-     | Anti-    |
|-----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                             |          | LGBTQ    | LGBTQ    | Guns     | Guns     |
|                             |          | <i>n</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>n</i> |
| <b>Gender</b>               |          |          |          |          |          |
| Man                         | 60       | 32       | 28       | 32       | 28       |
| Woman                       | 98       | 52       | 46       | 52       | 46       |
| Prefer not to specify       | 3        | 1        | 1        | 1        | 1        |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>            |          |          |          |          |          |
| Caucasian                   | 125      | 64       | 61       | 64       | 61       |
| African American            | 9        | 4        | 5        | 4        | 5        |
| Hispanic                    | 13       | 6        | 7        | 6        | 7        |
| Asian                       | 6        | 5        | 1        | 5        | 1        |
| Native American             | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        |
| Other                       | 8        | 6        | 1        | 6        | 1        |
| <b>Age</b>                  |          |          |          |          |          |
| 18-20                       | 1        | 0        | 1        | 0        | 1        |
| 21-30                       | 83       | 48       | 36       | 47       | 36       |
| 31-40                       | 25       | 11       | 14       | 11       | 14       |
| 41-50                       | 17       | 10       | 7        | 10       | 7        |
| 51+                         | 34       | 17       | 17       | 17       | 17       |
| <b>Political Party</b>      |          |          |          |          |          |
| Democratic Party            | 69       | 38       | 31       | 38       | 31       |
| Republican Party            | 25       | 12       | 13       | 12       | 13       |
| Independent                 | 47       | 26       | 21       | 26       | 21       |
| Other                       | 20       | 9        | 10       | 9        | 10       |
| <b>Political Degree</b>     |          |          |          |          |          |
| Extremely Liberal           | 10       | 6        | 4        | 6        | 4        |
| Liberal                     | 48       | 33       | 15       | 33       | 15       |
| Slightly Liberal            | 28       | 13       | 15       | 13       | 15       |
| Moderate                    | 42       | 14       | 28       | 14       | 28       |
| Slightly Conservative       | 15       | 10       | 5        | 10       | 5        |
| Conservative                | 11       | 7        | 4        | 7        | 4        |
| Extremely Conservative      | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        | 0        |
| <b>Interest in Politics</b> |          |          |          |          |          |
| Not at all Interested       | 10       | 6        | 4        | 6        | 4        |
| Little to no Interest       | 26       | 14       | 12       | 14       | 12       |
| Neutral Interest            | 17       | 8        | 9        | 8        | 9        |
| Somewhat Interested         | 82       | 41       | 41       | 41       | 41       |
| Very Interested             | 25       | 16       | 9        | 16       | 9        |

*Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables Table Continued*

|                   |                 |     |    |    |    |    |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----|----|----|----|----|
| Employment Status |                 |     |    |    |    |    |
|                   | Employed        | 149 | 77 | 72 | 77 | 72 |
|                   | Not Employed    | 10  | 8  | 2  | 8  | 2  |
| Office Size       |                 |     |    |    |    |    |
|                   | <20 Employees   | 36  | 21 | 15 | 21 | 15 |
|                   | 20-50 Employees | 17  | 13 | 4  | 13 | 4  |
|                   | 50+ Employees   | 92  | 42 | 50 | 42 | 50 |

## Appendix B: Questionnaire

*The participant will receive either version a or b of each of the scenarios. The scenarios will be randomly assigned to the participants.*

### SCENARIO 1a

It's the middle of the afternoon and you decide it's time for a coffee break. You go into the break room and begin to brew yourself a pot of coffee. As the coffee is still brewing, your coworker Ryley comes in and walks straight towards you. She looks geared up and ready to talk. She commented, "I was reading an article in the Wall Street Journal this morning, and it said you could be let go for your sexual orientation? Can you believe that? I don't get how your personal life could have any effect on your working ability." She pauses for a second before she begins again, "It just doesn't seem fair, why does it matter if Joe Schmoe from accounting likes guys or Jane Doe from Marketing likes women? I don't see how that matters. Who cares if your manager or some coworkers are uncomfortable by it? It's not like they come in everyday and go into explicit detail about everything." She looks at you waiting for a response.

### SCENARIO 1b

It's the middle of the afternoon and you decide it's time for a coffee break. You go into the break room and begin to brew yourself a pot of coffee. As the coffee is still brewing, your coworker Ryley comes in and walks straight towards you. She looks geared up and ready to talk. She commented, "I was reading an article in the Wall Street Journal this morning, and it said you could be let go for your sexual orientation? I'm really glad to hear that! I'm glad we still have some rights to choose who we work with." She pauses for a second before she begins again, "It makes sense if your manager or some coworkers are uncomfortable by it, then it could make for a hostile environment, and honestly I don't really want to hear all those details about their personal life with their 'partner' you know?" She looks at you waiting for a response.

