



WE NEED

# CORPORATE SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

How companies can help make themselves and America stronger by providing paid time off to vote and supporting employees voting rights.



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## Executive Summary

For many Americans, voting is a challenge as employer scheduling demands often compete with the time it takes to stand in line and cast a ballot. This means that companies are uniquely positioned to help educate and support their employees as they try to exercise their right to vote. Unfortunately, not all companies have taken up this opportunity to support American democracy. Some companies take a barebones compliance approach, doing only what the law requires. While other companies have robust civic engagement programs that provide flexibility and time off to vote. Recognizing the importance of this issue, Trillium

has engaged with 20 companies to understand and influence their policies and practices in an effort to encourage their improvement. The results of these engagements are both promising and concerning. Companies like **BNY Mellon** and **Target** are robust supporters of employee voting and take a variety of steps to facilitate and promote civic engagement. But, companies like **Home Depot** and **Costco**, have not shown any evidence that they will do anything beyond what the law requires. With the fall elections approaching, companies still have the chance to step up and support their employees and our democracy.

## The Problem

Americans agree that voting is important, but with long lines, paperwork hurdles, and the pressing time constraints of work and family, the barriers to voting are significant. The timing of Election Day (always a Tuesday) makes matters worse. While dozens of other advanced democracies vote on the weekend or a national holiday, Americans have to weigh voting against weekday obligations and increasingly inflexible work schedules. Underscoring the challenges, the coronavirus pandemic has amplified the existing problems in the system and created an urgency to modernize the US voting system during a presidential election year. In the absence of laws or support from an employer, Election Day may force some to choose between their paycheck, civic duties, and now in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, their health.

The US has one of the lowest voter participation rates in the developed world. Roughly 56% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2016 Presidential elections<sup>1</sup>. Midterm elections typically produce even lower turnout. There is at least one clear barrier getting between voters and the polls: work schedules. Pew Research indicates that 35% of non-voters blame schedule conflicts with work or school<sup>2</sup>. Not all employers permit employees the time to vote. Hourly employees (who are likely to be more politically disempowered than salaried employees) may be impacted the most because of a lack of flexibility in work schedules. While some states have expanded early voting and incorporated no-excuse absentee ballot programs, this is not the case in every state, and taking advantage of these opportunities comes with their own bureaucratic challenges.

## The Challenges for Employees

There are no federal laws that require employers to provide workers with guaranteed time off to vote. In the absence of federal law, some states provide employees with time off to vote, but these laws vary widely and are rarely enforced. States like Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, and South Carolina – representing 22% of American citizens – do not require employers to provide any amount of time away from work to vote<sup>3</sup>. Of the states with laws providing time off, some only provide a modest 60

minutes to vote and often this time is unpaid. For many this is simply not enough time. For example, in the past we have seen states like Arizona and Florida with polling station wait times that exceed 5 hours.

Making matters worse, wait times at polling stations don't impact everyone equally. Black and Latinx communities routinely face longer wait times than white communities. Research from the Brennan Center found that during the 2016 election voting centers in Latinx communities had an average wait time of 244 minutes whereas nearby white communities had an average wait time of 167 minutes. This strongly suggests that modernizing the voting system could equalize access to voting and support civic engagement for all voters regardless of race or ethnicity<sup>4</sup>. Workers in each of these communities are faced with different decisions in weighing their work schedules and time to vote. Regardless of state laws, an individual's employer can be a significant determining factor in whether they can confidently take the time to vote.

Over the course of 2019 and early 2020, Trillium reached out to 20 companies with large US workforces to encourage them to provide meaningful amounts of paid time off to vote.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.people-press.org/2014/11/12/little-enthusiasm-familiar-divisions-after-the-gops-big-midterm-victory/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workplacefairness.org/voting-rights-time-off-work>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/Long\\_Voting\\_Lines\\_Explained.pdf](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/Long_Voting_Lines_Explained.pdf)

## Trillium's Outreach and Findings

Over the course of 2019 and early 2020, Trillium reached out to 20 companies with large US workforces to encourage them to provide meaningful amounts of paid time off to vote. As we explained to them, providing this benefit can lead to more engaged employees who are routinely more productive than those who do not feel engaged. We also noted that hourly workers may face more challenges in having enough time to vote.

We wanted to know what companies with large numbers of hourly workers are doing to support civic engagement, so we asked each of these companies: Is there a company-wide policy that provides employees with time off to vote? Who does this policy extend to? Full-time, part-time, salaried, seasonal, and hourly employees? Contractors? How much time off is provided? If time off is provided, is it paid? In states with existing time off laws does the company do more than comply with state law? What kind of education is provided to make employees aware of this benefit? We also gathered information about how companies make employees aware of these benefits and any other education they offer around civic engagement.

“Voting is the bedrock on which our community’s future and your ambitions are built”

- Stacey Abrams



The findings of our inquiries were both encouraging and concerning. We were pleased to find companies like **Target**, **JPMorgan**, **PNC**, and **First Republic Bank** have strong policies providing robust education efforts and mandates for

managers to be flexible with scheduling to facilitate voting. For the hundreds of thousands of workers at thousands of workplaces around the country, that is good news for them and their communities.

But we were concerned about companies like **Costco**, **CVSHealth**, and **Nike** because they do the bare minimum: comply with the law. At best, such companies could point to vague encouragements to managers to work with employees, but fundamentally they exhibit a compliance mentality. And some companies like Chipotle and BJ’s did not even bother to respond to our inquiries, suggesting a concerning lack of interest in the issue. Voting policies can serve as a way to keep employees engaged which in turn can increase employee morale and retention – by taking a compliance approach some companies are passing up an important opportunity to strengthen their workforces.

