

# Politics at Work

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*For my parents:  
Thank you for mobilizing my curiosity.*



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## PREFACE: ORGANIZING FOR CORPORATE AMERICA

Spirits were running high at the RightOnline conference in July 2010, where hundreds of conservative activists had assembled in the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas for the annual meeting of right-wing bloggers, pundits, and politicians.<sup>1</sup> Over two jam-packed days, participants attended panels celebrating the rise of the conservative Tea Party movement and strategized about how to translate grassroots energy into electoral wins in November. In one session an eclectic group took to the stage to announce an initiative billed as “Prosperity 101.” Led by GOP presidential contender Herman Cain, a candidate best known for his flat-tax plan, the speakers bemoaned the fact that so many employees these days were casting ballots against their economic interests. As Linda Hansen, one of the speakers and the founder of the group selling Prosperity 101 had described elsewhere, American workers “may be voting to end their job—and they don’t even realize it.” Cain put the point more bluntly: “There are a lot of uninformed people [in the workplace]. . . . They just have not been given access to easy-to-understand information about some of the garbage that they are hearing about these various pieces of legislation. So, it’s this uninformed group that is the target for Prosperity 101.”

What could be done? As a short promotional video explained to the crowd, employers could host reading groups, lectures, and even short courses for their employees to educate them on free-market economics using a new curriculum developed by Prosperity 101. Suggested readings included excerpts from conservative *Wall Street Journal* columnist Stephen Moore, one of the spokesmen for the curriculum, and other right-wing writers decrying the role of government and extolling the virtues of an unfettered free-enterprise system. Policies such as the minimum wage, corporate regulations, and climate change legislation all threatened prosperity—and thus workers’ job security. In one version of the curriculum, workers were told that tax rates on business represent “an attack

on American job security and our future securities as leader in the free market and free world” and reminded workers that the “rich pay more than their fair share” to government.<sup>2</sup> “Taxation, regulation, and legislation can all . . . make it more difficult for a business to make a profit [and] will, in the end, negatively affect you and me. They make profits smaller, and smaller profits mean fewer jobs and less tax revenue collected by the government,” explained the course materials.<sup>3</sup> “Job security only comes through business prosperity. . . . Business prosperity can only be achieved through free market, free enterprise policies,” the guide summed up.<sup>4</sup>

The possibilities of an employee economics curriculum were powerful, the speakers noted. “When we can educate them,” Hansen has boasted about the efforts, “we can begin to make a difference. It’s not the only way to take back our country, but it is one answer.”<sup>5</sup> Cain was even more enthusiastic. “It’s conservatives’ answer to ACORN,” he likes to exclaim about these efforts, referring to the now-defunct progressive community group that had become a bugaboo for the Right.<sup>6</sup> Prosperity 101 not only could help companies to lobby for lower taxes and regulations; it could also secure votes for politicians who would protect America’s free-market system.

What happens when employers, like the ones organized by Cain, Hansen, and Moore, attempt to recruit their workers into politics? What does it mean for American democracy that employers are trying to become community organizers? And have we ever seen this kind of corporate grassroots organizing before?

This book answers these questions. It documents, for the first time, how many companies are sending political messages to their workers, showing that around 25 percent of American employees have received a political message from a boss, and nearly fifty percent of all managers in recent surveys report sending political messages to their workers. It explains why businesses are increasingly turning to their workers as a political resource to change elections and policy, arguing that changes in the balance of economic power between workers and managers, shifts in election and labor law, new workplace technologies, and entrepreneurial business group leaders have made it easier for employers to recruit their workers into politics. It documents the concrete ways that employer-led mobilization of workers can be a very effective tool for electing friendly politicians and ensuring favorable public policies. And it explores the consequences—both beneficial and worrisome—of this corporate mobilization for American politics.

The book shows that while employer mobilization helps to close some gaps in civic participation, there are serious issues raised by the employer political recruitment process. Workers fearful of losing their jobs are much more likely to report responding to their employers’ political requests, raising the concern of economic coercion of workers by their managers. Indeed nearly 30 percent of workers report being concerned about the potential for employer political



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retaliation—and 16 percent of employees have actually seen such retaliation at their jobs. Troublingly, lower income employees were substantially more likely than higher income employees to report either fear of political coercion or actual accounts of political retaliation from their bosses. Moreover employer mobilization disproportionately favors a narrow set of policy interests and political goals, exacerbating already existing imbalances of political power and voice. Above all, the book emphasizes that scholars, politicians, and citizens need to think of the workplace as a deeply political arena—and one that may well become an intimidating battleground without new protections for private-sector workers.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book came as a surprise in several ways. Until five years ago I had no idea about the latitude employers possessed for recruiting their workers into politics. Even after learning about the extent to which employers were mobilizing employees into politics, I had no expectation that I would write a book about it. (Indeed I was supposed to be writing another book—my dissertation—at the time!) But encouragement from Theda Skocpol, my dissertation chair, helped me to see the possibilities for piecing together the employer surveys I was doing into a bigger project. Aside from that early and continued advice, Theda was instrumental in helping me to secure the funds to field the 2015 telephone survey of workers. It is no exaggeration to say that the book would not exist without her generous support and constructive feedback and, perhaps most important, the model she has provided of rigorous, civically engaged scholarship on politics and policy.

The book additionally benefited from the early support of Richard Freeman, who offered helpful advice on my initial surveys and, later, the opportunity to get feedback from the participants in the 2015 Political Economy of Labor Regulation workshop at Columbia Law School. (Comments from Mark Barenberg, Craig Becker, Joseph McCartin, Damon Silvers, and Dorian Warren were especially helpful.) A second workshop held at the New America Foundation was also very useful in developing my thinking on the project, and Mark Schmitt and Lee Drutman deserve special thanks for helping to organize the workshop and providing detailed comments on the related policy paper. Back at Harvard I was fortunate to have a wonderful writing group in the last stretch of graduate school—Volha Charnysh, James Conran, Leslie Finger, and Noam Gidron—who endured multiple drafts of each chapter and provided supportive feedback each time. Many others offered detailed and helpful advice as well, including (but by no means limited to) Steve Ansolabehere, Charlotte Cavaille, Greg Elinson, James Feigenbaum, Paul Frymer, Peter Hall, Chase

Harrison, Sandy Jencks, Carly Knight, Torben Iversen, John Marshall, Cathie Jo Martin, Rob Mickey, Mike Miller, Melissa Sands, Kathy Thelen, Kris-Stella Trump, Peter Volberding, as well as participants at the 2015 Midwest Political Science Association and 2015 American Political Science Association meetings and workshops at Harvard, Columbia, Barnard, UCLA, and Tufts. Vanessa Williamson deserves a big thanks for giving detailed comments on the first draft of the book even as she was completing her own manuscript.

After I arrived at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia, Ester Fuchs helped me to arrange a workshop for the manuscript, where I was incredibly lucky to get together a terrific group of scholars to comment on the book, including Frank Baumgartner, Cynthia Estlund, Jacob Hacker, Hahrie Han, Greg Huber, Adam Levine, Matto Mildenberger, Suresh Naidu, Kay Schlozman, Paul Secunda, Bob Shapiro, Leah Stokes, and Ed Walker. I am very grateful for their generosity. As will be apparent to the reader of chapter 7 and the conclusion, joint work with three of those workshop participants—Paul Secunda, Matto Mildenberger, and Leah Stokes—has deeply informed the analysis and arguments in this book.

Will Jordan (at Columbia) and Geoff Henderson (at the University of California, Santa Barbara) were invaluable research assistants on this project. Will read and cite-checked the entire manuscript and offered helpful feedback along the way. Geoff helped Matto, Leah, and me to field the legislative staffer survey, and now knows more than he probably ever wanted to know about the current chiefs of staff and legislative directors in Congress.

I am very grateful for the enthusiasm and patience of Dave McBride at Oxford University Press, as well as the anonymous reviewers for the manuscript. Their probing comments and feedback were incredibly helpful in strengthening the book.

Ideas alone are not enough to finish research projects, and I benefited from generous financial support from a variety of sources. The Harvard Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy (with the help of Pam Metz in particular) helped me (along with Vanessa Williamson) to fund a pilot worker survey, as well as supporting my work through its graduate fellowship. Through the research project on the Shifting U.S. Political Terrain, Bob Bowditch supported the telephone worker survey; the Ash Center at the Harvard Kennedy School supported the employer survey; the Dirksen Congressional Center supported the legislative staffer survey; and the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University supported the survey experiments of workers and managers through its faculty research funding.

