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# Productive Political Discussions

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# Productive Political Discussions

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] Polls show that most union members understand and support their union's political activity. But, talking to members about politics can be tricky. Many people are justifiably cynical, seeing politics as a dirty business. The following guidelines will help stewards relay information and build participation without worsening divisions or agitating members who do not agree with the union's political positions or endorsed candidates.

## **Disciplines**

Unions

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**P**olls show that most union members understand and support their union's political activity. But, talking to members about politics can be tricky. Many people are justifiably cynical, seeing politics as a dirty business. The following guidelines will help stewards relay information and build participation without worsening divisions or agitating members who do not agree with the union's political positions or endorsed candidates.

### Why Politics?

One reason unions are so involved in electoral politics and campaigns for specific legislation is that what is won at the bargaining table can be taken away by government action. It's an arena in which unions and their allies can win advances not only for members, but for all workers: safety and health protections, retirement provisions, wage and hour laws and more.

### Inform Yourself about the Issues and the Process

Unions do polling and have committees that analyze issues and candidates. Usually, elected boards decide which positions and candidates the union will support. Information about the union's process and reasons for their endorsements (or lack of endorsement) are usually found on your union's website, at your union's political education committee meeting or by talking with a union official or staff person. Ask questions until you are sure you understand the process and the reasons well enough to explain them to others.

### Provide Information, Not Directives

No one likes being *told* how they should vote or what to support. They do appreciate information that helps them make up their own mind.

Don't Say: "Here's how the union wants us to vote."

Do Say: "Here is a fact sheet from the union on the upcoming election (or issue before the legislature). Please take a look – I'm around to talk about it if you'd like."

And, if a member has a question you don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. I'll find out."

# Productive Political Discussions

## Respect Opposing Views

Everyone has the right to disagree with the union and support what is important to them. You should defend that right and convey to everyone in your workplace that no one should be hassled for not agreeing with the union's recommendations. It is important that everyone participate in the union.

## Gently Determine People's Positions

Do not assume you know where others stand on political or legislative issues. After you provide information on the union's position, politely ask members, "What do you think?" Once they respond, use the Rule of Thirds to determine how to proceed.

This informal rule of human behavior says most groups have three subgroups:

1. Those who agree with you
2. Those who disagree with you
3. Those who are undecided

Members of each subgroup should be approached differently:

*To those who agree*, say something like: "That's great, here is a list of ways you can show your support. Which things can you help with?" Don't assume everyone is eligible to vote – but all supporters can participate by knocking on doors, phone banking and the like.

*To those who disagree*, especially those who feel very strongly, politely reply: "I understand. Of course that's your right and I respect that. Thanks."

*To those who are undecided*, you might say: "What is most important to you in making a decision? Here's information about that. If you have other questions I'll try to answer now or get back to you soon."

## Keep Track of Each Sub-Group

Keeping track allows you to call on supporters to join you in talking to the undecideds and avoid arguments with those who strongly disagree.

## Avoid Arguing

Don't waste time arguing or trying to convince those who disagree—it rarely changes anyone's mind and it can generate tension and divisions. Concentrate on getting supporters involved and bringing those who are undecided to your side.

## Stick to Issues, Reasons and Shared Values—Not Labels

Avoid labeling politicians as liars and jerks and making blanket statements. Concentrate on information about the candidates or issues. Invite others to support the union's position because it makes sense and is in keeping with your shared union values—not based on a party's political philosophy.

Do say: "Here are the reasons why we support this candidate/issue."

Don't say: "Support this candidate because she/he is a liberal/conservative."

## Pay Attention to Your Tone

Sometimes when we feel strongly about something we unintentionally come off in ways that put people off, especially when there is much at stake. Don't talk down to people or act like your position is the only legitimate one; don't scold, push too hard or otherwise offend.

## Acknowledge Cynicism

Say something like, "Politics can be nasty and politicians don't always keep their promises, but if we don't support our allies in the legislature things could get worse." Then steer the discussion to issues that affect working people and show how the union's recommended action addresses those issues.

## End on a Positive Note

Regardless of where others stand, always thank them for their time and end the conversation on a friendly, positive note.

—Ken Margolies. The writer recently retired from the Worker Institute, Cornell ILR.