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The Dangers of an Informed Electorate

By Bradley A. Smith

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One day you return home from work, go to your mailbox, and find a packet from your employer concerning the coming Nov. 6 election. It includes information about the candidates and a letter from the company president that reads:

"To help you engage in the political process, we have enclosed several items in this packet. For most of you, this includes information about voter registration deadlines and early voting options in your state. At the request of many employees, we have also provided a list of candidates in your state that have been supported by . . . our employee political action committee.

"I want to emphasize two things about these lists. First, and most important, we believe any decision about which candidates to support is—as always—yours and yours alone, based on the factors that are most important to you. Second, we do not support candidates based on their political affiliation."

If you're like most Americans, you probably wouldn't find these words threatening. But they have many denizens of the anticorporate American left apoplectic. "A slow-motion coup d'état," says journalist and law professor Garrett Epps, writing in the Atlantic. "A culture of fear" pronounces In These Times, Noam Chomsky's lowbrow broadsheet. "Ominous," says the Center for American Progress, a lefty think tank.

The quotes are from a letter sent by Koch Industries President Dave Robertson to the company's employees. "It is essential that we are all informed and educated voters," wrote Mr. Robertson. "Our future depends on it." His employees must be quaking in their boots.

Of course, anything done under the aegis of David and Charles Koch, the owners of Koch Industries and prominent backers of Mitt Romney and conservative causes in general, drives the left crazy. But it isn't just the Kochs who are letting their political preferences be known. As Reuters notes, "Several companies have sent out letters urging their employees to vote for Romney."

On top of that, Mitt Romney has encouraged such communication. In a June conference call with small business owners organized by the National Federation of Independent Business, Mr. Romney pointed out that it was perfectly legal for them to talk to their

employees. He added, "I hope you make it very clear to your employees what you believe is in the best interest of your enterprise and therefore their job and their future in the coming elections. Whether you agree with me or agree with President Obama, or whatever your political views, I hope you pass those along to your employees."

But the left seems to think it is somehow illegitimate for management to speak to its own employees about how different candidates, and the policies they espouse, could affect the company. The left has two main fears: First, that corporations will say things it doesn't like; and second, that employees will listen.

The second fear, at least, is well founded. A report released this week by the Business Industry Political Action Committee (Bipac) found that employees ranked their employer's website as the most credible source of political information on the Internet, more than media sites or parties and candidates. Over 75% of the more than 500 respondents from a variety of industries indicated that employer-provided information was useful in deciding how to vote, and over a quarter said it made them more likely to vote.

This comes on top of past Bipac research showing that 47% of employees said that employer-provided information had "somewhat" or "strongly" increased their awareness of how various policy proposals affected their employers.

It should come as no surprise that employees want to know how government policies will affect their employers, and by extension their jobs. One might even argue that business leaders have an obligation to share with employees credible, accurate information on how public policies might affect the company.

Yet those who think corporations are inherently bad want to prevent business owners and managers from providing this valuable information to their employees. It is disturbing, on many levels, that these so-called activists would rather keep employees in the dark than have them get information from the "wrong" sources.

Mr. Smith is chairman of the Center for Competitive Politics and professor of law at Capital University. He served as commissioner of the Federal Election Commission from 2000 to 2005.