I am very appreciative of the corporate and trade association managers who participated in the interviews I report in this book. Their perspectives were invaluable to the analysis. In addition I owe a big thanks to the staff at BIPAC

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who participated in interviews and provided the 2014 electoral data reported in chapter 8. Ilona Babenko, Viktor Fedaseyev, and Song Zhang also generously shared data reported in that chapter from their unpublished working paper, “Do CEOs Affect Employee Political Choices?”

Last, but by no means least, I am grateful for the emotional support of my family. I could not have done any of this without Nate, who knew just when to offer the enthusiasm I needed to keep going—but also when to break out the red wine and Goldfish. My parents, Adriela and Tom, have stood beside me in everything I have done. They have been incredible role models, and my hope is that this work reflects what they have both tried to teach me about the power of using social science to tackle big questions. This book is dedicated to them.

*Alexander Hertel-Fernandez*  
*New York, New York*



## ABBREVIATIONS

ACA	Affordable Care Act
ACORN	Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AGC	Associated General Contractors of America
BIPAC	Business-Industry Political Action Committee
CCES	Cooperative Congressional Election Study
CEO	chief executive officer
CFO	chief financial officer
CIO	chief information officer
COO	chief operating officer
COPE	Committee on Political Education
CTO	chief technology officer
E2E	Employer to Employee Political Communication
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FEC	Federal Election Commission
GE	General Electric
GMO	genetically modified organism
GOTV	Get Out the Vote
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender
NAM	National Association of Manufacturers
P2	BIPAC Prosperity Project
PAC	political action committee
SHRM	Society for Human Resource Management





# Politics at Work



## Introduction: The New Office Politics

Imagine that you and your coworkers begin receiving letters from your employer's CEO endorsing candidates for an upcoming election. Those messages not only list the politicians that your CEO prefers but also contain the threat that your business might need to lay off workers if those candidates are not elected. As Election Day approaches, your managers ask you to volunteer for the campaigns of the political candidates that your CEO has endorsed. When some of your coworkers demur, the managers tell you that political volunteering is a requirement of your job and that any worker who refuses could be fired. Can your employer get away with such a practice? Remarkably, the answer is often yes for private-sector workers.

Thanks to changes in American election law associated with the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, as well as long-term shifts in the economic and technological context of the workplace, employers now have sweeping legal rights as well as the technical means to campaign for political candidates in the workplace. Employers can even require that their workers participate in politics as a condition of employment. Just as a private employer can discipline or fire workers for failing to perform their regular duties, so too can managers generally discipline or fire workers for not participating in political activities that the company deems part of a worker's job.

The latitude employers have for political campaigning can also encompass other, less extreme examples. An employer could simply choose to remind workers to register to vote or to turn out to vote for elections, sending emails to workers with links to a website that helps them download registration forms and find their polling places. Or employers could inform workers about the implications of pending legislation in Congress or state legislatures, asking employees to contact their elected officials to support bills that would benefit the company's bottom line. And some contact might fall in between these categories, such as when managers refrain from explicitly endorsing candidates for elected office but distribute "voter guides" to workers rating the policy stands of political candidates. The similarity underlying all of these activities is that managers are using the

relationship they have with their workers to promote particular political stances and behaviors. That is the subject of this book.

Employers' abilities to engage in these practices are not merely hypothetical. Consider the following examples from the past few years:

- An Ohio coal-mining business invited Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney to a rally at their plant.<sup>1</sup> Miners were told that they would be required to attend the rally and that they would not be paid for their participation. Although managers later explained that no one was actually required to attend the event, miners still reported showing up out of fear they would be disciplined or even dismissed. One radio host summed up the incident in the following way: "What I gathered was employees feel they were forced to go. They had to take the day off without pay. That they took a roll call, and they had a list of who was there and who wasn't and felt they wouldn't have a job if they did not attend."<sup>2</sup>
- Executives at Cintas, a provider of uniforms and other workplace supplies, and Georgia Pacific, a major paper product manufacturer, sent letters to their respective workforces expressing clear partisan stances during the 2012 election.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Georgia Pacific, executives distributed a flyer that indicated all of the candidates that the business had endorsed, from the presidency down to state legislatures. These flyers also included warnings that workers "may suffer the consequences" if the company's favored candidates were not elected.<sup>4</sup> One such flyer is reproduced in Figure I.1.



- A renewable energy company I interviewed encouraged its workers to contact their members of Congress in an effort to reauthorize a federal tax credit for wind energy, warning its workers of the decline in sales of their products if the credit were to expire.
- In the wake of a number of highly publicized episodes of racial violence, Starbucks executives launched a campaign for their baristas to start conversations with their patrons about race relations in America.<sup>5</sup> Baristas were asked to write the words "Race Together" on customers' coffee cups. Staff were also encouraged to visit a company website with essays and videos about race relations.
- In the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, the CEO of a major timeshare company sent an email to all of his employees, warning them that their jobs would be threatened by "another 4 years of the same Presidential administration." If Obama were reelected, the CEO went on to say, he "[would] have no choice but to reduce the size of the company."<sup>6</sup>

**AS REPORTED BY IN THESE TIMES**

state: **OREGON**

**TUESDAY**  
**10.16.12**  
**REG. DEADLINE**

**TUESDAY**  
**11.06.12**  
**ELECTION DAY**

**GENERAL EARLY VOTING**

**THURSDAY**  
**10.18**  
**IN PERSON BEGINS  
BALLOTS ARE MAILED  
TO ALL REG. VOTERS**

**TUESDAY**  
**11.06**  
**APPLICATION DUE**

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**KOCHVOTES.COM**

**PRESIDENT / VICE PRESIDENT**  
Mitt Romney / Paul Ryan

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	DISTRICT
Greg Walden	2

STATE SENATE	DISTRICT
Brian Boquist	12
Tim Knopp	27
Doug Whitsett	28
Ted Ferrioli	30

STATE HOUSE	DISTRICT
Bruce Hanna	7
Andy Olson	15
Vic Gilliam	18
Kevin Cameron	19
Jim Thompson	23
Julie Parrish	37
Bill Kennemer	39
Gene Whisnant	53
Mike McLane	55

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Figure I.1 Georgia Pacific mailer to Oregon employees. Reproduced from Elk 2012b.

- At franchises of College Hunks Hauling Junk, a cleverly branded garbage removal and moving company, managers have regular “roll call” meetings with their workers to discuss political issues related to the “free enterprise” system. Managers discuss, for instance, how taxes and regulation affect companies’ profits and how to support political candidates who would maintain and expand free enterprise in the United States.<sup>7</sup> At one session a manager explained to a roomful of movers that Gandhi’s protest campaigns were about fighting unfair taxation and that such levies were similar to the American federal government’s unjust taxation of job creators.
- During tight congressional elections in 2010, a regional president at Harrah’s casinos and resorts sent a spreadsheet to supervisors with a row for each employee working at the company’s Las Vegas properties.<sup>8</sup> Supervisors were instructed to ask each of their employees whether he or she had voted in the race, and if not, why.

All of these examples are legal under current federal election and labor laws. And all are cases of what I call *employer mobilization of workers*—when the top managers of a company attempt to change the political behaviors and attitudes of their employees as a matter of company policy. By “top managers,” I am referring to those senior executives who make, rather than merely implement, key company decisions. That means employer mobilization does not encompass cases of a single company employee trying to persuade coworkers to support an issue or candidate. Employer mobilization also goes beyond instances of a single supervisor trying to channel support for a political position among his or her supervisees. Instead employer mobilization refers to cases of top corporate executives attempting to use their workforce as a resource to change politics and policy, whether to encourage greater turnout (as with Harrah’s), to discourage support for specific political candidates (as with the coal-mining company), to build support for particular legislation (as with the renewable energy firm), or to change the way employees think about political issues (as with Starbucks or the junk-hauling college students). Employer mobilization includes both recruitment of workers into specific political activities and broader education initiatives aimed at moving worker attitudes and preferences. As one manager explained to me, employer mobilization efforts are most successful when they get employees “activated in their identity as workers” so they start thinking about their political interest in terms of their business and industry.

