



DEPOLARIZING THE THANKSGIVING CONVERSATION

Thanksgiving should be a time to celebrate with family and friends – not only for our valuable personal relationships but also for the wonderful country that houses and protects us. Of late, however, political polarization has been gaining momentum and may be reaching its zenith.

The United States is disuniting. We're more and more angry. We trust each other less and less. Increasingly, we view political opponents as not only misguided, but also as bad people whose ideas are incomprehensible to us and a danger to our country. This degree of civic rancor threatens our democracy; when it occurs in your household, it threatens family unity.

Thanksgiving directly follows elections on even numbered-years and elections can have a calamitous impact on the Thanksgiving holiday. Following the 2016 election, a study of the impact of partisan politics on Thanksgiving dinner concluded that when families were politically divergent, dinnertime was significantly shorter than for those families that were politically similar.

This year, we will have just completed the mid-term elections and the issues will be fresh in everyone's mind. You can avoid controversy either by banning any discussion of politics at all, or you can depolarize your Thanksgiving conversation by setting some guidelines to keep the discussion under control.

Virtually all religions share some abstraction of the Golden Rule, which is often stated as, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That could not be more applicable here. If you convey respect, curiosity, and openness, it tends to elicit the same from your conversation compatriots. It is important that all participants:

- Listen actively to each other with listening that conveys to the speaker that they are being heard.
- Set a constructive tone by speaking in a way that helps the listener hear you and not by dominating, offending, or pontificating.
- Find common ground by establishing key issues on which you all can agree – problems to be solved and programs for the common good.

Most people in a friend- or family-relationship have some common values and concerns that can be unearthed in a proper conversation. Use the political conversation for good. Try to learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically. You can achieve a sense of satisfaction about how well you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences. Best of all, when done properly you will discover some common ground with your political opposites if it's there.

As you engage in this process, we do want to offer some words of caution:

- You cannot expect to persuade someone to change their core attitudes and beliefs. Your best hope should be to reach mutual understanding.
- You should not expect that "facts" will be agreed on and that logic will be followed consistently in the course of conversation.
- Each participant in the conversation needs to save face. You must ensure that no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving, or bigoted.

To achieve the best possible effect, share this paper with those who will share your meal. Even if a political discussion does not arise, it will help ensure that your conversation partners will match your openness.

LISTEN ACTIVELY

Active Listening is listening in a way that the other person feels heard. It is a well-known and respected discipline that has been widely-employed in counseling, strategic planning, training, and conflict resolution. It requires that the listener fully concentrate, understand, respond, and then remember what is being said. The Center for Creative Leadership delineates the 7 Key Active Listening Skills as: Be Attentive, Ask Open-Ended Questions, Ask Probing Questions, Request Clarification, Paraphrase, Be Attuned To and Reflect Feelings, Summarize.

You can apply active listening skills to learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically. Your intent should be to build trust and establish rapport and to demonstrate concern. You should paraphrase to show understanding. You can use nonverbal cues which show understanding such as nodding, eye contact, and leaning forward and also brief verbal affirmations such as “I see,” “I know,” “Sure,” “Thank you,” or “I understand.”

One way to get the conversation started is to ask permission to pose questions. For example, “May I ask you something about politics and your views on something?” To an out-of-town relative or friend, you might ask, “May I ask you what people in your part of the country are saying about what’s going on in Washington these days?”

The next step might be to ask real *questions of understanding* (versus asking loaded questions). This is hard to do:

- A progressive might ask, “I’m curious about what you make of Trump’s words about women, like what he said on the Hollywood Access bus video” versus asking “Why did you vote for a sexual predator?”
- A conservative might ask, “Do you see Black Lives Matters helping or hurting things in our cities?” versus asking “Do you see attacking the police as the solution?”

It can be helpful to understand how the other person came to their view on an issue, especially if it’s strongly held. (Progressive, “I’m interested in how you came to see the federal government as more the problem than the solution;” conservative “I’m interested in how you came to believe in single-payer health care.”)

