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SCIENCE FOR A SMARTER WORKPLACE

# Politically Based Maltreatment in the Workplace

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Special thanks or other notes...

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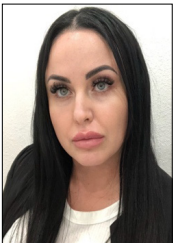
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**Abstract**

The United States of America, contrary to its name, is a nation divided in contemporary times, with polling data showing political polarization to be at record levels (Pew Research Center, 2021). Flight attendants often take self-defense classes because of increasing numbers of violent attacks upon them by passengers upset about mask mandates (Street, 2021). Police officers and business owners have experienced property damage, and in some cases physical attacks, resulting from confrontations between politically motivated groups (Staff, 2021). Workplace conflicts between employees, sometimes including those in leadership roles, has become so commonplace that the National Law Review (White, 2021) recommends employment policies be revisited to ensure organizations are prepared to address incidents of workplace conflict and violence stemming from political differences. To properly address incidents and issues related to politically motivated conflicts in the workplace, we must have an operational definition of what this phenomenon truly is.

In this paper, we posit that politically based maltreatment in the workplace (PBMW) is the perceived negative, aggressive, or disparaging treatment of workplace colleagues, subordinates, or superiors based on their political identity. For example, an individual might experience PBMW if his or her political ideals were publicly ridiculed by coworkers. We argue that such type of mistreatment can lead to stress and decreased satisfaction and that organizations need to plan how to address maltreatment based on political identity. Issues related to political identity are often complicated because the U.S. values free speech and individual expression, but the divisiveness of the U.S. political climate may result in uncivil interactions between persons with differing viewpoints. In this white paper, we start by describing the problem of politically based maltreatment in the workplace, then describe initial data that supports its relationship with stress and turnover, and then end with potential guidelines for employers.

### Roots of Mistreatment, Incivility, and Other Bad Behavior

Bullying, undermining, mobbing, and incivility all denote forms of ill treatment of coworkers, supervisors, and others that one encounters in the workplace. These are generally differentiated by level of severity and the ambiguity regarding intent. Bullying is denoted as more severe and less ambiguous, and incivility is considered less severe and more ambiguous in intent (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). A meta-analysis on the effects of bullying found that experiencing workplace bullying was related to greater mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as physical health problems (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Individuals may also be targeted for maltreatment based on their social identity or membership in social or demographic groups. In these cases, maltreatment may be called discrimination, bias, or harassment. Our definition of PBMW captures both ambiguous and unambiguous behavior, and a range of severe to less severe forms of maltreatment, and it includes the additional element of being based on the perceived identification of an individual with a set of political beliefs. A new measure of politically based workplace maltreatment found that such maltreatment was relatively frequent with nearly one in five respondents experiencing the use of derogatory terms or slurs that described their political beliefs weekly (Brown et al., 2021). The study also showed that the more employees encounter politically based maltreatment in the workplace, the more likely they are to experience stress and dissatisfaction as well as desire to leave that place of employment in favor of other employment opportunities. Given these findings, we believe it is important for employers to address PBMW.

**Ancillary Implications**

**The Value Added**

Organizations have used their diversity programs and policies to create a more inclusive environment so that all employees feel comfortable at work and valued by their organization. We argue that organizations could benefit by relying on similar types of training to address PBWM as they do on other forms of workplace bullying and harassment. Finally, by recognizing that political diversity exists, and by providing a safe environment in which individual employees can appropriately express their own views within the bounds of any policies or laws that govern employee rights to free speech if applicable, an organization can create a culture that embraces beliefs and ideals from all, create a more accepting, inclusive, safe, and enjoyable workplace for their most valued asset, their human capital.

**Legal Concerns**

Political affiliation is not considered a protected class as there is no federal law protecting all employees from discrimination based on one's political affiliation. However, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 prohibits discrimination in employment based on political affiliation for civil service federal employees (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Whether or not it is legal to make employment decisions based on political affiliation or beliefs in the private sector varies by state. Most states prohibit employers from influencing who employees choose to vote for while a few places, such as South Carolina and the District of Columbia, prohibit discrimination based on political affiliation. Other states, such as New York, specify that employers cannot discriminate against employees for political activities that take place outside of the workplace. Thus, PBMW may be a cause for legal concern depending on the state or municipality in which an organization operates.