1.) I believe this is an appropriate conversation to have in the workplace

|                   |   |         |   |                |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|----------------|
| 1                 | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree |   | Neutral |   | Strongly Agree |

2.) I would be likely to discuss this topic with my coworker

|                   |   |         |   |                |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|----------------|
| 1                 | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree |   | Neutral |   | Strongly Agree |

3.) Why would you choose to discuss or not discuss this topic with your coworker?

Open-Ended



**SCENARIO 2a**

You have just sat down in the cafeteria, and begun enjoying the lunch you prepared for yourself. Your coworker Mark noticed you sitting there and decided to join you. As you are both eating your meals, Mark launches into a conversation. He recently watched a 60 Minutes episode on guns in the workplace, and has some thoughts on the materials covered. He looks at you and says, "I saw that a lot of companies are considering allowing guns in the workplace. It's about time! We as Americans have the right to bear arms and defend ourselves! If someone comes in here wanting to shoot up the place, the only thing that's going to stop them is a gun. It's not like we're going to use them on an everyday basis, but I just feel safer knowing I have it with me."

**SCENARIO 2b**

You have just sat down in the cafeteria, and begun enjoying the lunch you prepared for yourself. Your coworker Mark noticed you sitting there and decided to join you. As you are both eating your meals, Mark launches into a conversation. He recently watched a 60 Minutes episode on guns in the workplace, and has some thoughts on the materials covered. He looks at you and says, "I saw that a lot of companies are considering allowing guns in the workplace. I don't think they belong at work. What if Sally gets angry one day and decides to use her gun on us? It seems like it's only going to further perpetuate the problem. I just don't feel safe knowing the coworker I'm sharing a cubicle with is armed."

4.) I believe this is an appropriate conversation to have in the workplace

|                   |   |         |   |                |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|----------------|
| 1                 | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree |   | Neutral |   | Strongly Agree |

5.) I would be likely to discuss this topic with my coworker

|                   |   |         |   |                |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|----------------|
| 1                 | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree |   | Neutral |   | Strongly Agree |

6.) Why would you choose to discuss or not discuss this topic with your coworker in the above conversation?

Open-Ended

### The Big Five Inventory (BFI)

Here are a number of characteristics that may or may not apply to you. For example, do you agree that you are someone who likes to spend time with others? Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement.

|                   |   |         |   |                |
|-------------------|---|---------|---|----------------|
| 1                 | 2 | 3       | 4 | 5              |
| Strongly Disagree |   | Neutral |   | Strongly Agree |

I see Myself as Someone Who...

- \_\_\_ 1. Is talkative
- \_\_\_ 2. Tends to find fault with others
- \_\_\_ 3. Does a thorough job
- \_\_\_ 4. Is depressed, blue
- \_\_\_ 5. Is original, comes up with new ideas
- \_\_\_ 6. Is reserved
- \_\_\_ 7. Is helpful and unselfish with others
- \_\_\_ 8. Can be somewhat careless
- \_\_\_ 9. Is relaxed, handles stress well
- \_\_\_ 10. Is curious about many different things
- \_\_\_ 11. Is full of energy
- \_\_\_ 12. Starts quarrels with others
- \_\_\_ 13. Is a reliable worker
- \_\_\_ 14. Can be tense
- \_\_\_ 15. Is ingenious, a deep thinker
- \_\_\_ 16. Generates a lot of enthusiasm
- \_\_\_ 17. Has a forgiving nature
- \_\_\_ 18. Tends to be disorganized

- \_\_\_ 19. Worries a lot
- \_\_\_ 20. Has an active imagination
- \_\_\_ 21. Tends to be quiet
- \_\_\_ 22. Is generally trusting
- \_\_\_ 23. Tends to be lazy
- \_\_\_ 24. Is emotionally stable, not easily upset
- \_\_\_ 25. Is inventive
- \_\_\_ 26. Has an assertive personality
- \_\_\_ 27. Can be cold and aloof
- \_\_\_ 28. Perseveres until the task is finished
- \_\_\_ 29. Can be moody
- \_\_\_ 30. Values artistic, aesthetic experiences
- \_\_\_ 31. Is sometimes shy, inhibited
- \_\_\_ 32. Is considerate and kind to almost everyone
- \_\_\_ 33. Does things efficiently
- \_\_\_ 34. Remains calm in tense situations
- \_\_\_ 35. Prefers work that is routine
- \_\_\_ 36. Is outgoing, sociable
- \_\_\_ 37. Is sometimes rude to others
- \_\_\_ 38. Makes plans and follows through with them
- \_\_\_ 39. Gets nervous easily
- \_\_\_ 40. Likes to reflect, play with ideas
- \_\_\_ 41. Has few artistic interests