Companies that exhibited what we believe are “best practices” on this issue have robust policies that provide employees with paid time off to vote. Many also have strong engagement programs that provide employees important information about voting locations and deadlines. Some companies provided paid time off while others deferred to ad-hoc conversations with managers in order to schedule time off. Companies that rely on vacation time and the structure of employee schedules are not showing a sincere commitment to employee engagement.

Target, for example, has a voting policy that provides all employees with paid time needed to vote. Employees can comfortably vote without concerns of reduced pay and information about the policy is communicated in advance.

We also found that some companies have joined organizations like Time to Vote or ElectionDay.Org to vocalize their support for employee civic engagement. Companies who join these organizations pledge to make important shifts in their company’s culture in order to increase voter participation. This may include paid time off to vote, a no-meeting workday, or information about absentee ballots and early voting. Time to Vote is a business led organization which is committed to shifting corporate culture to increase voter participation in our country’s elections. In a similar vein, ElectionDay.Org is a group of companies that have made paid voting leave company policy.

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# Democracy Scorecard

**A** denotes a company that provides paid time off to vote

**B** denotes a company that encourages and provides employees time to attend the polls

**C** denotes a company that only complies with state and local laws with strong emphasis on education

A	B	C	No Response
			

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## Companies Showing Progress

During our engagement with **PNC**, the nation's 9<sup>th</sup> largest bank, the company made material changes to its voting policy by adopting a paid time off to vote for all of its employees. This policy will impact PNC's 60,000 employees in 21 states including Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. By shifting from a compliance approach to best practice, PNC employees will have the flexibility to vote without jeopardizing their jobs or sacrificing hourly wages. PNC also became a signatory to Time to Vote pledging that its "CEO has committed to increasing voter participation by ensuring employees have a work schedule that allows them to vote or, if applicable, resources for mail-in ballots."

Similarly, we were pleased to learn that **Bank of America** and **Apple** made meaningful changes to their voting policies during the course of our outreach. Bank of America now provides its 200,000 employees with up to 3 hours of paid time off to vote. Apple now gives all of its approximately 130,000 employees four hours to vote or to volunteer at a polling place.



## Voting During a Pandemic

When we began asking companies these questions we were unaware that another large barrier to voting would present itself in the months ahead: the coronavirus pandemic. Due to the often crowded nature of voting, more than a dozen states postponed their primary elections while others moved forward as scheduled – forcing voters to risk their health in the name of civic engagement. Most Americans have been under stay-at-home orders or are diligently practicing social distancing in order to prevent further spread of this novel virus. Holding elections when citizens are trying to keep at least 6 feet from others presents many challenges. These became painfully clear when Wisconsin held its primary in early April. The National Guard was called in to fill the place of nearly 7,000 poll workers who stayed home over fear of infection.<sup>5</sup> At least 50 confirmed cases of coronavirus stemmed from the State's in-person voting that day.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately more than one million Wisconsinites took advantage of the no-excuse absentee ballot option – more than 70% of votes cast were by mail, compared to just 10% in the 2016 primary.<sup>7</sup> Witnessing these challenges spurred lawmakers to expand the ways in which voters cast their ballots. States like Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, and many others have temporarily expanded voter access to absentee ballots. But the level of uncertainty we're facing suggests states and companies need to take stronger steps to protect voting rights.

As the pandemic endures, voting by mail may seem like the clearest option to maintain or even increase voter participation. It avoids the need to take time off from work, travel to a voting center, or wait in polling lines.

For many, but not all, voting by mail is more convenient and reduces barriers that may otherwise prevent someone from casting their ballot. Voters in Colorado, Oregon, Hawaii, and Washington already receive their ballots in the mail and have long histories of successful elections with high participation rates and very low levels of voter fraud.<sup>8</sup> California is currently making the transition to a similar process. Not every state has made this an option but a growing number of

Americans are casting their ballot by mail. According to the Brennan Center, 31 million Americans voted by mail in 2018 – about 25% of all voters.

Transitioning to allow more people to vote by mail will require planning and a significant logistical shift for some voters; employers have an important role to play in supporting their employees through these changes. Companies can inform employees of the deadlines for requesting absentee ballots and can help them understand the requirements for applying. They also have the opportunity to provide employees with the paper request forms and/or links to election official's websites. Companies that have policies providing time off on Election Day can broaden this to include early voting and time to drop off ballots. Companies can, and should take all of these steps.

## Conclusion

Trillium believes that a strong democracy is linked to a strong economy. When companies actively and enthusiastically support civic engagement it sends a positive message to all company stakeholders and most notably, employees.

Unfortunately, voting is not easy in America and often the barrier is a scheduled work shift. This means that some of the largest companies in America, companies like **Starbucks**, **The Home Depot**, and **Target** can be a help or a hindrance on Election Day. Recognizing the unique role that corporate America plays, Trillium is pressing the companies that can make a difference, to take this opportunity and to become part of the solution. Doing so can benefit our democracy, can increase employee satisfaction, and we believe, improve the bottom line.

This year is an opportunity for investors to speak up for workplaces that help make America stronger and encourage them to provide paid time off to vote. So as Election Day 2020 draws closer, Trillium will continue to remind CEOs and human resource directors to consider the words of Fair Fight founder Stacey Abrams: "Voting is the bedrock on which our community's future and your ambitions are built".

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/01/825226988/sanders-calls-on-wisconsin-to-delay-election-as-governor-calls-up-national-guard>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nicholasreimann/2020/05/19/coronavirus-infections-spiked-in-wisconsin-after-in-person-election-study-says/#5660d76f14b3>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/15/834037566/in-the-end-the-voters-responded-surprising-takeaways-from-wisconsin-s-election>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/false-narrative-vote-mail-fraud>

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