

5 Steps To Have An Constructive Conversation On Politics

- 1) Create a container of respect and appreciation
- 2) Use active listening
- 3) Acknowledge emotions and get to underlying needs and values
- 4) Practice Self Care and Self Regulation
- 5) Build agreements where you can

Having political conversations can be difficult, especially with a friend or loved one. Talking about politics often brings out some of our strongest opinions and emotions and when those opinions clash with someone else's, especially someone we care about, conflict can arise. For this reason many people avoid talking about politics. But that is unfortunate, because done in the right way, an effective conversation on politics can lead to a deepening or healing of a relationship, greater connection with a stranger, and a way to help build the kind of democratic process our country really needs right now.

To have the most constructive conversation on politics we have created this simple 5 step process below. Feel free to print and practice these steps with friends or family or anyone else you wish to have a constructive conversation with.

1) Create an up-front agreement to have a respectful and appreciative conversation

The most important tip to having an effective conversation on politics, or any challenging topic for that matter, is to have an upfront agreement about how you are going to have the conversation. Create an agreement to be respectful and appreciative and have good intentions. Speak this agreement to each other and both agree to it. Too often, conversations on politics devolve because people don't create this upfront agreement and if both parties don't have intentions for a respectful, open-minded conversation, then the outcome is likely not to be very good.

Agree with each other that you are going to be:

1. Respectful – Agree that you will be kind to each other and genuinely curious to better understand each other. It is ok that you disagree with each other. Remember that none of us has a monopoly on the truth, even as much as we'd like to think so sometimes. Agree that you will be open-minded and suspend your need to be right, just long enough to see if you can get a better insight or understanding.
2. Appreciative – be appreciative of each other. Try to find places where you can appreciate and understand the other person's ideas and opinions. This goes a long way towards building trust.

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3. Good Intentions – Go in with good intentions at the beginning and state what those intentions are. Be clear why you are going into this conversation. Can you both set the intention that you want to better understand the other person and the reasons why you have the opinions you both do? Also, set the attention about what you want to get out off the conversation. Maybe you want to make peace with the other person about politics or the current political situation or how you both want to act together in some way.

2) Use active listening

Once you start the actual conversation use Active Listening. Active Listening is both listening with your full attention and asking deepening questions to better understand the other person.

Take turns speaking and reflect back what you hear.

Pick one person to go first.

Using a 2 minute timer, allow the first person to speak uninterrupted. As the speaker, speak about what you really care about, what are the issues and concerns that concern you and why? Be specific. Try to avoid generalizations, and insults. Don't say something like "Trump is a fascist" or "Democrats are wimps" (even if you think thats funny or the truth). The other person is likely to feel insulted. Speak about specific policies and things you care about and use I statements, like "I think" or "I believe..." Remember you are going in open minded and you need to speak what is true for you but you also have to stay open minded.

The second person listens.

Your job is to just listen. Listen with curiosity and your full attention without making the person, right or wrong. Stay curious. Even if judgements arise, notice them but keep them aside. You will have a chance to speak but now your job is to try to understand the other person as completely as possible.

After the person has finished the 2 minutes, listener reflect back what you heard.

Do this reflection for 1 minute. Reflect back what you heard the other person say, without agreeing, disagreeing or giving an opinion. Just reflect back so that they feel heard and understood. Do your best and if you don't understand or they don't feel heard and understood ask clarifying questions. Why do they believe and feel what they feel? What are the underlying reasons? What are the values and needs they are expressing through the beliefs they have? (more about this below)

After the first person speaks and the second person listens and reflects. Let the listener become the speaker and the speaker the listener. Then Go back and forth. You don't have to use the 2

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minute talking, one minute reflecting rule, but we recommend it. It ensures that everyone gets to speak and that everyone has to listen.

3) Acknowledge emotions and get to underlying needs and values

In reflecting back what you heard and in asking questions acknowledge the emotions that the other person is expressing. If someone is angry or sad, acknowledge it by asking them if they are angry or sad. Saying something like “this situation seems to make you feel angry, is that true?” This will help normalize the emotion and make the person feel seen and heard. Practicing this builds empathy and the ability to connect with the other person, even if you disagree with them.