Be sure to acknowledge the experiences behind the person’s views, listen for their underlying values and aspirations, and acknowledge them. For example, “I’m getting that for you, fairness is a big issue when it comes to immigration.” Then, for conservatives it might be fairness to those who have to wait for years to immigrate legally, and for progressives it might be fairness to the *Dreamers* who were brought here as children or to their parents who have worked hard and contributed to society.

To make sure that you understand, and the other person feels heard, paraphrase what they said as best you can. A progressive might state, “So you’re saying that you don’t trust the federal government on health care—they will mess it up” or “You wish Trump wouldn’t tweet so much, but he’s there to shake things up in Washington.” A conservative might state, “So for you, Trump is a big threat to the country” or “You’re saying that Obamacare needs fixing but should not be thrown out.”

Don’t go farther than what the person stated by suggesting *implications* of their view. Also be prepared to be corrected about what the person really meant, and strive for, “Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

SET A CONSTRUCTIVE TONE

Closely allied with Active Listening are the proper speaking skills that set a constructive tone and lets the other person know that you want to understand their (other) perspectives better. For example, you might state, “I’m finding myself curious these days about the views of people who are different from the people I tend to associate with regularly.” You should also identify your point-of-view to ensure understanding by

acknowledging your general political stance—progressive, conservative, libertarian, etc. For example, “As you probably know, I’m a liberal Democrat/conservative Republican, so that’s the perspective I come from.” Note: only add this with someone you think might want to hear your point of view.

Specific speaking skills include treating your partner with respect: never insult or attack your partner – the conversation should be about issues and not be personalized. Don’t pontificate, bait, or interrupt your partner. Speak in a way that helps your partner hear you.

Convey your opinions as such, not as facts. Use I-statements (“This is how I see it”) more often than truth-statements (“This is how it is”). For example:

- A progressive might say, “It sure looks like Trump fired James Comey to short circuit the Russian investigation” rather than “Here’s why Trump fired James Comey....”
- A conservative might say, “I think that Trump’s business experience is what the country needs right now because professional politicians have messed things up” versus saying “What this country needs is a good business man in charge.”

Also, express personal rather than absolute statements. For example, “I’m concerned/worried/troubled” expressions rather than definitive “This is what will happen” statements when referring to the future.

- A progressive might say, “I’m afraid we’re going off a cliff on climate change and that there will no coming back” versus saying “We’re going to have to evacuate coastal cities before this century is over.”
- A conservative might say, “I’m worried that the national debt keeps going up, we’ll be bankrupt, and there will be no Social Security before I retire.”

Case studies are one of the businessman’s most powerful selling tools. The same is true of interpersonal conversations. If you feel very strongly about an issue, say something about what life experiences you have had that led to you to be passionate about that issue. Stories humanize issues and make passionate political people come across as human beings who care. For example, “I’ve worked in health care my whole career, and I’ve seen things that have disturbed me a lot....” followed by a delineation of specific issues.

FIND COMMON GROUND

Discovering common ground has two component parts – one positive and one negative. The positive component is finding agreement with your partner’s point-of-view – common values and concerns that can be unearthed.

You should capitalize on every opportunity to highlight an area of similarity or agreement when you hear one. Often, these are broad issues, philosophical concepts, or generalities. Examples, that could be stated by either persuasion, include:

- “It sounds like we both agree that the health care system needs a lot of fixing.”
- “Trump appears to have tapped into real concerns of a lot of people.”
- “Seems like both of us see the media as dividing us more than informing us right now.”
- “I think we agree that gerrymandering is adding fuel to the polarization we’re seeing these days.”

Note that these statements lack specifics and judgements. Be careful about trying to solve these issues or define them more specifically – it can destroy the agreement you have reached with your partner.

Another technique to finding common ground is to offer something critical of your own side and crediting something positive about the other side.

- A progressive might say, “I think that Democrats have been out of touch with a lot of people in rural communities and Rust Belt towns. Trump picked up on that.”
- A conservative might say, “I think that conservatives can sometimes come across like they don’t care about minorities. Liberals have done a better job of connecting with minority groups.”