\_\_\_\_42. Likes to cooperate with others

\_\_\_\_43. Is easily distracted

\_\_\_\_44. Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature

*Scoring:*

BFI scale scoring (“R” denotes reverse-scored items):

Extraversion: 1, 6R, 11, 16, 21R, 26, 31R, 36

Agreeableness: 2R, 7, 12R, 17, 22, 27R, 32, 37R, 42

Conscientiousness: 3, 8R, 13, 18R, 23R, 28, 33, 38, 43R

Emotional Stability: 4R, 9, 14R, 19R, 24, 29R, 34, 39R

Openness: 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35R, 40, 41R, 44

**Political Stance - LGBTQ Rights**

I believe there should be laws to protect gays and lesbians against job discrimination.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

I believe gay or lesbian couples should be legally permitted to adopt children.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

I believe gay or lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

**Political Stance – Attitudes Towards Guns**

I would feel safe if guns were allowed at my place of work.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

If I have a permit to carry a firearm, I should be allowed to bring it to my place of work.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

I believe having firearms in the workplace could help prevent workplace violence.

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree somewhat
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree somewhat
5. Agree strongly

**Demographics**

I identify as..

1. Man
2. Woman
3. Prefer not to specify

I identify as..

1. Caucasian
2. African American
3. Hispanic
4. Asian
5. Native American
6. Other

I am..

1. Under 18
2. 18-20
3. 21-30
4. 31-40
5. 41-50
6. 51+

What political party are you registered with, if any?

1. Democratic party
2. Republican party
4. Independent
5. Other {SPECIFY}

Where would you place yourself on this scale?

1. Extremely liberal
2. Liberal
3. Slightly liberal
4. Moderate; middle of the road
5. Slightly conservative
6. Conservative
7. Extremely conservative

How interested are you in politics?

1. Not at all interested
2. Little to no interest
3. Neither interested nor not interested
4. Somewhat interested
5. Very interested

I am currently employed in either a part-time or full-time capacity..

1. Yes
2. No
3. Prefer not to specify

If employed....

The company I work for specializes in..

Open-ended

How many employees work in your office?

1. <20 employees
2. 20-50 employees
3. 50+ employees

### Appendix C: Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

#### *Descriptive Statistics for All Variables for Pro-LGBTQ 1a Scenario*

| Variable            | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Appropriateness     | 86       | 3.27     | 1.19      |
| Engagement          | 86       | 3.48     | 1.28      |
| Pro-LGBTQ Agreement | 86       | 4.56     | 0.79      |
| Extraversion        | 86       | 3.44     | 1.01      |
| Emotional Stability | 86       | 3.79     | 0.93      |
| Openness            | 86       | 3.76     | 0.61      |

#### *Descriptive Statistics for All Variables for Anti-LGBTQ 1b Scenario*

| Variable             | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|----------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Appropriateness      | 75       | 1.73     | 1.13      |
| Engagement           | 73       | 1.93     | 1.11      |
| Anti-LGBTQ Agreement | 75       | 1.45     | 0.71      |
| Extraversion         | 75       | 3.39     | 0.84      |
| Emotional Stability  | 75       | 3.59     | 0.79      |
| Openness             | 75       | 3.73     | 0.60      |

#### *Descriptive Statistics for All Variables for Pro-Guns 2a Scenario*

| Variable            | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Appropriateness     | 85       | 2.89     | 1.3       |
| Engagement          | 85       | 3.01     | 1.36      |
| Pro-Guns Agreement  | 85       | 2.13     | 1.33      |
| Extraversion        | 85       | 3.45     | 1.01      |
| Emotional Stability | 85       | 3.79     | 0.94      |
| Openness            | 85       | 3.76     | 0.62      |

#### *Descriptive Statistics for All Variables for Anti-Guns 2b Scenario*

| Variable            | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Appropriateness     | 75       | 2.85     | 1.14      |
| Engagement          | 75       | 2.95     | 1.24      |
| Anti-Guns Agreement | 75       | 3.84     | 1.12      |
| Extraversion        | 75       | 2.95     | 1.24      |
| Emotional Stability | 75       | 3.58     | 0.79      |
| Openness            | 75       | 3.73     | 0.60      |



