



FAMILY POLITICS

They're your blood and you love them, but *wow*, are they wrong. So how do you get past opposing viewpoints and keep the peace?

BY LAURA WALLIS

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR—full of hours spent with family making lasting holiday memories. But for many, “going home” can also be a source of anxiety, especially when the conversation turns to current events. And in today’s particularly charged political climate, even slight differences in opinion have the potential to turn into an ugly fight.

Can families and lifelong friends get through gatherings while flat-out ignoring the elephant and donkey in the room? Or is there a way to stand your ground and still preserve your relationships? A lot of people are asking these exact questions right now—so we went to the pros to get their top tips on how to avoid a major blowout this season.

Know that not engaging is a valid approach.

You and Uncle Lou will never see eye to eye. Grandma just doesn’t get it. Sometimes the simplest and kindest thing to do is just to agree not to talk politics. “Avoiding the subject is very normal and can be a good strategy, especially if you know these conversations will end up hurting people,” says Elizabeth Dorrance Hall, assistant professor of communications at Michigan State University and director of the Family Communication and Relationships Lab. “They can make the divide greater rather than shrink it.” Remember that it’s your responsibility to know yourself and keep your emotions in check. “If you can’t debate without losing calm,

then stay out of debates,” says Carl Pickhardt, PhD, an Austin, Texas-based psychologist.

Understand that debate isn't your only option.

Sometimes the conversation is inevitable. Maybe there's one relative who just won't stop poking the bear. Or maybe it's you—when a piece of breaking news seems just too important not to mention. Consider deciding that you'll talk but you won't fight. “A more productive alternative to debate can be discussion, which is about understanding rather than winning,” says Pickhardt. “You might say, ‘I want to hear what everyone has to say, but I have no desire to argue about it.’” There's inherent respect in this, because everyone gets a chance to be heard. It's helpful to patrol your own language, he adds: Speak in operational terms instead of abstract, accusatory ones. For example, “Please don't interrupt me,” and not, “You're being unreasonable!” The goal is to calmly make your points, and of course, to calmly listen.

So shut up and listen.

Laura Beth Buchleiter, who lives in the South and came out as a trans woman five years ago, says that she has found listening more than she speaks to be the key to communication with her evangelical family. “It is easy to get caught in cycles of arguing where we are trying to win,” she says. “But it became much easier for me when I set the idea of ‘growing’ over the idea of ‘winning.’”

Dorrance Hall agrees. “Pay attention to what someone is saying, instead of thinking ahead to what you'll say next,” she advises. “You'll do a better job responding if you think about what they are saying and why.”

Don't expect to change minds.

Some people say that part of the anxiety about avoiding political conversations with family comes down to guilt: These are your people. Isn't it your responsibility to make them understand how very wrong they are? Nope—that's not likely to happen. “That's misguided,” says Pickhardt.

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“Political beliefs are value-based, tied to founding beliefs about what is socially right and wrong, and they are very hard to change.” Not only that, but the very act of attacking and defending can leave people on both sides more firmly wed to their positions, he explains. That doesn't mean it's not worth expressing your views; just be realistic.

Stay positive—envision a happy get-together.

If you're feeling a lot of stress about an approaching family gathering, a little prep work may help. “Visualize a positive outcome,” suggests Dorrance Hall. “Think about the good things that could come out of quality time with family, and try to visualize how it would feel to have a smooth, happy conversation.” You might even brainstorm some safe topics for when you need to steer conversation into calmer waters. “Jot them down; put them in your phone. You won't necessarily have to look at them, but it can help to have them there,” she says. ●



LIGHTEN UP THE ROOM!

Even if your family relishes a good debate, sometimes enough political drama is enough. Why not arm yourself with a list of safer “issues” to fight about? Some ideas to get you started:

Who was the best Batman? (Hint: The answer is not Ben Affleck. It is also not, sadly, George Clooney.)

Best movie sequel of all time (not counting *The Godfather: Part II* and *The Empire Strikes Back*—too easy). Or best Marvel movie. Or Marvel hero. Or superpower.

Cranberry sauce: canned or fresh? Mashed potatoes: smooth or lumpy? (Avoid this one if the cook is the sensitive type.)

Who would win: Alligator vs. shark? Godzilla vs. King Kong? ____ vs. ____?

What was the best decade for music, and why? (Points for answering without getting eye rolls from the kids at the table.)

Scenario: The ship your family is traveling on hits an iceberg and goes down, leaving you drifting together on a life raft. Who would be raft commander? Argue your own case.