**Moving Forward**

Members of Generation Z are more drawn to work for organizations that demonstrate an interest in social responsibility, likely stemming from the diversity that Generation Z embodies. To become more aligned with the ideals of social consciousness, organizations can act to ensure that all people, even those whose views differ from the views of the majority within the organization, feel a reasonable sense of psychological safety and do not fear reprisal or adverse outcomes resultant from their divergent beliefs or defining characteristics. Organizations with an emphasis on psychological safety are likely to experience elevated levels of productivity from employees, and increased productivity across all levels of an organization yields increased revenue.

Honest and frank discussion among all levels of the organization through a direct process of interaction and guided discussion can foster a sense of psychological safety surrounding the topic of political ideals and will

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likely decrease the frequency of occurrence of PBMW. Part of the honest and frank interaction surrounding this phenomenon should include making leadership aware of the damaging effects of PBMW. Acknowledging the inherent benefit of being a member of the political majority in the workplace or surrounding community should occur. Providing a forum within which those who are not members of the political majority can openly share their experiences with PBMW within the workplace can aid those who are in the majority group to recognize and understand how their own behaviors contribute to perpetuating the PBMW in the context of the workplace, as well as the ways their ideals bolster their status within the social hierarchy of their organization.

Finally, ensuring a balanced, reasoned, and consistent approach to the way an organization addresses occurrences of PBMW is important. Presently, there are organizations that are acting to address issues of diversity in the workplace prior to collecting, analyzing, and understanding the data about this issue, and the result is that policy is created without deep thought or soliciting buy-in from concerned stakeholders. Then, consequences are levied without thought to the way the public will respond to the actions taken.

Taking a hardline, zero-tolerance position on issues of diversity is an approach that organizations take; however, this can lead to adverse outcomes in some scenarios. Although zero tolerance might be applicable for egregious circumstances, organizations can use smaller infractions as teachable moments and engender a sense of empathy for those whose hurtful actions or ideas might be rooted in ignorance as opposed to deliberate malice. Essentially, disciplinary response should be suitable for the infraction, and policies that leave no room for a tiered response to increasing or repeated abhorrent behaviors can lead to adverse and unjust outcomes. Figure 1 demonstrates a process model that organizations can employ when addressing PBMW from a preventative or responsive perspective.