Given the fact that so many companies—including many large and prominent businesses—are now turning to their workers as a means of changing public policy, shifting elections, and even determining how workers construct their political identities, you might think that there would be a slew of surveys and studies tracking the prevalence of employer mobilization and its implications

for workers, companies, and American politics. Yet, remarkably, you would be wrong. Beyond a smattering of investigative pieces from journalists, there is virtually no systematic work that could help us to understand how common mobilization is across companies and employees, let alone what its effects might be on workers' political attitudes and behaviors, public policy, and elections. This book represents one early step at answering those questions and in the process unpacking what employer mobilization means for American democracy. I make three main arguments:

- *Employer mobilization is prevalent.* Broad swaths of the business community describe mobilizing their workers into politics, and many workers report that they have received political messages from their employers. According to surveys I describe in subsequent chapters, I estimate that nearly 50 percent of American managers report mobilizing their workers in some way, and around 25 percent of employees reported in 2015 that their bosses have ever attempted some kind of mobilization. That share increased to about 30 to 40 percent of employees around the 2016 election. Employer mobilization, in short, has become a way many Americans hear about political issues and are recruited into politics.
- *Employer mobilization shapes worker political participation, public policy, and elections and is now an important source of corporate influence in politics.* Corporate managers report that mobilization of their workers is one of the most important ways their businesses engage in politics. In surveys I describe throughout the rest of the book, I show that managers rank mobilization of their workers as being just as effective at shaping public policy as hiring a professional lobbyist, and even more effective than making PAC contributions to political campaigns and participating in major business associations. Beyond managers' own perceptions, I provide a range of evidence to show how employer messages deeply shape how workers think about politics, how Congress and state governments make policy, and which politicians are elected to office. To understand how businesses influence politics, we need to focus on employer mobilization.
- *Employer mobilization pulls workers into politics—yet raises serious concerns.* I document that employer mobilization is effective at recruiting workers into politics, including spurring workers to register to vote, turn out to vote, and contact their elected officials. Yet I also find that not all workers are equally likely to respond to their employers' messages. Workers who are especially fearful about their economic security, those who are worried about retaliation from their bosses, and those who lack political privacy at work are most likely to respond to their employers, raising concerns about economic coercion of workers by their managers. If workers are responding to their

managers not because they are genuinely persuaded by corporate political messages but because they are fearful of losing their jobs, we ought to worry that some workers are being pressured into giving up their political voice to their employers.

The nine chapters of the book make the case for each of these arguments, drawing on a range of evidence—surveys of workers, managers, and senior legislative aides, interviews, experiments, and archival materials—which I document in more detail in chapter 2. At this point I turn to answering the question of why a close study of employer mobilization matters now more than ever.

## Why Does Employer Mobilization Matter—Especially Now?

Why study employer mobilization when few others have? I believe there are good academic and practical reasons why employer mobilization warrants rigorous, scholarly treatment. To the extent that we want to understand how Americans participate in politics, we ought to care about employer mobilization as a new way that citizens are being recruited into politics. If we focus only on the usual suspects for civic engagement—such as political contacts from the parties, unions, churches, social clubs, and interest groups—we will miss a growing part of political life in the United States. As I show using new national survey data, employer recruitment efforts may be about as effective at spurring worker political participation as outreach by the political parties and unions.

Aside from widening the picture of American civic engagement, employer mobilization also has an important bearing on our understanding of corporate political behavior. As I discuss in the coming chapters, managers themselves report that mobilization is one of their most effective means of changing public policy. But we do not need to take managers' word for it. Looking across a number of case studies, I document concrete changes in politics, elections, and policy as a result of employer mobilization efforts. To ignore mobilization would be to neglect an important mechanism of corporate influence in the policymaking process.

Last, mobilization raises thorny ethical questions about the role employers should play in the political lives of their workers. What kinds of communications between managers and workers are acceptable, and what kinds of messages should be banned? Do employer messages—especially those that rely on the threat of changes in employment or wages—infringe on the rights of workers to arrive at their political choices free from outside interference? These questions touch upon broader issues of economic power, corporate free speech, and



worker political freedom, and merit a serious discussion among the public, corporate executives, and policymakers.

Apart from concerns about the agency of individual workers, many forms of employer mobilization may pose a challenge to our democratic institutions by granting disproportionate political influence to businesses. Even before the controversial *Citizens United* case, which lifted restrictions on corporate electoral giving, many citizens and politicians from the Left and the Right were worried about the disproportionate power that corporations possessed in the electoral and policymaking process. For instance, nearly half of all Democrats and well over half of all Republicans reported in 2009 that big business had “too much influence” over the decisions made by government.<sup>9</sup> And poll after poll finds that most Americans believe government is more responsive to special interests than to ordinary citizens.

A growing body of academic research backs up these opinions. Regardless of the measure one chooses—the number of groups, the breadth of political activity, or the depth of financial resources—organizations representing business interests do indeed vastly outnumber groups representing labor or the general public in Washington, DC. Figure I.2 shows just how much better companies are represented in America’s capital than are labor unions, for instance, looking at disclosed dollars spent on federal lobbying.<sup>10</sup> Between 1998 and 2015 businesses spent an enormous 50 to 60 times more on lobbying than did labor unions, according to the Center for Responsive Politics—and the trend is upward over this period. Ordinary workers are outmatched compared to business, and that political gap is only growing.

As Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady sum up in their exhaustive survey of Washington interest groups, “Although the weight of advocacy by organizations representing business interests varies across domains of organized interest activity, in no case is it outweighed by the activity of either organizations representing the less privileged or public interest groups.”<sup>11</sup> Corporations also possess outsized advantages in lobbying the states, especially states with only weakly professionalized, part-time legislatures that are highly dependent on business lobbies for ideas, research, and other resources.<sup>12</sup> The product of these disparities in representation is captured in compelling research by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, who find that organized business interests are substantially better represented in national policy decisions than either mass-based interest groups or average citizens.<sup>13</sup> The authors conclude that “business groups are far more numerous and active [in national politics]; they spend much more money; and they tend to get their way.”<sup>14</sup>

Employer mobilization therefore provides an additional opportunity for already politically powerful businesses to further influence legislation, regulation, and elections at the federal and state levels. Importantly, the priorities

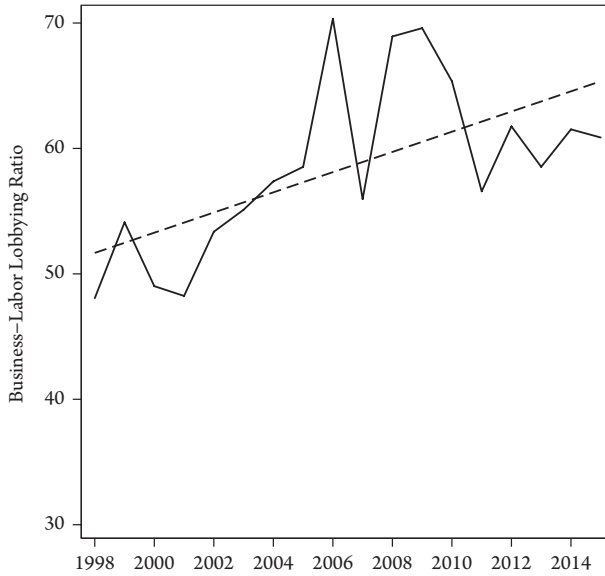


Figure I.2 Business lobbying vastly outweighs labor lobbying in Washington, DC. Figure shows the ratio of total federally disclosed lobbying spending by business relative to labor unions using data from the Center for Responsive Politics. Dashed line indicates trend line.

that businesses pursue through mobilization are not a random cross section of policies. Companies are, by and large, seeking to lower their taxes and reduce regulations. And when managers educate their workers about politics, corporate messages often involve material that cheerleads the free market and attacks government action.