The negative side of finding agreement is softening flat-out disagreements and, as much as possible, trying to defuse tense situations. Before expressing a disagreement, say some version of “I hear you.”

- A progressive might say, “I hear you that you don’t trust the federal government to do the right thing on healthcare or on much of anything . . . what I want to say is that I think that only the federal government has the resources to guarantee good health care for everyone in the country. The market isn’t going to do it, and some states are just too poor to support health care.”
- A conservative might say, “I hear you that you think that federally-backed health care is the way to go . . . From my point of view, the federal government has a really bad track record of running domestic programs, and I can’t see it doing a good job on something as complicated as health care. I prefer a market approach with states helping people who can’t afford insurance.”

Going back and forth between acknowledging the other’s feelings or viewpoints and then stating your own is more effective than simply restating your position. It’s like a dance: two steps one way, one step back, and repeat. Aim for “yes, and” rather than “yes, but” -- I hear you, and here’s what I think about this.

You can also signal that your perspective is very different. For example, “It probably won’t surprise you that I see this completely differently.” If you get really emotional on a topic, signal that as well, “This one is very close to home for me, and I have very strong feelings about it.”

Other key skills for difficult moments include:

- Staying focused on a topic when another person jumps from issue to issue. For example, “Can we stay with immigration for now?”
- Not answering baiting questions, but instead restating your viewpoint on the topic. Examples:
 - When asked, “Do you think we should let foreigners just pour into this country illegally and then become citizens?” You might respond, “I think we need a responsible immigration policy that protects our borders and is also welcoming in the way it was for my grandparents and lots of others.”
 - When asked, “Do you think we should just round up undocumented immigrants and throw them in concentration camps?” You might respond, “I think we have to find a way to make sure that our immigration laws mean something—by enforcing them.”
- Not returning provocative statements in kind. Examples:
 - When you’re talking about health care and the other person exclaims, “Obama was a fraud on health care like he was on everything else!” Instead of defending Obama’s integrity or attacking Trump in kind, you can ignore the outburst and say something like, “Obamacare needs fixing for sure, and I think the Republican alternative will make things worse.”
 - When someone blurts out, “Trump will go down in history as the worst President we’ve ever had!” You might respond, “For now, he’s the President and I want to give him a chance to succeed” rather than saying, “Do you think that Hillary would have been a modern-day Lincoln?”

Sometimes, you simply must agree to disagree instead of beating entrenched differences into the ground. “We both have strong feelings about this, and I don’t think we are going to convince each other at the moment.” If you reach a point that the other person is upset and no longer listening, exiting the conversation in a low-key way. Examples could range from humor, “Well, we sure figured that one out!” to concern, “I don’t want to keep going and end up with bad feelings between us.” to simply exiting stage left, “Gotta go. To be continued.”

As a final result, unless you end completely polarized, wrap up with three take-aways:

- Express your appreciation for the conversation and for your partner(s)
- Share something you learned from your partners, particularly something you did not know or appreciate before the conversation started
- Express some hope for the future and for the country that we all love

CONCLUSION

Preserving unity with family and friends should be a primary goal especially during the holidays. In a polarized world, these key relationships become ever more important to your sanity and well-being. At Better Angels, we believe that by exercising the above defined best practices, you will have a much more civil and peaceful Thanksgiving holiday.

This is but the first step. Better Angels is a national citizens' movement *to reduce political polarization* in the United States by bringing progressives and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, forming red/blue community alliances, teaching practical skills for communicating across political differences, and making a strong public argument for depolarization.

We conduct workshops that successfully help polar opposite Americans build trust and better understand each other. Our signature "Red/Blue Workshop" brings together equal numbers of conservative-leaning and progressive-leaning participants for moderated activities and discussions that clarify disagreements, reduce stereotyped thinking, and begin building the relationships needed to find common ground. Our "Skills Workshop" teaches practical skills for having better conversations with friends and family members with whom you have strong political disagreements. Watch our short video to learn more or visit:

www.better-angels.org

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