**Figure 1**
*Process Model for Addressing Politically Based Maltreatment in the Workplace*
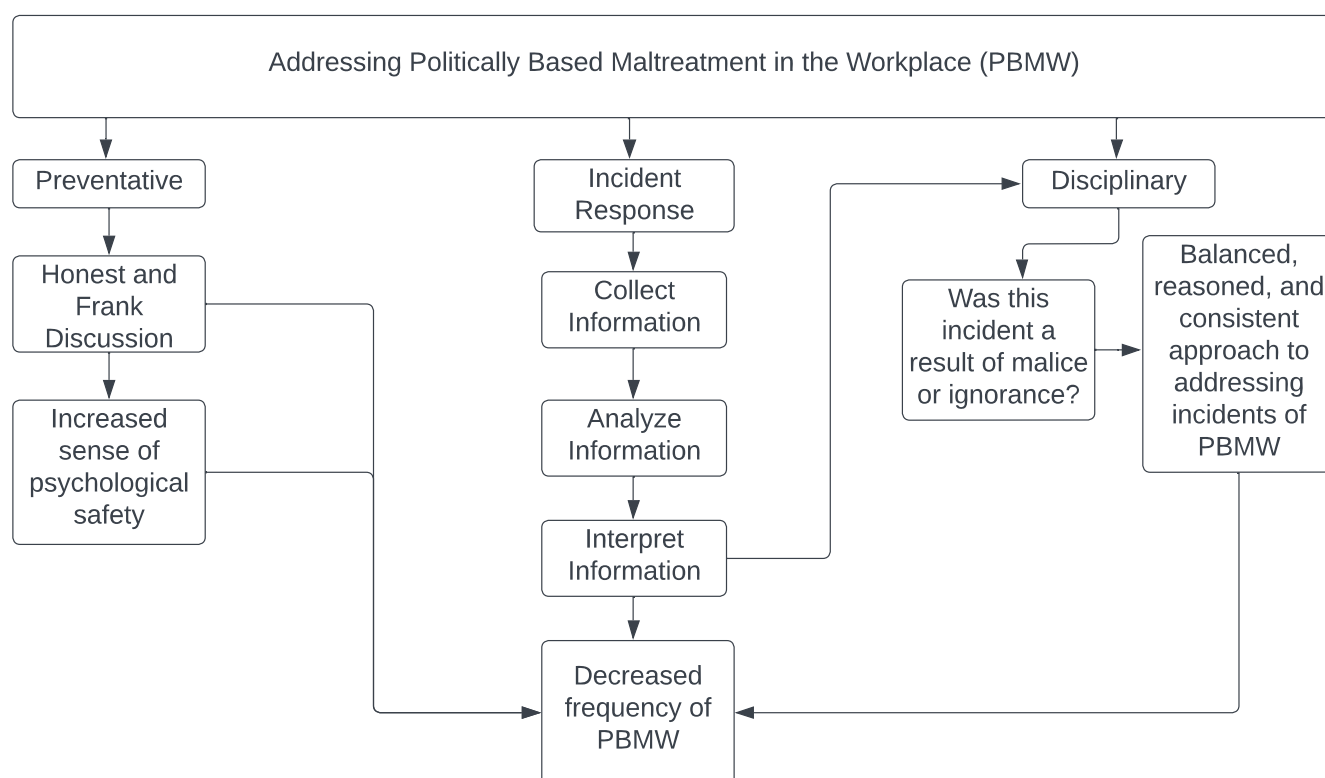
### PBMW In Situ

For various reasons, including legal impetus, organizations should create a culture of tolerance for varied political views. This can be done through a mixed system of implementation. A cascading system emphasizing tolerance for divergent personal views can be embraced in an actionable context within an organization to decrease the frequency and intensity of PBMW. From the ground-up perspective, an organization should identify, recruit, retain, and advance talented candidates, with a respect for personal views that may differ from the majority within the organization. Organizations should strive to achieve the equanimity that leads to stability and composure enabling and empowering human capital to perform at high levels despite differing ideals. All levels of an organization can benefit from creating a climate of psychological safety for employees who are members of an otherwise invisible political minority.

### Implications for Practice

Although diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become an important area of research and practice in human resources (HR) and industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology, challenges regarding how to properly address issues related to DEI in the workplace remain. Presently, there are seminars and training program that focus on DEI from a race or gender-based perspective; however, there are scant resources available regarding the appropriate manner to address inclusion based on political identity.

To embrace diversity of political opinion, we propose that organizations should include discussion of political identity when conducting DEI efforts, to ensure that kindness and empathy are used when discussing beliefs and views that many include central to their own personal identity. Current research (Brown et al., 2021) indicates that people are experiencing PBMW, and the impact of those experiences has multiple negative effects on their work experience and work satisfaction.

### Conclusion

The 2016 and 2020 presidential electoral cycles demonstrated that the United States of America is deeply divided in terms of political ideology. The Pew Research Center (2021) indicates that the American public is growing more and more polarized regarding political ideals as time passes. As Americans spend a large amount of their time working, whether it be in person or from home, it is important to recognize that political identity and political beliefs are going to become more common topics openly expressed in the workplace. The dichotomous beliefs that individuals hold regarding the topic of politics is likely to lead to disagreement, conflict, and perhaps even maltreatment, which can threaten employee psychological safety and lead to a variety of negative outcomes. For these reasons, among others, organizations should take a vested interest in developing policies and procedures regarding political diversity in their workplaces.

**As Americans spend a large amount of their time working, whether it be in person or from home, it is important to recognize that political identity and political beliefs are going to become more common topics openly expressed in the workplace**

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