The fact that employer mobilization overwhelmingly benefits one narrow set of corporate and pro-market priorities over all others might be concerning at any historical juncture. But it is especially worrisome today. We are living in an era when powerful segments of the business community and the conservative movement have succeeded in demonizing the role that government plays in sustaining a prosperous economy.<sup>15</sup> Employer mobilization threatens to tilt the political playing field even more sharply against government regulations and the investments that are necessary for a safe, productive, and relatively egalitarian society. It also threatens to enable greater capture of government by private interests. That is a consequence that ought to worry libertarians as much as liberals who are concerned about businesses using public policy to disadvantage their competitors. As we will see, employers often use mobilization as a tactic to secure narrow provisions that disadvantage their competitors or customers—a form of regressive, upwardly slanted redistribution.<sup>16</sup>

The rise in employer mobilization also comes at a time when we have seen skyrocketing levels of economic inequality, summarized in Figure I.3. The top 1 percent is on pace to capture almost a fifth of all income in the United States—and the even more rarefied group of the top 0.1 percent is nearly set to take home a full tenth of all income. This concentration means that the wealthy managers and business owners who control major companies in the United States will have even more resources to invest in politics.

Employer mobilization, then, not only adds to the power of business and wealthy individuals; it does so at a time when imbalances of economic and political power are already large and continuing to grow quite rapidly. Even if we were not concerned about the potential for coercion in the workplace when employers communicate with their workers about politics, there are thus good reasons to be worried about the fact that organized business interests now have access to a new means of shaping elections and policy debates—especially since this is a means of engaging citizens in politics that other actors do not possess.

This imbalance is particularly troubling because the mobilization of citizens through the workplace is being done in an increasingly unbalanced environment, where labor unions struggle to maintain a presence throughout the private sector. A deep irony is that employer mobilization was inspired by labor unions' recruitment efforts in the workplace (as I explain in chapter 5), yet employer mobilization is currently unfolding in a context wherein the vast majority of

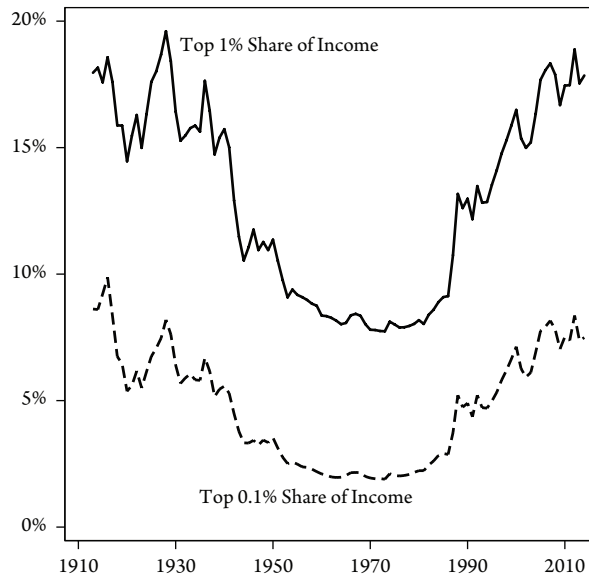


Figure I.3 Rising economic inequality in the United States. Data from the World Wealth and Income Database.

private-sector workers will never interact with a labor union. Just 6 percent of the private-sector workforce was covered by a union in 2016, down from 24 percent in 1973. The political voices workers hear at work are thus more often than not from managers, meaning that employees get only one side of the political story. It is not a coincidence that employer mobilization is flourishing in the contemporary economy. We will see that the diminished voice that employees possess at work ~~through the labor movement~~ has played an important role in fostering an environment in which the costs faced by employers for recruiting workers into politics are considerably lower than they were in previous decades. In sum, employer mobilization is a trend that merits attention now more than ever—and that is what I intend to do in this book.

## Plan of the Book

The rest of the book proceeds as follows. In chapter 1, I lay out a guide for thinking about employer mobilization both as a means of corporate involvement in politics and as a source of political recruitment for individual workers. The chapter describes why profit-seeking private-sector companies decide to become political recruiters—and in particular, the value that employer mobilization can offer to managers and the investors they serve. It also describes why workers might think about employer messages and requests as being distinct from messages they might receive from other political recruiters, like unions, parties, or political campaigns. The underlying message in this chapter is that employers, unlike nearly any other political actor, have direct control over the economic livelihood of the people they are trying to recruit. Employers also have the means of closely monitoring the participation of their workers in politics, potentially rewarding complying workers and punishing defiers. That means we should expect that workers who are especially worried about the prospect of job loss or drops in their wages will be more responsive to their bosses' political requests compared to workers who feel more secure in their jobs. The fact that economic security dictates employees' responses to employer political requests represents an important contribution to our understanding of political behavior and participation. It also introduces a serious concern with employer mobilization that I explore throughout the book.

In chapter 2 I summarize the data sources and methodological strategy I use to study employer mobilization in the United States. Unlike other types of political recruitment, major surveys of American workers and voters do not ask about political contact with employers. I therefore had to design a series of new surveys of workers and managers to capture how often employer mobilization

has occurred throughout the American labor force and the effects it has had on politics and policy. I also describe how I triangulate among a range of different sources, including surveys of workers, managers, and top legislative staffers, in-depth interviews with top corporate executives, and media accounts to understand why employer mobilization happens, where it is most effective, and the specific outcomes in legislative debates and elections that we can trace back to employer mobilization drives. Readers who are less interested in the methodological guts of this project can skip this chapter without losing much context and proceed directly to chapter 3, which begins presenting the substantive conclusions from my research.

Given that so little research has focused on employer mobilization, part I aims to provide a comprehensive guide of what employer political recruitment efforts look like ~~today~~—and how contemporary employer strategies compare to the past. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the landscape of employer mobilization in the United States as it stands today.

Chapter 3 provides a picture of employer mobilization from the perspective of managers, including how many businesses report mobilizing their workers, the messages and requests mobilization encompasses, and how managers rank mobilization as a political strategy. This chapter further explores when companies are most likely to make employee political recruitment part of their “core strategy” for changing policy, as one of my interviewees put it. Businesses were more likely to engage their workers in politics and to rate employee mobilization as being more effective when they already engaged in other political activities that complemented mobilization, when businesses faced specific regulatory threats from government, and when businesses monitored their employees’ political attitudes and behaviors more closely. The potential for worker backlash also weighed heavily on managers’ minds. When managers fear backlash, they are less likely to opt for mobilizing their rank-and-file workers and more likely to switch to more traditional tactics, like giving electoral contributions or buying political ads.

Chapter 4 flips the perspective from managers to workers and documents how many workers report receiving employer requests, what those requests and messages contain, what workers think about employer messages, and how messages have shaped workers’ behaviors and attitudes. This chapter shows that most employer messages focus on specific policy issues facing companies, especially health care, education and training, taxes, and regulation. Messages related to voting—including reminding workers to register to vote or to turn out to vote on Election Day—were also quite common. By all accounts, workers consider employer messages to be relatively persuasive: large proportions of surveyed workers report changing their political thinking and actions in some way as a result of employer mobilization.

A significant minority of workers also report that their employers made explicit threats to them about job loss, wage cuts, or business closings linked to political outcomes. Workers tended to take these threats seriously. I follow up on the question of managerial threats by presenting data on the number of workers who either are concerned about the potential for employer coercion or have actually seen such political retaliation at their jobs. These data present a picture of a small but nontrivial swath of workplaces where employees, especially low-income workers, experience considerable pressure to toe the company line or face retribution.

I next contrast employer mobilization with political recruitment by labor unions, discussing how the prevalence and character of union messages differ from messages from managers and supervisors. In a final section of the chapter, I consider how employer mobilization shapes inequalities in civic participation, looking at the ways employer recruitment both mitigates and exacerbates class differences in political action. Even as employer mobilization closed some gaps in political participation, it exacerbated others. I also find that it was disproportionately lower income workers who reported changing their beliefs and attitudes in response to employer messages, switching from more liberal positions and preferences to more conservative stands.

While chapters 3 and 4 focus on the contemporary picture of employer messages, chapter 5 takes a longer historical perspective to map out exactly how mobilization has evolved over time. I describe how a specific constellation of economic, legal, and technological changes spurred the return of employer mobilization to American politics since its heyday in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These shifts were insufficient, however, to make political recruitment into a viable political strategy. Business associations were critical in teaching managers that mobilization was well within their legal rights. Associations also played an important role in selling managers the technical capacity necessary to mobilize workers.

