

A Holiday Guide to Getting Along in a Partisan World

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A family enjoys Thanksgiving dinner together, just as many generations did before them. Biba Kayewich



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Commentary

This holiday season, you are likely to end up seated near a person who thinks you voted wrong. They may even think you're evil and try to set you straight.

But, truth be told, you may think they are evil and hope to set them straight. Ugliness will result, so the best solution is to avoid politics entirely.

Share This is hard because everything is political. You can't say "it's a nice day" without someone pointing out that it's warmer than it should be due to capitalist greed.



You can't say "bless you" to a sneeze without someone opining on THE science of airborne viruses.



But you can avoid politics if you want to. Restrain yourself from bringing it up, and if they bring it up, ask them if they are willing to



avoid politics. Make it explicit so you can roll it back when someone politicizes the turkey and the cranberry sauce.

However, you may not want to avoid politics. You may think your political conversation is a contribution to the greater good. Why should I make small talk when the world is on fire, you may say.

Here are three reasons why the greater good is better served by avoiding politics at social gatherings.

Authenticity: You may think you're being authentic when you discuss politics, but you are mostly repeating what you've heard from the algorithms that surround you. Strong emotions are triggered because political events tap into the emotional circuits carved by your own experience. If you're authentic about those deeper circuits, the conversation will be more interesting than the usual battle of talking heads. When you speak from your personal experience rather than from partisan platitudes, you liberate the other person to do that too. This may be the first authentic conversation they've had in a while. They may be grateful for the chance to mine authentic impulses instead of repeating ideological clichés.

Humility: You may think you are humble and “they” are arrogant. You may think your allies are caring while “they” are selfish. But we are all mammals, so we all seek safety in numbers, and we all strive to rise in the social hierarchy. In today’s world, moral superiority is the socially acceptable way to express this natural urge. It’s better than battling with swords, but we end up battling over moral superiority, a lot. The mammalian brain creates a sense of urgency about social dominance. We see this in people we disagree with, but not in ourselves or our allies. When you understand the natural urge for social dominance, you can relax about it instead of taking it so seriously.

Unity: Mammals unite when they face a common enemy. Cows would rather spread out to avoid eating grass that was soiled by others, but they cluster tightly once they smell a predator. We humans like to go our own way, but we stick with the pack once we fear an enemy. Leaders keep panicking you about “the enemy” because that keeps the group together. Bonding without a common enemy is a sophisticated skill. You are making a contribution to human sanity if you practice social bonding without constant reference to an enemy. It’s hard, so you will be tempted to substitute a different enemy, like Uncle Harry in that ugly sweater.

It seems like people are more polarized than ever because our media feed makes it look that way. But a look at history shows that divisiveness has always been part of life. Protestants and Catholics killed each other for centuries in England, and when the Protestants won, they started killing other Protestants. I was amazed to learn this! I started feeling grateful that we battle with memes rather than swords.

We have been taught that animals are cooperative and “our society” is to blame for human friction. But animals have constant conflict in their herds and packs and troops. I was amazed to learn that gazelles with one stripe on their butt do not associate with gazelles that have two stripes. Humans will always have group dynamics, but you decide whether to go there.

Someone at your holiday table may seem to be indoctrinated and in need of your enlightenment. But they think you are indoctrinated and need their enlightenment. Horns will lock if you go there and you will hurt yourself.

You have a choice.

Bringing up politics only puts you into the position of having to listen to their politics. Do yourself a favor and talk about something else. If they bring up politics, you can give them three reasons why the greater good is better served by leaving politics out of social occasions.

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