

Workplaces serve as training ground or deterrent for civic participation

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The workplace can function as a springboard for increased democratic participation, says new research co-written by U. of I. labor professor Ryan Lamare. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Workplaces can encourage or deter an employee's participation in civic

life outside of the office, depending on how the workplace is structured, according to research co-written by a University of Illinois expert who studies labor unions and politics.

When there is a more egalitarian office setting that fosters a sense of openness and agency, the [workplace](#) can serve as a springboard for increased democratic attitudes and behaviors. But dictatorial or authoritarian workplace environments and practices are likely to lead to reduced participation in [civic life](#) outside of the office, said J. Ryan Lamare, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois.

"This research gives us a pretty clear indication that, in terms of contributions to larger society, participation in civic life outside of the workplace is heavily influenced by employees' experience inside the workplace," Lamare said. "In other words, what happens in the workplace doesn't just stay in the workplace. Work matters not just within its own bubble, but also for democratic institutions and structures."

The paper, published in the journal *ILR Review*, analyzed several measures of employee participation and the political behaviors of more than 14,000 workers across 27 countries in Europe from 2010-11.

The researchers found that autonomy and participation in decision-making in the workplace were linked to individual political behaviors in civil society. The results, which are consistent with the hypothesis of a "positive outward democratic [spillover effect](#)" from the workplace to the political arena, point to the workplace's influence on individual behavior, Lamare said.

"Even though the issue has been previously studied in the political science literature, it's not very well-known within workplace circles," he said. "Past research has also been quite U.S.-centric. Obviously, we

shouldn't use the U.S. as the only barometer, especially with anti-democratic fervor sweeping through Europe right now. But we found these results in arguably the broadest and most robust analysis of diverse countries to date. And it wasn't driven by a small number of countries in Europe, which suggests this opportunity for workplaces to help shape democracies exists irrespective of the geopolitical constraints."

The findings aren't just limited to just one element of democratic participation, Lamare said.

"It's not only about voting. It's a whole manner of different acts that contribute to democracies: protesting, boycotting products, working for campaigns, even something as small as wearing a button in support of a candidate or cause, something that signals that you're politically active," he said. "It runs the gamut. And as you look across most of those dimensions, they seem to be affected by something as simple as being allowed to control your work times, or how much say a worker has in their daily routines. Seemingly small elements of a job – deciding what time workers start and finish work; the ability to have a say in how work is organized – contribute to this rich growth of democracy."

Since the implications of organizational practices extend beyond the workplace, public policy interventions might be warranted to encourage empowerment within workplaces as a way of improving civic engagement, Lamare said.

"This sort of information hasn't really found its way into the hands of those who might consider things from a workplace-first perspective as opposed to thinking about broader democratic foundations, but it's clear that the organization of work has some potentially meaningful noneconomic implications beyond the workplace," he said.

One could also argue that executives and HR managers in particular have

a responsibility to recognize that their workplace can have much wider effects if they don't give workers a certain amount of autonomy in their jobs, Lamare said.

"That's the negative side of the spillover effect: poor workplace decisions on the part of executives and other higher-ups might prohibit the growth of democracy within economies," he said. "And it doesn't take much of a leap to make a pretty strong case that we need as many channels that allow us into greater democracy as we can possibly find. We rarely think of the workplace as being an easy path toward increased democratic participation. But I think it can be a great avenue available to people – if the higher-ups structure the workplace in a way that allows for that participation."

More information: John W. Budd et al. Learning about Democracy at Work: Cross-National Evidence on Individual Employee Voice Influencing Political Participation in Civil Society, *ILR Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0019793917746619](https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793917746619)

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