Part II switches from describing what employer mobilization looks like to tracing the effects of employer messages on political participation, public policy, and elections. Chapter 6 explores how employer messages fit into our understanding of individual political participation. I first use a survey experiment of workers to show that messages workers think come from an employer shift employee attitudes toward policy and employees' likelihood of engaging in the policy process. These experiments also provide evidence supporting the prediction I offered in chapter 1: that workers most concerned about losing their jobs would be more likely to respond to their employers' messages. The chapter next reviews surveys of workers who have received actual employer messages to show that employer contacts shift these workers' political attitudes and behaviors—though not their basic knowledge about politics. Just as in the survey experiments, I also find that

employees who were more concerned about losing their jobs were more likely to respond to employer messages. Apart from these differences in economic security, I show that employee perceptions of employer monitoring also mattered, consistent with the employer-level findings from chapter 3. Employer political requests had the strongest effect on employees who perceived that their managers were tracking employee political behaviors and attitudes.

Workers reported that they were responding to employer messages, but can we actually observe changes in policy as a result of employer mobilization? Chapter 7 marshals a range of data to show that employer mobilization has significant consequences for policymaking in Congress and the states. I first present results from a survey of top legislative staffers working on Capitol Hill to show that Congress pays especially close attention to the messages employers have their workers send to U.S. senators and representatives. I also report results from an experiment embedded in that survey that shows employee messages can deeply affect staffers' perceptions about their constituents' opinions, especially when congressional offices are more attuned to the threat of joblessness in their districts and states. I provide a case study involving a ballot initiative in Alaska to document the effect employer messages can have on state policy outcomes, presenting evidence that mobilization of workers helped to lower taxes on oil producers even in the face of public support for tax hikes on the oil and gas sector. In another example, I show that employer messages to workers opposing the Affordable Care Act were an important source of durable public opposition and skepticism to national health reform.

Chapter 8 moves from the realm of policy battles to elections and focuses on the 2014 races to show how employer messages coordinated by a conservative business organization worsened the electoral fates of Democratic candidates in the 2014 election cycle. Employees subjected to more intensive recruitment drives were less likely to vote for Democratic gubernatorial candidates. Beyond convincing employees to cast ballots for Republican candidates, employers can powerfully shape workers' electoral giving. Candidates endorsed by the top management of companies ended up receiving substantially more contributions from employees at those companies compared to candidates who were not favored by managers.

In the two concluding chapters, I reflect on the implications of my findings for the study of American politics, as well as for judging the quality of American democracy at the ballot box and in the workplace. I summarize the positive and negative aspects of employer recruitment efforts, and then focus especially closely on the concerns created by coercive employer messages. I end by proposing a variety of reforms for addressing political intimidation at work and discuss the political coalitions that might support such efforts. Polling data suggest that large majorities of Americans—including majorities of both Republicans and

Democrats alike—favor strict limits on employer abilities to recruit workers into politics. As I will argue, now is the moment to curb coercive employer mobilization practices, before they spread further into the American labor force. To delay action will only increase the risk of inciting a political war at work between managers and employees.



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PART I

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WHAT IS EMPLOYER  
MOBILIZATION AND FROM  
WHERE DID IT COME?



# How Should We Think about Employer Mobilization?

“Why on earth would employers want to do this—and why would employees ever respond assuming that employers did contact them?” Those were some of the first questions I received from a fellow political scientist at an early academic talk on my research on employer mobilization. The political scientist, one of my department colleagues, was puzzled as to why employers would ever want to wade into the potentially controversial area of workplace political recruitment, especially since workers could easily ignore the messages they received from their bosses. Americans are bombarded with political messages and requests every day that do not make much of a difference one way or another. What, then, could possibly be the upside for managers to workplace political mobilization?

This chapter answers my colleague’s questions, showing why businesses would want to deploy their workers as a political resource to shift elections and change public policy. I also explain why workers might take their managers’ messages quite seriously, especially when workers are fearful of losing their jobs and wages. This chapter provides a guide for thinking about employer political recruitment from the perspectives of both managers and workers.

## The Value to Business of Employer Mobilization

Why would profit-seeking private-sector companies decide to become political recruiters? Top managers sometimes engage in political recruitment, especially efforts to encourage greater voter registration and turnout, as part of corporate social responsibility campaigns. Starbucks launched such a nonpartisan effort in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, partnering with a tech start-up that helps with voter registration. In announcing the decision, Starbucks’s CEO explained that the company had asked, “What is our role and responsibility as a for-profit company, and as citizens in a wider world?”<sup>1</sup> One answer

that stood out to him was helping to address the problem of chronically low voter registration and turnout. (TurboVote, the platform Starbucks used, aims to replicate the same approach across other major companies, like Lyft, AirBnB, Google, Univision, and Target.<sup>2</sup>) Corporate executives sometimes also mobilize their employees simply to advance their own personal beliefs, using all of the resources available at their company to elect favored politicians, as in the case of the Florida timeshare mogul I mentioned in the introduction. But in general most companies are not like Starbucks or the timeshare enterprise. Companies tend to invest in mobilization because of its value to corporate bottom lines.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the subsequent chapters, I will point to a number of cases where businesses used mobilization to secure valuable gains through public policy, such as stymieing the passage or implementation of onerous regulations or securing tax cuts. These examples help us to understand why managers rank employee mobilization as one of the most effective tools in their political arsenal.<sup>4</sup>

There are at least four different strategies employers can use to influence politics and policy by mobilizing their workforce. Though I present these strategies as being distinct, in practice companies often combine ~~these~~. The first is through elections: if businesses prefer a policy change that is likely to come about under a particular legislator or party, mobilization of workers could provide the votes necessary to elect those favorable candidates, especially in tight or low-turnout races. For instance, if a company is seeking to reduce its tax burden, then electing antitax Republican lawmakers would be one way to increase the probability that a state legislature or Congress would consider enacting tax cuts. This strategy involves sending material to workers that encourages them to support or oppose particular political candidates, reminding workers about elections, and then ensuring that workers turn out on Election Day.

Wynn Resorts employed such an approach when the company mailed a voter guide to their resort and casino workers in Nevada, which pushed them to register and turn out to vote for the company's preferred candidates. Those were politicians who "support policies that help promote a friendly business and living environment to Wynn Resorts, our . . . employees, and the gaming industry as a whole."<sup>5</sup> In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, CEO Steve Wynn explained that his company was engaged in electoral outreach because "it would be a complete disaster if Obama wins, which is why I'm urging my employees to vote for Romney."<sup>6</sup>

Employers often point out that sending messages to their workers about elections can have ripple effects that extend well beyond their workforce. As one business representative put it in a pitch to other companies, "If you have a thousand employees, and you educate those thousand employees, each one of them touches 20, 30, 50 people in their family, in their community. And if they're

educated about their own livelihood, they'll make the right decision, and the right decision is to keep the free enterprise system strong."<sup>7</sup>

Closely related to the first strategy, mobilization can serve as a mechanism for employers to demonstrate a commitment to a lawmaker (or aspiring lawmaker), building relationships the company can leverage for access to the policymaking process at a later time. In this manner, employer mobilization could be seen as achieving one of the same goals as campaign contributions: supporting political allies so as to "buy time and effort" from them in the future by building a reputation as an organized force that can effectively mobilize voters.<sup>8</sup>

As with the first strategy, this one requires employers to send material to workers supporting or opposing candidates for elected office. But in addition to that, employers must also signal to politicians that managers have mobilized workers in ways relevant to a candidate's campaign. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) recommends that its member companies use just such an approach to build ties with important lawmakers, especially by arranging for elected or aspiring officials to visit factories. "Manufacturing plant visits offer an opportunity to build lasting relationships with members of Congress and their staff," explained NAM's vice president of public affairs Tiffany Adams. "They provide opportunities for lawmakers to meet with their constituents, hear the success stories and the struggles that manufacturers face, and witness how their policies work in real life."<sup>9</sup> A critical part of the tour, of course, is interacting with plant workers and offering politicians an opportunity to "speak candidly" with potential supporters.

A household goods manufacturer (and NAM member) reiterated the importance of building these ties to members of Congress in an interview with me. That manufacturer mentioned that they relied on the relationships they had previously developed by bringing politicians into their plants to "give them rallies and that kind of support" during a recent legislative debate over reauthorization of the president's trade promotion authority, a measure the company strongly supported. This strategy can also function as a warning for politicians: employers can threaten to encourage their workers to vote against a candidate in a subsequent election if candidates do not follow the policy positions favored by the company. That same household goods manufacturer told me that they might do this as well if they were "concerned about members of Congress's votes" on the trade promotion authority bill. In a similar vein, the head of grassroots mobilization at a major business association said that employee messages could help put pressure on a wayward member of Congress, especially if they reminded the member that their businesses had defeated similarly wayward legislators in other primaries. Above all, that business association executive said that his goal with employee political recruitment was to remind potentially unruly legislators that

“they [businesses and the association] just threw a body in the street in the last election in the district next to mine.”