When asking deeping questions about the beliefs the person has try to get to the underlying needs and values the person is expressing. All of us, no matter our political beliefs share the same human needs and values, even if we vary on the needs and values that are most important to us.

Our human needs range from the basic survival needs like food, water, shelter, to emotional needs for love, connection, safety and security. We also have needs for self-expression and community. Sometimes we have competing needs that vy for our attention. We might have a need for novelty that competes with our need for safety and security.

Everything we do and all of the opinions we hold are in some way attempts to get needs met. Wanting to build a bigger wall on the border with Mexico might come from a desire to meet a need for safety and security or it might be to protect our need for independence (a fear that immigrants will take jobs and local people’s independence). The desire to have more open borders might meet another person’s need for community and connection which comes for them by being more inclusive of outsiders.

When asking someone about why they hold their political opinions understand that they are trying to get human needs met that you also share. Try to figure out what those needs are by asking them. “You like having more open borders because you value being inclusive of outsiders, is that true?” They might not even be aware of the needs they are wanting to get met until you ask them. When you understand those needs and they understand yours, then you can start to see your common ground.

Also, ask the other person about their values. Underneath our policy opinions are our values. On the spectrum of conservative and liberal we have different values. Conservatives tend to value independence and decisiveness, liberals collaboration and curiosity. We all have conservative and liberal values but tend to fall more on one side or another. Here are some more:

Conservative

Independence

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Competition	Interdependence
Decisiveness, action	Collaboration
Tradition	Discussion, Comfort with uncertainty
Linear Thinking	Novelty
<u>Liberal</u>	Systems Thinking

When talking with someone on a particular issue you disagree on, ask them about their values and tell them yours. Again, this way you can start to see your commonality and then you will be able to start building agreements. (Step 5 below)

4) Practice Self Care and Self Regulation

Having a political discussion can get heated and certain topics will push anyone's buttons. Self care is important and taking a pause if you notice that things are starting to get too heated is important. If you feel overly angry, overwhelmed or notice the desire to run for the door, take a moment. Ask for a pause in the conversation and take a few breaths. Feel your feet on the ground and take another breath. Invite the other person to do the same.

A few moments of mindfulness can be really helpful to calm this down. It has been shown that simple mindfulness practices calm the nervous system and relax the reptilian part of our brains that gets really activated when we are upset. There is more about this on our mindfulness page and there is 2 minute mindfulness recording that you are free to download.

Self regulation is also important when having a political discussion. Sometimes in a political discussion one party will become more dominant than the other. If you are that person make sure you don't talk too much or talk over the other person. Make sure you are listening and giving space for the other person to also speak.

5) Build agreements where you can

As you practice active listening, acknowledging emotions and getting to underlying needs and values you will start to understand better why the person believes what they do. They too will better understand you. It is also a good if you challenge each other's beliefs and assumptions and see if they hold up. There is a lot of incomplete and misleading information online and in the media and sometimes we have to admit that we don't know the full truth. But again, do this by being respectful and kind and make sure you understand the underlying emotions, needs and values the other person really cares about.

As you get below the surface of policy, opinion, and beliefs to needs and values you can start to build agreements. You don't have to agree on everything but start with what you can.

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For example, you might think building a big wall on the border of Mexico is a bad idea but when you understand why your friend thinks it is a good idea, you might still not agree with them, but you will understand their need for safety and security and values of decisiveness and action.

And if they too listen why you think not building the wall is a better idea then they will understand your need for inclusivity. Then you can start to build agreements. You can agree that you both want safe borders, security of good jobs for locals, and to be inclusive of other people.

As you are making agreements like this, then you can decide what to do. What is the course of action you both want to take? Do you want to agree that you both want to disagree on policy? Or do you want to take action in immigration reform? What kind of government and what kind of candidates could you both support? Since you are both concerned citizens what other kind of actions do you want to take that will make our country better?

And the end, whatever you decide, thank each other. You have both done great job to show up for a conversation like this. You have both grown in your understanding of complex issues and you have both grown as communicators and citizens. Well done!