### Appendix D: Qualitative Analysis for Engagement Justifications

#### *Pro-LGBTQ Qualitative Analysis - Frequency of Engagement Justifications*

| Decision to Engage | Reason to Engage                    | <i>n</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Engage             | Relationship with Coworker          | 9        |
|                    | Relates to Their Personal Identity  | 4        |
|                    | Wants Their Side of View Heard      | 11       |
|                    | Wants to Explore Ideas              | 21       |
| Do Not Engage      | Potential for Argument and Backlash | 11       |

#### *Anti-LGBTQ Qualitative Analysis - Frequency of Engagement Justifications*

| Decision to Engage | Reason to Engage                     | <i>n</i> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Engage             | To Hear the Opposing Side            | 8        |
| Do Not Engage      | Inappropriate and Not Work Related   | 34       |
|                    | Potential Argument from Disagreement | 15       |

#### *Pro-Guns Qualitative Analysis - Frequency of Engagement Justifications*

| Decision to Engage | Reason to Engage                    | <i>n</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Engage             | Wants Side of View Heard            | 18       |
|                    | Exploring Ideas                     | 10       |
| Do Not Engage      | Fear of Safety                      | 5        |
|                    | Potential for Argument and Backlash | 14       |
|                    | Relationship with Coworker          | 3        |

*Anti-Guns Qualitative Analysis - Frequency of Engagement Justifications*

| Decision to Engage | Reason to Engage                    | <i>n</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Engage             | Work Related                        | 17       |
|                    | Want Side of View Heard             | 4        |
| Do Not Engage      | Inappropriate and Not Work Related  | 9        |
|                    | Potential for Argument and Backlash | 7        |

## Appendix E: IRB Approval

### IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
Office of Research Compliance,  
010A Sam Ingram Building,  
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



### IRBN007 – EXEMPTION DETERMINATION NOTICE

Friday, February 08, 2019

Principal Investigator **Megan Snodgrass** (Student)  
Faculty Advisor Patrick McCarthy  
Co-Investigators NONE  
Investigator Email(s) *mes8b@mtmail.mtsu.edu; patrick.mccarthy@mtsu.edu*  
Department Psychology

Protocol Title *Political discussion in the workplace: Does agreement equal appropriate?*  
Protocol ID 19-1054

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the EXEMPT review mechanism under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) within the research category (2) *Educational Tests*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

|                        |   |      |         |
|------------------------|---|------|---------|
| IRB Action             | EXEMPT from further IRB review***   | Date | 1/29/19 |
| Date of Expiration     | NOT APPLICABLE  |      |         |
| Sample Size            | 300 (THREE HUNDRED)   |      |         |
| Participant Pool       | Healthy Adults (18 or older) - Amazon MTurk workers   |      |         |
| Exceptions             | Online consent is permitted with mandatory age-verification   |      |         |
| Mandatory Restrictions | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Participants must be 18 years or older</li> <li>2. Informed consent must be obtained from the participants</li> <li>3. Identifying information must not be collected</li> </ol> |      |         |
| Restrictions           | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All restrictions for exemption apply</li> <li>2. Mandatory disclosure of restrictions on participation compensation</li> </ol>  |      |         |
| Comments               | NONE  |      |         |

\*\*\*This exemption determination only allows above defined protocol from further IRB review such as continuing review. However, the following post-approval requirements still apply:

- Addition/removal of subject population should not be implemented without IRB approval
- Change in investigators must be notified and approved
- Modifications to procedures must be clearly articulated in an addendum request and the proposed changes must not be incorporated without an approval
- Be advised that the proposed change must comply within the requirements for exemption
- Changes to the research location must be approved – appropriate permission letter(s) from external institutions must accompany the addendum request form
- Changes to funding source must be notified via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))

- The exemption does not expire as long as the protocol is in good standing
- Project completion must be reported via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- Research-related injuries to the participants and other events must be reported within 48 hours of such events to [compliance@mtsu.edu](mailto:compliance@mtsu.edu)

#### Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

The current MTSU IRB policies allow the investigators to make the following types of changes to this protocol without the need to report to the Office of Compliance, as long as the proposed changes do not result in the cancellation of the protocols eligibility for exemption:

- Editorial and minor administrative revisions to the consent form or other study documents
- Increasing/decreasing the participant size

**Only THREE procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel.**

| Date | Amendment(s) | IRB Comments |
|------|--------------|--------------|
| NONE | NONE.        | NONE         |

#### Post-approval IRB Actions

| Date       | Action(s)  | IRB Comments |
|------------|--|--------------|
| 02/06/2019 | Additional disclosures related to the use of Amazon Mechanical Turk platform were not included during the review. The PI was instructed to provide these particulars for additional review. The documents have been submitted and approved.. | NONE         |

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all applicable post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, current & past investigator information, training certificates, survey instruments and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board  
Middle Tennessee State University

#### Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.  
More information on exempt procedures can be found [here](#).