Employer mobilization need not be confined to generating support for political candidates during elections. It can also be a tool for directly generating grassroots support for—or against—policy changes, what political scientist Ken Kollman has described as “outside lobbying.”<sup>10</sup> An employer could, for example, encourage workers to contact elected officials to express the company’s preferred position on a particular bill under consideration by a state legislature or Congress, or even a proposed regulation. This sort of legislative contacting can provide an important signal to lawmakers about the public attitudes of a mobilized group of citizens in their district. As Kollman has put it, outside lobbying has “the common purpose of trying to show policymakers that the people [an interest group] claims to represent really do care about some relevant policy issue. These tactics say, in effect, ‘See, we told you constituents were angry about policy X, and now you can hear it from them.’”<sup>11</sup> I will present evidence from an in-depth survey of top congressional staffers that this sort of contact can be quite effective, deeply shaping the ways that policymakers think about proposed policy changes.

DuPont, the chemicals manufacturer, provided a good explanation of why it mobilizes its employees to change public policy in a company-wide manual containing frequently asked questions. The document explained:

Grassroots communications from constituents is one of the most powerful ways to influence the decisions legislators make. While the DuPont Government Affairs staff members are experts in the legislative process and are highly successful in affecting positive public policy, what constituents say matters a great deal to elected officials. Lawmakers listen when informed citizens speak up on issues that affect them, their families and their communities. . . . Regardless of the means of communication, the fact that you have taken time to convey your views puts a human face on the issues and lets them know that the choices they make affect your company and the lives of real people back home. The facts, ideas, and opinions you and other members of DuPont Employee Voice share with lawmakers will help them make better-informed decisions so they can better represent you and DuPont.<sup>12</sup>

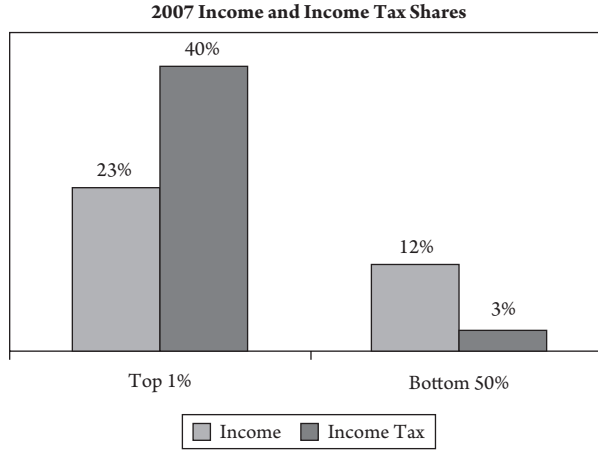
There is also a strong parallel between this sort of workplace mobilization and the corporate political strategies described by sociologist Edward Walker, in which companies buy the services of public affairs consultants who can generate the appearance of grassroots support for corporate policy goals.<sup>13</sup> We will see that this is one of the most common uses of mobilization reported by business.

As one employer mobilization consultant stressed in a best practices guide to corporate executives, “Corporations don’t vote. Environmentalists vote. Union members vote. Senior citizens vote—big time. But many legislators look upon corporations as piles of bricks that don’t vote and thus pose no political perils. Grassroots action by corporate stakeholders lends living, breathing, *voting* faces to your otherwise faceless corporation. With effective grassroots action, your corporation (and thus you) quickly becomes a player to be reckoned with instead of a punching bag.”<sup>14</sup>

The last pathway to influence is more indirect and involves changing the political preferences of workers over the long run. In this strategy an employer might not encourage workers to become involved in any one election but instead develop communications that change the ways workers construe their economic and political preferences. Managers I interviewed described this process as “employee education” or, alternatively, turning workers into “employee voters” who take their companies’ perspectives into account when thinking about politics. Menards, a large home improvement chain in the Midwest, provides a good example of this practice. In January 2012 the store began encouraging its 40,000 employees to take an online civics course at home, inspired by the Prosperity 101 curriculum I mentioned in the preface.<sup>15</sup> Though the course was optional, it was clear that managers would be tracking who did and did not pay attention to the material. Workers who passed the course were singled out for recognition in company publications. The course was a recitation of conservative policy talking points, emphasizing that “limited government and individual liberties are the foundation of American economic dominance” and that “taxes always limit freedom.” Using the language of “takers and makers,” the course argued that the rich and business already pay too much in taxes and that workers ought to support candidates who promise to lower taxes on job creators. Figure 1.1 shows an excerpt from the curriculum on tax policy.

It is worth dwelling on the differences between mobilization that companies engage in to advance specific policy objectives (like lobbying Congress to preserve tax credits or to prevent onerous regulation) and more general employee education initiatives, like the Menards textbook. On their face it may seem like these strategies are opposed to one another: the first one is about obtaining company-specific benefits from government, while the second one is about promoting a broader ideology or worldview among employees, which does not yield narrow benefits for a specific company but would instead advance more general conservative political goals. Yet a close examination of employer messages and interviews with corporate managers reveals that these two types of mobilization are more closely linked than they appear at first glance. Companies will often engage in broader employee education to develop an initial political

**Rich Pay More Than Their Fair Share**



*Figure 1.1* Excerpt from Menards employee textbook on economic security. Reproduced from Nolan 2016.

relationship with workers that lays the foundation for later and more specific requests.

The government affairs officer at a large extractive resource manufacturing company explained to me that the first thing a company does when it wants to mobilize its workers is not to ask them to contact a member of Congress or to support a particular candidate; instead it wants to “build a relationship with employees . . . [to] educate and inform them.” That involves talking about bigger political issues and how politics and policy—not necessarily an individual bill or election—shape the company. “Once [employees] feel the passion and involvement in the political process, everyone [at the company] will start talking about politics, so it is natural. Hell, that’s how we started as a country, just bitching about politics,” he concluded colorfully. Thus employee education may start off focusing on a more general ideological or political orientation and switch to business-specific issues as those proposals arise in the political process and a company has developed a relationship with its employees.

Despite these potential benefits, mobilization is not without pitfalls for employers. The most obvious concern managers expressed in interviews is that workers might ignore company requests, resulting in wasted resources. Worse, workers might disagree with the mobilization requests and protest the messages—or even do the opposite of what companies request. If workers are incensed enough by employer requests, they can even leave the company altogether. Political scientists Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady have underscored a closely related risk in their review of interest group political



activity, noting the danger that “once a grassroots campaign has been initiated, it may be difficult to control, and the organization may lose control of both the membership and the message.”<sup>16</sup> Even if mobilization works initially, it may not continue to inspire large-scale participation from workers over time, and another major issue that managers brought up was worker fatigue. Many executives mentioned that they tried to be strategic about the frequency with which they contacted workers, so that workers did not tire of receiving requests from their managers. Some managers also said they wished they had begun tracking the effectiveness of their efforts earlier so they could figure out which messages were most likely to elicit positive responses.

The opposite of fatigue was sometimes a concern as well. When companies succeeded in mobilizing workers to contact lawmakers, executives fretted about flooding legislative offices with a mountain of carbon-copy letters. Although a handful of corporate representatives told me they were fine with volume over quality, most managers said they strongly encouraged workers to tweak company talking points so that legislative aides would take the letters more seriously.

A third set of potential challenges is that messages managers communicate to their workers have to be detailed enough to motivate participation, but not too detailed as to turn workers off. As one executive put it, you have to “keep the melody simple if you want your constituents to sing your song.”<sup>17</sup> He went on to explain that the “toughest challenge in mounting any grassroots campaign is to frame the issue in such a way that your constituents get the information they need to respond without feeling intimidated. If they don’t understand the issue, they won’t act.”<sup>18</sup> This tends to be an issue with grassroots mobilization in general, as political scientist Frank Baumgartner and his collaborators discovered in their comprehensive study of lobbying strategies.<sup>19</sup> Those researchers even identified a big downside risk for groups that tried to mobilize but failed to motivate participation: “Even with a large membership, mobilizing the grassroots is not that easy. And if an organization announces a plan to mobilize its membership but few respond to the call, this is a clear signal that the issue is not a major concern, a point that rivals will be sure to exploit.”<sup>20</sup> For instance, if a business attempted to mobilize its workers to oppose new regulation and failed, proponents of that regulation could point to the failed mobilization drive as evidence of broad public support for the measure.

