

How-To Navigate the Election Results Within a Polarized Family

Survive the political chaos at family dinners with simple tricks to keep things civil and maybe even find some common ground

By Bea Kress

With Thanksgiving approaching quicker than the poll workers counting the votes this time around, we must brace ourselves for the uncomfortable political conversations. Holidays are meant to bring families together, but when politics come to the table, they can often leave everyone feeling more divided than ever. If you're bracing for yet another debate about the election results, there's hope — using communication techniques like mirroring, gratitude sharing, and active listening can help you survive the political crossfire and keep the peace.

This list includes a compilation of tools, as suggested by Marriage and Family Therapist, Eman Tadros and SU associate professor, Brett Jakubiak, that are used to foster understanding, create space for emotional connections, and reduce tension that can make family gatherings feel like a battlefield. By reframing how you approach uncomfortable conversations with family you never see, whether it's reflecting back someone's words or acknowledging your own feelings with an "I feel" statement, you can turn even the most contentious discussions into opportunities for empathy. By embracing acceptance and finding moments to share gratitude, you can remind your family that, despite political differences, there's still a lot that unites you and not just the holidays.

1. Mirroring

Once grandpa gets going about Trump's "victorious" reelection, Thanksgiving dinner conversations get heated. Mirroring can be an effective way of fostering an understanding of his views, whether we agree or disagree. By implementing the communication tool used in therapy, you will listen to gramps and follow his spiel with a reflection of what you just digested (words, not turkey, that is). "Grandad, you are a proud American," you mimic back. Grandpa will feel understood and *finally* heard. Using this method can reduce initial flames by slowing down reactions and opening up a safe space for anyone to express their views in an open context, even if that feeling is not reciprocated for you. Implementing this technique during every painful family holiday for the next four years can help build empathy and a deeper emotional connection between all parties.

2. Gratitude Sharing

While awaiting the turkey to finish basking in the oven and wishing that could be you on a secluded beach, getting your tan on, conversations about current America's future can get stressful. Roll out those thanks early to simmer down any heated political

conversation. It's not about ignoring the tension or issues at hand, but adding in some balance by calling out all the good stuff (-ing). These small, positive moments remind the entire family that there's more holding you together than pulling you apart through arguing politics, making it just a little bit easier to sit around the table without the usual fireworks.

3. I-Statements

Before tension arises, try rewording your thoughts using the I-statement technique. Rather than telling grandpa 'You always vote for the worst candidate' or 'You never think about anyone else's perspective,' try shifting gears with a simple 'I feel' or 'I think' even if your initial thoughts are true. Starting statements off with your own experiences and feelings is an effective way to try to keep the peace, because let's face it — no one can argue with what *you* feel. You're the expert there. So when your finance bro cousin starts going off on a tangent about how he voted for Trump for a better economy even though your aunt still pays for his Xbox subscription, try using the method instead of jumping to pointing fingers. This approach makes conversations less of a battlefield and more of an open exchange, allowing everyone to feel less defensive and more inclined to listen.

4. Active Listening

Active listening can be daunting, but giving it a shot can keep family debates from spiraling into another miserable holiday. Start by coming in with a neutral stance and see where the other person is coming from, even if their take makes you want to roll your eyes. Even if we disagree, everyone has the right to their own opinions. Once they *finally* finish, try implementing that mirroring technique and reflect back what you heard to prove that you are, in fact, paying attention and are making sure that you understood their point. Ask questions. This simple move lets them know they are heard and might just lower the temperature in the room enough to keep the conversation chill and civil.

5. Acceptance

At the end of the day, some people are set in their ways, especially old folks, and there's not much we can do about it. Acceptance is key when it comes to family and politics — sometimes you have to bear with your out-of-tune aunt's differing opinions. Instead of gearing up for battle, try acknowledging that, yes, these differences are here and not going anywhere, whether you like it or not. Picture these opposing views as a separate entity, something the entire family can agree to navigate around. By treating those differences as just 'there,' you might just be able to find it easier to keep a positive connection and remember that family more than just politics, even when it feels like you're on opposite teams.

