

I vote left, you vote right: How can we work together?



Political divisiveness continues to make news and influence our lives. In Spain, the drive for Catalonia's independence has sparked demonstrations from both sides, including police action to close polling places. In Britain, Brexit aroused a debate marked by strong emotion over the future direction of the country. In the U.S., movements such as Black Lives Matter/Blue Lives Matter, standing for the national anthem, and even monologues from late night comedians engender strong emotions. Polling data in the U.S suggest that major political parties are further apart on basic political values [than ever before](#). We suggest that the strength and ubiquitous nature of political convictions will likely spill over to workplace decision-making.

Where political affiliation information was once relatively private, recent political events and social media have made this information more available than ever before. Traditionally, a manager might find indications of political affiliation on an application or on a resume. For example, an applicant might note a leadership position in a campus political organization.

Similarly, in traditional workspaces, co-workers often talk about a variety of life space issues which make it possible to make good educated guesses of the political affiliation of others. However, the popularity of social media has increased access to information on co-workers' opinions in a variety of forms, such as memes, comments, and tweets. International [surveys of recruiters](#) from Jobvite, as well as [surveys](#) from the Society for Human Resource Management suggest more and more managers are accessing social media websites in the hiring process.

Our [paper](#) suggests that differences in political affiliation set off a logical chain of events that affect how managers make a variety of personnel decisions regarding people in the workplace. We use hiring as a basis to illustrate our logic (but it may also apply to performance appraisal and promotions).

First, a manager can see the similarity or difference between himself/herself and a job applicant regarding political parties and issues. Political similarity (i.e., both affiliated with the same party) gives rise to a more general feeling of overall similarity. Next, the manager will like the applicant more than if they were different. Liking is an overall affective state toward the applicant that gives rise to better ratings of applicant quality (i.e., hireability).

How much managers identify and disidentify with the political party of current or potential employees may affect their decision making. For example, a manager might strongly identify with the Labour (or Democratic) Party – and that strength signals the party’s centrality to the manager’s identity. This identification captures the positive affect directly related to the party in question, and more positive identification by the manager leads to higher ratings of similarity, liking, and hireability, if a job applicant is associated with the same party.

Disidentification from the applicant’s party is also a critical issue. Disidentification refers to the negative affect attached to a party. For example, a Conservative (or Republican) manager might think that the Labour (Democrat) Party does shameful things and wants to distance himself/herself from that party. This disidentification is critical, because it is the negative affect that drives so much of the political discussion (and related behaviours). Thus, the negative affect the manager feels toward the party of a job applicant can have strong influences on hiring-related ratings.

We have conducted some preliminary tests of our thinking (in the US.) One experimental study presented at the International Conference on Information Systems showed that similarity at the political issue level influenced hiring decisions provided by a sample of college seniors and MBA students. For example, similarity of views on marijuana legalisation, Obamacare (government-sponsored healthcare), and gun control/rights positively influenced views of similarity, liking, and the employability ratings of applicants.

A second experimental study presented at the Academy of Management meetings (in August of 2017) examined how political party similarity influenced liking and hiring-related ratings (expected task performance and citizenship behaviours) provided by upper-level business students and working professionals in management.

The results, which were nearly identical across the two samples, confirmed the importance of identification and disidentification of the manager with the party of the applicant. Interestingly, the expected results were borne out for both the task and citizenship ratings. Further, these effects were detected with or without the presence of various job-related qualifications that included grade point average, presence on a dean’s list, and a relevant internship. This suggests that political affiliation can still influence decisions, even when there is job-relevant information presented to the decision-maker.

We believe our studies of political affiliation have important implications for managers. First, managers should be aware of the power of political affiliation similarity (or dissimilarity) between themselves and applicants (or subordinates or those seeking promotion). Both identification and disidentification can influence personnel decisions. Second, managers may wish to have their diversity training add political affiliation to the list of variables that people might consider as job-irrelevant (but might influence hiring or other decisions, nonetheless). Third, lawmakers might consider whether they wish to protect political affiliation as a characteristic that should not influence hiring.

Overall, we believe political affiliation similarity is a key, understudied variable that will continue to shape how managers and employees interact in the future. There are many polarizing issues facing a variety of countries (e.g., immigration policies). There are parties that evoke strong reactions (e.g., AfD in Germany). The polarisation of politics is likely to continue and we believe this trend will make it even more likely that “political affiliation discrimination” will spill over into the workplace, unless managers become aware of this trend and take appropriate action.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors’ paper [The role of political affiliation in employment decisions: A model and research agenda](#), *Journal of Applied Psychology*, September 2017.
- The post gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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