

9 Tips For
SURVIVING
POLITICAL



CONVERSATIONS

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Family & Politics can be harmonious or a point of contention.

Just under half of all Americans say they've stopped talking about politics with someone in 2020. However, about 60% of adults say their family is okay with talking about politics.

If you belong to one of the families who are uncomfortable talking politics, there are ways to learn how to handle political conversations peacefully with family members in person and online.



1

Talk to key players beforehand.

If you're bringing a new significant other or friend to dinner, be proactive. Grab a parent, sibling, or other trusted close relative and make a plan to be the peacekeepers. If your parent is often the one starting debates, it's OK to respectfully ask them to tone it down for the evening. Try saying, "I want to be comfortable, and part of that is not wanting to feel 'on guard.'"

2

Have conversation starters and activities at the ready.

As for keeping difficult conversations to a minimum, if you're the host, create a list of planned talking points, like discussions about food and travel. The holidays are a time to reflect on positive subjects, not doom and gloom.

If everyone's milling about and starting to argue, send them outside or set up a game of charades. This way, they're not talking, they're just doing something.

3

If you're hosting, seat people strategically.

Normally, you can trust everyone to find their own spot at the table. But, if you have a few family members who love to stir the pot, a seating chart could save the day. Mix it up, put somebody you know can hold their own next to that person.

4

Have a designated room for political talk.

Hosts have the burden of ensuring an event runs smoothly—and they shouldn't just plan ahead for the food and decor. The host should designate a room (with a door that can close), or a specified time, for any kind of political conversations. That way, those who wish to participate, debate, or share their points of view will have the opportunity to do so in a controlled setting, away from those who'd rather not partake.

5

Don't engage.

Not to state the obvious, but if you're hoping to avoid a heated debate at the dinner table, don't stoke the flames yourself—as hard as it may be to keep your mouth shut sometimes. An impassioned speech won't change your relatives' political leanings. While it may be particularly hard if you know one relative of yours has what you believe is an uninformed point of view, try to hold back.

If you're worried you can't hold your tongue, I'd enlist an accountability partner. In other words, find someone who can help you steer the conversation in another direction before it goes awry.

6

As a guest, make it known when you're uncomfortable.

Whether or not you're familiar with the family dynamic, or your relatives' political standings, guests should alert the host right away if they're especially uneasy. Before the event, guests who think this may be an issue should consider what kinds of suggestions they can give the host to alleviate the situation. A good host will recognize your feelings and help handle the situation quickly, or make it clear to other guests that they don't wish to speak about the subject.

7

Have an exit plan for sticky one-on-one conversations.

Luckily, there's a polite way to back out of an uncomfortable dialogue using a single sentence. If you're stuck in one of your uncle's classic tirades, for example, put it to a halt by saying his name. It will make him feel heard. Then, follow with: "I love you, but I don't want to get into a debate right now. Let's agree to disagree." You have to "own it." Simply put: If you want to end a debate, say so.

8

If the table gets fired up, propose a toast.

A surefire way to get everyone quiet is to raise your glass to the family. As soon as the shouting becomes unbearable, toast to love, gratitude, and the chance you all have to be together. Then, redirect—possibly to a child's recent accomplishment or a funny TV show you know everyone would love.

9

Prepare for the inevitable (and keep an open mind).

Politics are a difficult topic to avoid—they've entered so many facets of life, and simply trying to stifle them at the dinner table may not be the best option. Of course, some conversations can be helpful, and going into them with an open mind is highly recommended.

If you have family members who can enjoy a respectful, thoughtful political discourse and still be smiling at the end of it, and feel they both learned something, then that kind of healthy engagement isn't a bad thing. But be warned, that's not usually the case.

Often the only thing you can do is to remove yourself from a situation. Sometimes you can't change crazy. If there's nothing they're going to do to change their perspective, you can change how you deal with it. Anyone uncomfortable with a situation can remove themselves entirely and even find a fun game to play with the kids.

How to Have Better Political Conversations

Here are seven tips to have fair, balanced, and open-minded conversations about politics with colleagues and friends – even if you disagree.

There is an emotionally charged atmosphere in our country that has been going on for many years. At times, it has felt unbearable. Day after day we more Americans are infected and killed by COVID-19. We see another tragedy, another bewildering act of violence, another racially motivated act of hate, another nasty attack on a rival's character. Terrorism, racism, radicalism, and divisive politics are running hot. They stir us in outrage and helplessness, and tend to draw us into their psychological web so that we enact, in our personal lives, the very dynamics that we feel so troubled by. From the evening news to our social media feeds, from political speeches to side Zoom conversations after a meeting has ended, it is easy to see how the contagion of negativity spreads.

