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Yes politics at the dinner table

Giselle Sesi

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“No politics at the dinner table” is a popular mantra stating that individuals should not mention political beliefs in more intimate settings. Whether it is Thanksgiving and the turkey has just been set on the table or a random Sunday evening when everyone gathers to share a meal, the declaration looms above each individual. Discussion of politics in personal and professional relationships is a taboo no one dares to defy, unless they feel particularly bold.

I encourage this boldness. Normalizing political discussions, no matter the setting, can desensitize topics and lead to more educated participants in dialogue. Since politics are a fundamental aspect of our society, it is necessary to stop avoiding the subject and start sparking conversation about our beliefs.

In 2020, a Cato Institute survey revealed that 62% of Americans feared sharing their political beliefs at the risk of offending others. The polarization of political parties and their affiliates has severely impacted the United States political climate, so it is reasonable to assume that the Americans would prevent themselves from participating in political discussions with their families, friends and colleagues.

However, worrying about offending, or challenging, those we are close to should not be the reason we stop talking about politics. Philosophers like John Stuart Mill argued in favor of seeking disagreement in conversations. He believed that even if an opinion would cause a dispute, individuals should share and debate the issue to promote the pursuit of truth. Mill argued that the avoidance of certain political topics in discussions could ignore or silence truths.

Open and honest conversations with loved ones can teach us how to productively handle disagreements and develop argumentative skills while broadening our perspectives.

Participating in a political discussion, and understanding the potential for it to become intense, is beneficial for learning how to structure an argument. People learn valuable skills when engaging in subjects deemed sensitive. Calling our peers’ opinions into question teaches us to actively listen to the opposing side to find common ground, expand our perspectives, control our reactions and determine if we can reach a resolution.

The thought of having to conform to another person’s opinion can be unsettling. Because of confirmation bias, humans are inherently drawn to others that share corresponding beliefs. Political topics, ranging from gun violence to climate change, are stress inducing, and forcing confrontation about an opposing belief understandably increases nervous tension.

But talking about politics does not necessarily mean changing one's mind or agreeing with the other argument. Engaging in political discussions does challenge one's beliefs, which may lead them to believe they must jump ship. However, part of a productive dialogue is simply exposing yourself to a new perspective. Although your stance on the issue may not change, you gain an understanding of how the opposing side thinks.

Not only does talking about politics with peers develop argumentative skills and expose individuals to new information, but it is an effective way to desensitize reactive subjects as well. It is often difficult to separate politics from emotions, as morals and feelings influence the ideologies people support. Thus, when someone attacks another person's political opinion, it seems as though they are simultaneously attacking the person who holds those beliefs. For this reason, it is necessary to acknowledge the distinction between an individual and their opinion. It is crucial to have these conversations regularly, as they could decrease individuals' emotional responses to "sensitive" topics.

Talking about politics, and even religion, is often seen as rude or disrespectful — a social taboo. Society cautions job applicants against mentioning their party affiliation or asking their interviewer about civic issues, especially in formal settings like interviews. Issues like gun control, health care, abortion and affirmative action easily stir up controversy and elicit passionate emotions, leading to intense disagreements.

The workplace tends to lean into separating politics from employment. In that same 2020 survey, the Cato Institute asked participants to disclose their take on sharing political views. The results showed that 32% of respondents feared bringing up politics at work could cost them their employment. Conservatives, liberals and moderates all shared this apprehension.

Many people fear getting fired from their jobs because of their political views, unwilling to experience possible division. This is a prime reason why people choose not to engage in civic discourse. Ultimately, the continual polarization of political ideologies feeds into the cycle of apprehension, which prevents people from having these conversations and isolating them into their own echo chambers. People seek peaceful lives, and the chaos of politics often causes them to shy away from the subject.

Everyone should feel respected in their workplace, no matter their political leanings. An effective way to foster an environment of respect is to normalize talking about political affiliations and civic topics. Employers should ask potential job candidates what political party they most identify with and, in exchange, potential job candidates should feel comfortable asking employers where they stand. Encouraging workers to engage in political conversation offers a feasible solution to political polarization.

This is not to say that an employer should refuse to hire someone if they do not identify with their political party. It is to say, however, that making these conversations more common will keep people informed and exposed to different perspectives, which is fundamental to a productive workplace.

An environment that makes everyone comfortable enough to openly discuss their politics establishes an opportunity for every individual to be a better civic participant. We must bridge the gap between emotional and intellectual responses to politically-charged dialogue. This means that it is okay to acknowledge that politics can get emotional; but, despite that emotion, we should make logical arguments and speak informatively.

However, steps toward change start within our inner circles. No matter the response, it's important to answer when a relative asks, "Who are you voting for this election season?" or "What's up with these gas prices?"

Civic dialogue among friends, family and employers diversifies perspectives and teaches useful skills to defend opinions with logically sound arguments. Even if the conversations begin to feel akin to intense debates, they force us to listen to ideas that oppose our own, promoting Mill's philosophy on pursuing truth. We directly confront our biases when we engage in these conversations. Over time, as we normalize civic dialogue, the conversations may stop feeling like arguments and more like cordial chats.

A successful democracy benefits from the circulation of ideas, and the dinner table is the first place where that discourse can occur.