# Why it's OK to disagree about politics

*Cory Rosenberg November 5, 2019, 8:25 a.m.*

## Yes, it can be stressful, but if you listen, there's a lot to be learned.

John Trumbull's painting, 'Declaration of Independence,' depicts the five-man drafting committee of the Declaration of Independence presenting their work to Congress. They didn't agree about everything either. (Photo: John Trumbull [public domain]/Wikimedia Commons)

Many friendly get-togethers and family gatherings have been ruined by heated political debates, and the potential for political disagreement makes many of us uneasy. In fact, a poll conducted by PBS NewsHour, NPR and Marist found that 58 percent of Americans dread the thought of political discussion at the Thanksgiving dinner table. Another poll from 2017 conducted by Quinnipiac University revealed 61 percent of Americans were hoping to avoid any talk of politics over the holiday.

According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 50 percent of Americans find it uncomfortable to talk politics when people don't fall on the same side of the issues. (That percentage is down from 53 in 2018, though it's still quite high.) Because of all the discomfort, three-fourths of Americans only talk politics within like-minded political circles or tribes, as the Washington Post describes them.

So while it's clear talking politics makes us uncomfortable, new research suggests that discussing politics — and even arguing — has more benefits than you might think.

## Disagreements change the way we look at candidates

If you really listen to those with opposing political views, you'll probably learn something — and you might even change your mind. (Photo: Eugenio Marongiu/Shutterstock.com)

In a study published in American Politics Research, researchers at University of Minnesota looked at surveys from the 2008 and 2012 elections to compare how people's feelings towards candidates changed depending on the political diversity of their in-person social networks. They found that within social groups where there was little political disagreement, people tended to vote for the party supported by the social group even if an individual wasn't totally on board with all the candidate's views.

"As the election wore on, their attitudes towards the candidates got more and more partisan. And overwhelmingly, in the end, they chose their party's candidate," study leader Pierce Ekstrom told Greater Good Magazine.

In discussing individuals in more politically diverse groups, Ekstrom says, "When people say that they disagreed about politics with other people they felt close to — so, family and close friends — they tended to shift their preferences based on their issue positions and not necessarily based on partisanship."

So basically, when you discuss politics within a politically diverse social network, you're more likely to make decisions through the process of critically examining the issues and positions of the candidates. It gives you the chance to decide whether or not you're voting for an individual as opposed to voting for a party.

"When compared with those in low-disagreement networks, citizens in high-disagreement networks appear to develop candidate preferences through more effortful cognitive processes, no longer choosing candidates on the basis of simple partisan cues," says the study.

## Disagreements change the way we look at one another

Did you listen to any opposing views before you voted? (Photo: Vox Efx [CC BY 2.0]/Flickr)

Political scientists Larry Diamond and James Fishkin wanted to learn more about this, so they put together an event called "America in One Room," reports The New York Times. Diamond and Fishkin gathered 526 registered voters of different socio-economic backgrounds and political affiliations for four days at a resort in Dallas with the goal of getting voters to gain a deeper understanding of others' political beliefs and the heart of political issues in general.

The participants all wore name tags, but they didn't advertise their political affiliation so no one knew the political leanings of any one person immediately. If participants wanted to understand the political views of each other, they'd have to open up and listen.

A number of different topics were discussed from immigration to the environment to healthcare, foreign policy and general economic issues. Participants read through a 55-page book that explained certain policy proposals, and the book was purposely devoid of words like Democrat, Republican, conservative and progressive so participants wouldn't be able to readily discern which parties proposed which policies.

While the discussions were political in nature, it was the personal stories of participants that carried the conversations, not just impersonal political rhetoric. Because no one knew anyone's party affiliations, the participants ended up naturally listening to one another and empathizing with each other as opposed to just staying guarded without taking someone's view seriously.

"You have to learn to listen to them," Fishkin told The New York Times. "They don't talk the way policy wonks talk about an issue. They bring their life experience, their observations. But they're making arguments when they tell a story."

Participants spoke with increased civility and gained a greater understanding of the personal lives of others. They learned how policies affect livelihoods — things like healthcare costs and the way a policy could affect a farming business. People were surprisingly able to find common ground, became more informed, and they even developed a greater sense of how democracy functions.

In some cases, people's views changed; in many cases, they didn't. But at the very least they walked away more

informed and with a greater level of empathy.

So, while a lot of the time arguing politics just feels like screaming at a wall, if we actually take the time to listen to one another on a personal level, political disagreement can transform into a more meaningful understanding of one another and politics at large.

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