Fourth, managers have reported that mobilization is rarely effective entirely on its own, and so another reason mobilization might flop is if managers neglect to provide “air cover” for their grassroots campaigns through PAC contributions to political candidates or lobbyists whom companies hire to meet with lawmakers and their staffs.<sup>21</sup> Mobilization of employees, in short, often requires additional political efforts to be successful. Accordingly, whether it is aimed at electing favorable politicians, defeating a bill, or rewriting regulations, there is

strong evidence that employer mobilization works best when companies are already investing in complementary political activities.<sup>22</sup>

Fifth, employers, particularly consumer-facing firms, are sensitive to the negative publicity that mobilization—like any political activity—might generate.<sup>23</sup> Especially given the backlash against some politically active companies in recent years, managers are wary of taking political stands that large groups of consumers might protest. Explained one government affairs officer I spoke with, many companies looked at those missteps—such as when Target and Chick-fil-A backed groups opposed to LGBT rights—and said, “Holy cow, we never want to be those people.” That typically means companies stick to economic issues that directly affect their business. Employer mobilization thus generally focuses on issues related to taxes, regulation, the environment, trade, and spending, and not so much stands related to abortion, LGBT issues, or civil rights.

## Employers as Distinctive Political Recruiters

One way of understanding employer mobilization is to focus on how managers perceive the potential costs and benefits to activating their workers in politics. But another way of thinking about mobilization is from the perspective of individual workers. By doing so, we can see how employer mobilization is both similar to and different from other forms of political recruitment that citizens might experience. We can also see why employees might pay just as much, if not more, attention to messages from employers compared to messages from other political actors—including others in the workplace.

Political scientists studying civic engagement have shown that one of the best predictors of participation is direct individual contact and that the workplace is an important site for that recruitment even apart from managers.<sup>24</sup> Political communications scholars Diana Mutz and Jeffrey Mondak have argued that workplaces facilitate political discussions between individuals with very different ideologies, forcing coworkers to become exposed to, and perhaps more tolerant of, opposing political perspectives.<sup>25</sup> Echoing the importance of the workplace, political economists Samuel Abrams, Torben Iversen, and David Soskice illustrate how social pressure from colleagues can encourage individuals to follow and participate in politics themselves: if your coworkers are following politics but you are not, you run the risk of being excluded from daily conversations at the company water cooler.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from coworkers, scholars of political participation have also examined the importance of labor unions. Though the formal function of unions is to bargain on behalf of their members with corporate management, unions have long played a social and political role as well.<sup>27</sup> Unions educate their workers about

political issues, help workers register to vote, and promote particular candidates and parties. Political scientists have focused most of their attention on the role of unions in encouraging greater voter turnout, especially among low-income and low-education citizens.<sup>28</sup> But there is increasing evidence that unions can also shift the preferences of their members over time and can even change the way their members think about the political process.<sup>29</sup>

Employer mobilization is related to both of these types of political recruitment—through colleagues and labor unions—in that it also focuses on the workplace as a setting where individuals receive political messages, develop political preferences, and decide to engage in political activities. At the same time, political recruitment by employers is fundamentally different from recruitment by coworkers and unions because it implies a relationship between economic unequals.

## Power and Politics in the Workplace

A key insight that underpins many of the conclusions in this book is that political mobilization of workers by managers is heavily structured by the imbalance of economic power between them. The relationship between workers and their managers is wholly different from the relationship between coworkers, or between unions and their members, because managers have ultimate control over the employment situation of their workers. Unless private-sector workers or their union representatives have negotiated a written contract with an employer, workers are usually considered to be employed “at will” and can be terminated without cause. Moreover, in the absence of a contract or union representation, managers can change workers’ schedules, pay, and work routines without any notice or justification. As labor lawyers often quip, in the United States employers can hire and fire workers for a good reason, a bad reason, or no reason at all.

As a result of American labor law, then, political messages and mobilization efforts from top managers to workers carry a potential threat of retaliation—whether managers articulate that threat directly or not. This in turn **creates** pressure on workers to comply with managerial messages, even if workers may not agree with a company’s political position. To put it differently, employers have the ability to make credible threats about workers’ employment and wages and to condition those threats on workers’ political participation. This sets employer recruitment apart from, say, the grassroots mobilization of citizens by other interest groups or even efforts by companies or trade associations to mobilize nonemployees (like shareholders or consumers) into politics. Employers also have many more opportunities to monitor employees’ political activities and attitudes than other groups given the amount of time that workers spend on

the job every day. Employers might have even more information about workers' political activities if the companies monitor workers' email, social media, and other online activities, tracking if employees follow through on managers' political requests.

We can generalize the characteristics of employers that make them distinctive political recruiters in the following way: employers have the means to *monitor* workers' political behaviors given the close interaction of workers within companies on a daily basis; employers have the means to *discipline or reward* workers for their political attitudes and participation given the broad discretion possessed by managers in private, at-will employment; and *political warnings about wage loss and layoffs are especially credible* when they come from companies given it is managers who ultimately control the employment and wages of workers.

While other political actors, such as churches and unions, might individually possess one or two of these characteristics, collectively no other actor aside from employers possesses all three. For instance, members of a church or another civic association might have the ability to monitor the political leanings of participants through informal conversations. They might also have the ability to socially sanction members who do not follow the group's political positions or recommended activities. But these groups do not possess the same degree of economic control over individuals as do employers. To be sure, this has not always been the case, and in the past unions in particular might have had greater economic control over citizens—for instance, when unions had more discretion over the hiring and firing of workers. But at least in the contemporary era, labor unions, by and large, are not directly responsible for the economic fate of citizens in the same way as are managers and supervisors.

Although employers possess distinctive characteristics as political recruiters, this does not mean employers will necessarily always be more effective at spurring participation compared to other political actors. A relevant distinction to make here is between political recruitment that involves *organizing* and recruitment that simply *mobilizes*. As civic participation scholar Hahrie Han explains, organizers “do not simply aggregate individuals but also create new relationships between them that generate new commitments and resources.”<sup>30</sup> Organizers, in short, seek to cultivate future activists and leaders. In contrast, mobilizing is much more transactional, building a base of participants that can be activated for a specific purpose. The implication of this difference is that individuals recruited into politics by organizers will likely continue to engage in political activities well after the initial contact from the organizer has passed. In contrast, individuals recruited by mobilizers may simply cease participating once their ties with the mobilizers have ended.

Employers typically focus on mobilization of their workers rather than organization. Unlike organizers, employers engaging their workers in politics do not

usually grant them much autonomy or responsibility in the political process; workers are given very specific “asks,” such as voting for particular candidates or contacting legislators about specific issues. Han notes that these sort of “discrete, easy requests that allow people to act alone . . . [without] any strategic autonomy” are highly characteristic of mobilizers.<sup>31</sup> The upshot of this difference is that we should not expect employer political requests *will* typically engender civic activism or participation beyond the workplace. That means even though specific employer requests may be very effective at spurring worker responses, these requests will not necessarily endure over time in the same way as participation spurred by successful civic organizers.

A similarly important caveat is that the political preferences of employers will not always be opposed to workers, even as employers hold economic power over their employees. Indeed there may be many situations in which workers and employers strongly share a common economic interest.<sup>32</sup> To give one example, both managers and workers in import-sensitive manufacturing sectors might oppose trade with low-wage competitor countries. And both managers and workers might support greater subsidies for their companies. In these cases of shared interests, employers may well be serving a role as a trusted “policy translator,” helping workers to understand which policies and candidates are in a company’s best interests.

