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Letting workers go to vote

By Amy Showalter
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I wasn't troubled by last week's news that some Kentucky state workers took paid time off to vote but then didn't make it to the polls. According to a state audit, nine out of 10 state workers who requested time off to vote did vote.

That's terrific.

Like Kentucky, most states -- 30 out of 50 -- have laws that give state workers time off to vote. Indiana goes a step further and gives its workers the whole day off during primary and general elections.

I wish more private sector employers encouraged voting by giving workers time on the clock to go to the polls. During the last presidential election, several major employers did just that: Ford, General Motors and Chrysler, as well as parts suppliers Visteon Corp. and Delphi Corp. gave workers time off work to vote and work at the polls. American Electric Power, which owns Kentucky Power, gives its workers time off to vote and work at the polls.

But most employers don't make it easy for their workers to vote. I'm sure that's one reason the number of people who didn't vote in last year's highly contested presidential election was staggering. More than 78 million eligible voters didn't make it to the polls on Election Day, according to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate.

Last year, the Election Assistance Commission urged businesses and federal agencies to give volunteers the day off with pay to work at polls because they feared a shortage of poll workers. I wish the federal commission had gone a step further and urged the private sector to give its employees paid leave to vote.

Why should employers take this on? One reason is that it might work: One in four registered non-voters told the U.S. Census Bureau in 2002 they didn't vote because they had conflicting work schedules or were too busy. More important, paid time off to vote would send a message that voting and participating in the political process is important.

I train grassroots activists how to lobby on behalf of their employers, which typically are nonprofits or businesses in the private sector. My biggest challenge is convincing people that their voice matters to elected officials. To that end, I routinely urge corporate leaders to work to create a culture of civic involvement by encouraging their employees to participate in the political process. It's a morale booster and it serves the community's long-term interests more than sending employees out to paint park benches. It also raises a company's profile among elected officials, who complain routinely about voter apathy.

So when I read that some state workers took advantage of the state's policy of giving workers four hours to vote, I found myself sympathizing with the state workers who said they resented accusations of misbehavior. One state employee told *The Courier-Journal*, "We take our jobs seriously. Leave this alone. I think there's other things to worry about."

I agree. The audit recommended requiring workers to sign statements that they voted. I don't think that's necessary. Kentucky should continue its progressive policy of allowing workers the time off to vote. Instead of carping about the state workers who didn't make it to the polls, elected officials in Kentucky should encourage the private sector to follow their lead and help get voters to the polls.

Amy Showalter owns The Showalter Group, Inc., a Cincinnati-based company that advises on how to increase clients' grassroots and PAC effectiveness.

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