As a campaign catalyst and political strategist, I feel that I should try to offer something productive about this toxic dynamic. Here are ways to make political conversations more productive. I offer these suggestions to help further political conversations in our personal, social circles. I leave it up to the reader to consider their application to larger political discourse.



1

Try to minimize splitting and projection

Under the pressure of anxiety and confusion, it is a natural tendency to try to find safety in splitting and projection. By splitting, we rigidly separate “us” from “them.” Through projection, we build up a view of the other as very, very bad (ignorant, mean, criminal, selfish, etc.) while viewing ourselves as very, very good (smart, right, moral, virtuous, etc.) The net result is that we come to believe that we are right and the other is wrong. End of conversation.

The antidote of splitting and projection is to recognize our commonalities by acknowledging our own limitations and trying to see the good in others. When we see ourselves and others as complex, whole people, there is a greater likelihood of coming together productively.

2

Try to stay with the conversation in a respectful way

Productive political conversations take time and a lot of mental effort. Often, early on, there is a temptation to shut down the conversation because upsetting feelings enter the scene. An easy way out is to say to the other person, “That’s stupid” or something to that effect. It’s far more helpful to try to contain those impulsive, negative, conversation-killing comments, and stay with the conversation a little longer, with a cooler head. This allows more time for something productive to emerge.

3

Listen more and ask intelligent questions

If you want to stay with a conversation in a productive way, listen more. Often, we are so invested in our point of view that we try to shove it down the other person’s throat. This rarely leads to anything productive. Instead, be curious. People have different points of view, sometimes quite legitimately different points of view. Ask intelligent questions. Try to really understand where the other person is coming from. Approach the conversation with an expectation that you might learn something that would help you more fully understand a complex situation.

Being able to listen and ask intelligent questions rests on a fundamental attitude: giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. If we can ride herd on our own know-it-all attitudes, we stay open to the possibility that the other person might have something useful to say. This is a non-judgmental posture, a posture of openness and receptivity.

4

Explain your view in a clear and humble way

For a conversation about politics (or anything else) to be productive, it is crucial for each person to be able to articulate his or her point of view. Gathering your thoughts and putting them into words actually helps you clarify what you believe, regardless of its impact on the other person. If you can be humble as you go about it, you also get to listen to yourself and consider that there might be limitations, biases, or inaccuracies in your point of view. A humble attitude also makes room for the other person to weigh in—in a non-defensive and non-aggressive way. It paves the way for a back-and-forth conversation which is motivated by a search for understanding rather than the need to be right.

5

Link your opinions to your concerns

If you want to overcome a stalemate in a conversation, it is useful to shift from arguing selected facts to sharing what you are really concerned about. This brings a level of vulnerability to the conversation. After all, political conversations are rooted in very personal concerns for our own safety and livelihood, for the health of our communities, and for our family's future well-being. When we link our conversations to these more tender concerns, the atmosphere shifts and we have the opportunity to find common ground.

6

Research the facts from more than one credible source

Splitting and projection, arrogance and a know-it-all attitude are greatly fueled by the tendency to base our views on our emotions and vague impressions rather than the facts. Similarly, they are compounded by a tendency to get our facts from poor sources or from a single source with its inevitably limited point of view. Instead, look things up. Search for more information about an issue you are discussing. Use your best judgment. Ask yourself if the statistic you are using is accurate. Is that meme you saw on Facebook based in reality or something just made up for shock value? And dig deep. Look at more than one source. The picture is complex so it helps to have more than one credible point of view.

7

Emphasize your desire to be constructive

The most productive way to approach a conversation is to view ourselves on the same side—the side of wanting to be constructive, healthy, safe, and prosperous. The more we can come together around these shared values, the more we can talk with one another. This allows us to feel understood, to share the frustration and discouragement together rather than to be alone with it. Being together in the face of difficulties is a small but mighty consolation.

While I recognize that these are modest suggestions in the face of big problems, I hope that you will find them useful. Who knows the positive impact that our personal productive conversations might have on the bigger picture? I think that all we can do is try to live in the spirit of former US Senator Olympia Snow who said, "Two truths are all too often overshadowed in today's political discourse: Public service is a most honorable pursuit, and so is bipartisanship."



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