The perspective I develop on economic power offers a number of predictions that I explore in subsequent chapters. If greater imbalances of economic power between employers and employees do indeed make political recruitment easier for managers—by increasing the likelihood that workers will respond to their bosses’ requests, even if workers disagree—then we should expect that companies whose managers are less likely to expect backlash would be more likely to mobilize their workers. Employers should also be more likely to mobilize their workers, and to consider such recruitment as being more effective, when managers are closely monitoring their workers’ political activities and behaviors. Such monitoring makes recruitment more likely to succeed, since managers can reward complying employees and potentially punish dissenters.

Workers, for their part, ought to be more responsive to employer political requests when they are more sensitive to the threat of job loss or wage and hour cuts or more fearful of political retaliation from their managers. Similarly, workers who perceive that they lack political privacy in the workplace should be more likely to respond to managers’ requests than workers who do not believe their employers can discern their political opinions or behaviors.

Although this book is the first to systematically assess employer mobilization in the United States, my focus on the imbalance of power between workers and managers has important precedents in legal and academic work. For instance, the U.S. Supreme Court has recognized that speech from employers

to their employees carries extra weight in the mind of workers given the economic control managers possess. In a 1969 decision on labor organizing, the Supreme Court argued that any free speech right held by managers needed to be balanced against the reality of “the economic dependence of the employees on their employer, and the necessary tendency of the former, because of that relationship, to pick up intended implications of the latter that might be more readily dismissed by a more disinterested ear.”<sup>33</sup>

The idea underpinning the Court’s opinion is that employees are especially attentive to speech from their employers—more so than other potential sources—because employees fear the economic repercussions of angering their bosses. Even the smallest suggestion an employer might make could change employees’ behavior because of their fears of job loss, cuts to wages, and deteriorating working conditions. Accordingly this inherent imbalance of power between workers and employers has informed the way the National Labor Relations Board has approached employer involvement in union elections. The Board “is highly attuned to an employer’s power to set agendas and manipulate institutional rules” in ways that might bias workers’ opinions because of workers’ desires to preserve their jobs and wages.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the Supreme Court, several members of the Federal Election Commission have articulated similar logic in recent years. Those commissioners expressed concern that employer pressure on employees to hold particular political beliefs or engage in particular behaviors “is a real danger to our democracy—it puts citizens’ right to express their political beliefs at the mercy of their employers.”<sup>35</sup>

Conceptualizing employer mobilization in terms of this power imbalance also resonates with observations from civic participation experts Henry Brady, Kay Schlozman, and Sidney Verba in their canonical studies of political recruitment. Those authors argue that political recruitment is most successful when canvassers have leverage over their potential recruits. Having leverage over an individual gives that person a major incentive to consent to a canvasser’s requests, especially when the recruiter can dole out punishments or rewards. The authors give employers as a prime example of such a recruiter, finding that individuals in a supervisory role over others were more effective at convincing their targets to participate in politics.<sup>36</sup>

And employer mobilization fits into older debates over the nature and exercise of political power in democratic societies. The two camps in this debate were, roughly speaking, the pluralists, who contended that political power was distributed relatively diffusely across American society, and the antipluralists, who argued that power was instead concentrated in the hands of economic and social elites.<sup>37</sup> A key distinction between them was the very different evidence



they deployed to reach their conclusions. While pluralists tended to look at open competition between political factions, antipluralists claimed that the most important exercises of power were often not in outright political conflict but rather in the institutions, rules, and norms that structured political battles. Powerful political actors, the antipluralists argued persuasively, could use their resources to shape political structures in ways that benefited their own interests and disadvantaged their opponents, shutting out access to opposing groups. Elites could even use their privileged position to change the preferences of other actors. Lack of open political conflict thus did not necessarily mean that actors were in agreement; rather it might indicate that one side could not even muster the resources to enter into a debate.

Antipluralists distinguished among three different types, or faces, of power. The first face referred to open conflict between already organized actors, the domain typically studied by the pluralists. The second face involved changing the rules of the political game in ways that disadvantaged opponents—for instance, how the threat of a filibuster in the Senate might keep certain issues from even coming up for debate in the first place. And the third face of power referred to the ability of elites to change the preferences of their opponents in ways that went against opponents' material self-interests, a sort of false consciousness.

While these power debates were sometimes abstract, they had important implications for judging the health of American democracy. Where pluralists saw a well-functioning political system, antipluralists saw troubling inequalities, such as the fact that it was often the most economically disadvantaged citizens who were shut out of the political process. Employer mobilization contributes to these power debates in several ways. On one level, it provides a new avenue through which powerful economic actors (top corporate managers) can shape the preferences of their subordinates (workers). If employers can convince workers to change the way they think about politics, then employers have already won an important political battle. In this way, the concept of employer mobilization provides further empirical examples of the patterns John Gaventa documented in his extensive study of local communities in Appalachia as part of the power debates.<sup>38</sup> Gaventa found that politics in these communities was heavily tilted toward the interests of business because of the ways employers exercised both economic and cultural control over workers. Gaventa's key finding was that economic relationships can change how workers perceive their self-interest. That insight finds strong support in the recruitment practices I document in this book. Turning citizens into "employee voters," as one executive described them, fits with the notion of using imbalances of economic power between managers and workers to shift the preferences of workers over time—potentially against their own material interests.

## Employer Mobilization and the Privileged Position of Business in American Democracy

Employer mobilization, especially the notion of employers using their control over workers' employment and wages to motivate changes in workers' political attitudes and behaviors, also resonates with the concept of the structural power of business—another important contribution to the older power debates in political science and sociology. Some of the antipluralists, especially Charles Lindblom, argued that in a capitalist democracy businesses possessed unique leverage over the policymaking process, a “privileged position” that other political actors could never attain.<sup>39</sup>

As Lindblom explained, in capitalist economies private businesses are ultimately responsible for employment, wages, and capital accumulation and investment. That gives policymakers strong incentives to keep the private sector happy, since “any change or reform [businesses] do not like brings to all of us the punishment of unemployment or a sluggish economy.”<sup>40</sup> The market is, as Lindblom put it very memorably, “a prison” that restrains the actions of voters and politicians since no one wants to adopt measures that hurt the overall economy. Indeed the mere threat of unfavorable policy may be enough to trigger a negative reaction from businesses, pushing politicians away from even considering proposals that might impose significant costs on the private sector. Other actors, such as advocacy groups and unions, may also grumble about policy changes, but unlike businesses, the “dissatisfactions of these other groups do not result in disincentives and reduced performance that impose a broad, severe and obvious penalty throughout the society, which is what unemployment [in the private sector] does.”<sup>41</sup>

Employer mobilization reveals a new mechanism for the exercise of this structural power of business, showing how the control that corporate executives and managers possess over the employment and wages of their workers can be converted into a political resource that companies can deploy to influence the policymaking process. In this way employer mobilization helps to flesh out the individual, worker-level mechanisms that reproduce the structural power of business that Lindblom described. When they communicate to their workers about the economic risks of electing a particular politician or passing a certain bill, companies are exercising their structural power in a capitalist economy. Similarly Lindblom's theory helps us understand how congressional offices respond to employee correspondence initiated by their managers. As it turns out, congressional offices that are more concerned about unemployment in their districts and states are much more attuned to employee correspondence than are



offices that are less worried about joblessness—exactly what Lindblom would have predicted.

## Situating Employer Mobilization as a Corporate Strategy and a Source of Political Recruitment

Why would managers become political recruiters? The answer to the question my colleague originally raised is that employer mobilization affords managers an opportunity to advance their political priorities through a variety of strategies: by supporting or opposing candidates for elected office, creating a grass-roots lobbying force in favor of pending legislation, and changing the ideologies and political outlooks of their workers.

That brings us to the second question my colleague asked: Why would workers ever pay attention to the messages their managers send them? As this chapter has described, unlike the mountain of other political mailings that Americans receive every year, employer messages have the potential to carry extra weight in the minds of workers because employers—unlike other political groups or leaders with whom citizens might interact—are the ones cutting the checks for workers' wages and benefits. Workers thus have good reason to pay attention to their managers' political messages because managers can speak directly to issues that affect employees' workplace or industry. Workers also have a strong incentive to follow through on their managers' political requests because those requests contain a potential threat of retaliation. Just as an employer might fire or discipline a worker for refusing to participate in other workplace activities, so too might a manager punish a worker for failing to respond to political appeals. The looming threat of retaliation ought to be greatest for workers who are least secure in their employment and who perceive that their employer is more closely tracking their political preferences and actions. I will test each of these predictions in the coming chapters.

