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Companies' Memo to Workers: Exercise Your Right to Vote

More employers are giving paid time off on election day, facilitating dialogues and bracing for the days after the midterms



A sign in the Ultimate Software Group office in south Florida encourages employees to vote. PHOTO: JODY KAMINSKY

By [Chip Cutter](#)

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Corporate America wants to get out the vote.

Ahead of the midterm elections, many companies are urging employees to cast their votes, banning meetings or giving people paid time off to do so. Employers say they have a duty to encourage greater participation in democracy in a time of deep political division, especially because voter turnout is typically so much lower in midterms than presidential elections.

“It’s very important we not take democracy for granted,” said Daniel Lubetzky, founder and CEO of snack-bar maker KIND LLC, which will prohibit meetings and conference calls after 3 p.m. on election day so its 700 U.S. employees can vote.

At least 325 companies, from jeans brand Levi Strauss & Co. to spirits maker [Diageo PLC](#), are giving employees paid time off to cast their ballots on Election Day or in early voting, according to the nonpartisan nonprofit Vote.org. Other employers are closing offices early on Nov. 6 or, in some cases, shutting down for the day.

Many companies are engaging more actively on civic issues, partly because they face pressure from within their ranks to do so. Also, some of the hottest political debates, including immigration policies, tariffs and trade could have big impacts on U.S. companies.



Voters cast early ballots at a polling station in Doral, Fla., on Aug. 28. PHOTO: SCOTT MCINTYRE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Discussions about politics heated up with the 2016 election cycle and, in some cases, have stayed at a fevered pitch. In a recent survey by human resource services and staffing firm Randstad US, 64% of respondents said political discussions had gotten more heated in the workplace over the past five to 10 years. The September Supreme Court confirmation battle over Brett Kavanaugh careened out of Washington through office buildings, factory floors and break rooms in ways that altered some workplace dynamics in the run-up to the midterm elections.

To get employees into voting booths, [VF Corp.](#), owner of Vans and The North Face, is for the first time giving its 25,000 U.S. employees up to three hours of paid time off to cast their ballots. The organization saw that the 2014 midterm elections had 37% voter participation and decided to act, said Craig Hodges, vice president of corporate affairs.

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“We as an organization have to look at ourselves and say: ‘Are we doing everything we can to empower our associates and enable them to exercise their right to vote?’” he said.

[Tyson Foods](#) Inc. held a companywide voting initiative for the first time, seeing it as its responsibility to encourage employees to exercise their right to vote, spokesman Gary Mickelson said. That led more than 40 employees to register to vote at a poultry plant in Robards, Ky., while another 20 registered at a pork plant in Storm Lake, Iowa. On Election Day, the company plans to remind employees to head to the polls.

On the south Florida campus of payroll and talent management software company [Ultimate Software Group](#) Inc., large green banners near building entrances, with the words “Your Vote Matters,” encourage employees to vote. At the salad chain Sweetgreen Inc., signs in both English and Spanish in back-of-the-house areas inform employees of Election Day details. And in the political epicenter of Des Moines, Iowa, executives at Dwolla, a digital-payment startup, remind employees to vote in Slack channels, all-hands meetings and via email, said spokeswoman Steph Atkin.

A few companies even see a role in educating voters. The neighborhood social network Nextdoor Inc. on Thursday brought in a nonpartisan local media organization called By the Bay to talk to about 200 employees in San Francisco about local and statewide ballot initiatives. Some of those initiatives, on issues such as housing and homelessness, are confusingly worded and tough to understand, said Steve Wymer, vice president of policy and communications. At least one employee filled out a ballot in the session, he said.

“We don’t want to tell our employees how to vote, and we don’t want to push them to vote for a certain thing, but we sure as heck are going to ensure we are corporately investing in the time it takes for employees to get expert opinions on the pros and cons of measures that affect their daily lives,” he said.

Steve Sintra, a 36-year-old country manager at travel booking site Kayak, a unit of [Booking Holdings](#) Inc., said he often needed to make special arrangements to get to the polls at previous companies. Kayak now offers U.S. employees a half day of paid time off to vote.

Mr. Sintra plans to vote at 8 a.m. near his Connecticut home, bringing his 7-month-old son along, before dropping him off at day care and arriving to work late.

“With a newborn, it would just be very challenging for me to be able to go out and vote otherwise,” he said. “This perk makes it possible.”

While several states, including California, Alaska and Oklahoma, require companies to offer paid time to vote, some companies are now doing more than the law demands.

As it did in the 2016 election, outdoor gear maker Patagonia Inc., based in Ventura, Calif., will close all of its U.S. retail stores and its corporate office Tuesday, a move designed to send a signal that “on election day, it’s more important to vote than shop,” said spokeswoman Corley Kenna.

“The No. 1 reason that individuals say they don’t (vote) is conflicts with work or school,” said Colette Kessler, director of partnerships at Vote.org. The group launched a project called ElectionDay.org in which companies pledge to offer paid time to vote. A similar campaign called Time to Vote, with companies like [Walmart](#) Inc., Levi’s and Patagonia participating, has drawn the support of about 370 companies, some of them overlapping.

Some companies are bracing for upset—or even unproductive—employees in the days following the midterms. Bateman Group, a PR firm with offices in Brooklyn and San Francisco, plans to set aside meeting space for employees to talk after the election, said Chief Executive Fred Bateman.

At the enterprise software company Segment.io Inc., Adriana Roche, vice president of people and places, has sent a guide for managers, helping them talk about difficult issues. It includes sample language for opening up dialogue: “In light of [blank], I just want to check in with you all and let you know that I am here for you if you want to talk or need support.”

Other employers say they will fall back on their 2016 playbook. After the presidential election, Bullhorn Creative, a Lexington, Ky., branding firm, decided it needed something more soothing in its office than political headlines. So staffers played cellist Yo-Yo Ma’s performance of Bach’s Cello Suites, a move partner Brad Flowers is considering once again.

“At some point,” Mr. Flowers said of politics, “I think it’s good just to step back.”

Write to Chip Cutter at chip.cutter@wsj.com