

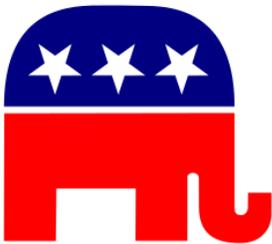
HOW TO REACH ACROSS THE AISLE (When Your Friend's Over There)

by Elly V. Darwin, M.Ed., NCC

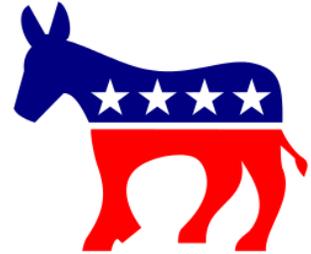
First of all, let me reiterate: the Clearheart Community does not get involved in politics! That's not what this article is about. I'm over 70 years old as I write this. I've seen a lot of political elections and issues come and go, but I've never seen politics as divided—and divisive—as they are now. Much as I'm sometimes tempted to jump on the outraged-against-them (How *could* they?!) bandwagon and join with my like-minded friends in a huge chorus of resentment, I prefer instead to offer some workarounds for when politics pit friend against friend, family against family.

During the last presidential campaign, a friend told me that one of her brothers had posted something about one of the candidates on his social media site. My friend responded with a comment that contradicted what her brother had posted. And guess what? Her brother unfriended her and did not speak to her for a long time.

Two other friends, Aaron and Trent, have been pals for decades. Over the years, they'd shared many beers and many good laughs together. When they moved away from each other, they visited occasionally and kept up their friendship through emails and phone calls. Then one day during an email exchange, Trent made a comment that suggested his political views were no longer in sync with Aaron's. Aaron was shaken that his buddy would make such a remark, and sighed, "Maybe it's time we stop being friends."



What do these two stories have in common? They are both long-time relationships that were damaged over differing political views. Relationships naturally evolve over time. Some friends and family drift apart as their common interests fade; others maintain or become closer. That's the human condition, and in many cases, our lives are enriched as we let go of certain connections and welcome in new ones.



But what about those family and friend connections you'd like to keep—if it weren't for, you know, you can't believe he'd vote for *that* one! When politics (or religion or any other sensitive issue) enters the conversation, there are three ways to handle it: 1) engage, 2) detach, or 3) neutralize. Which route you decide to take depends on your personality, how well you know the other person, and how important the relationship is.

Engage. Ok, I'm in! There are two reasons people actively engage in arguments: by nature, they love a spirited debate (and sometimes even take an opposing view just for the sake of argument), or they don't really enjoy arguing but feel so strongly about what was said that they feel compelled to jump in. For example, I'm usually not an engager, but as a staunch National League loyalist, don't even think about trying to convince me the designated hitter is better for baseball!

There are some rules of engagement, however, for dealing with friends and family

(or anybody else, for that matter) when opposing views come up.

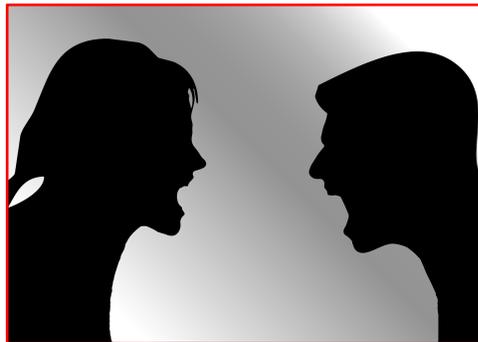
1. Stick to the argument. Argue all you want, all day long if you want, but be clear that you

"The louder you are, the righter you are."
- Stephen Colbert

are arguing about the issue at hand. Never let the argument degrade into a general dispute about anything and everything—you know, the kind that leaves you exhausted and probably not even sure what the argument was originally about.

2. Might doesn't make right.

Comedian Stephen Colbert was interviewed sometime during the run of his political satire show, "The Colbert Report." Remaining in character throughout the interview, he was asked something like, "How do you handle it when you're actually wrong or off-base?" His in-character response was, "I say it loud. The louder you are, the righter you are." The audience laughed, of course, but as with so much humor, what made it funny was its underlying truth. It's like two little kids on the playground: Billy says $2+2=4$. Bobby says $2+2=5$. They wind up fighting over it. Bobby wins. Does that mean $2+2=5$? It probably means Bobby's the stronger kid. Agreed, some people just love to argue, even if voices and tempers rise. Just be sure to keep it under control. Speaking of...



3. Never let the argument get out of hand. It's not worth it. We've all heard those sad stories about disagreements between friends and family members that escalate into fist fights or even homicides. Later, everyone's shaking their heads, saying too bad it all started over some little thing and "it didn't have to end this way."

4. Don't get personal. That's usually how arguments grow into real fights. If you're following the rules above, you'll avoid this problem. The difference lies in sticking to the

topic rather than attacking (verbally or physically) the person you're arguing with. I'd much rather hear someone espouse the benefits of the designated hitter (to which I can then counter with my opinion) than to be called degrading names because of my opinion. The problem with personal attacks is they are, well, personal. People who are personally attacked feel more inclined to defend not just their position, but their honor. This usually incites the person to respond in kind: "Oh, yeah? Well you're a ...!" And it's off to the races. It probably won't end well.

What do you do when you find yourself in an argument that's escalating? You call it. "You know, Jamie, I love a good political argument as much as the next guy, but this [has run its course / is not going well / is getting out of hand]. Let's call it a draw." You might get some pushback about being a chicken, or you're just calling it because

you're losing. That's ok. Be adult enough to handle it. Let them have their last word if they must, then calmly ask again, "Ok, can we call a truce now?" Then change the subject to something you know you both are compatible about ("Hey, did you see that show

last night?"). Creating a transition rather than a vacuum of silence makes it easier to turn the situation back to a calm conversation. If that doesn't work, take a step back, or even politely say, "Jamie, I really don't want to keep arguing now." Walk away if you must, not as a show of drama, but as a show that you honestly don't want to keep arguing. Remember that old saying, "It takes two to tango." If the other person wants to carry on,

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they'll have to find somebody else. Take yourself out of it.

Detach. There are two forms of detaching. One is taking the agree-to-disagree stance. The other is not letting the disagreement get off the ground. I have friends and family of several different religions (and no religion) and all across the political spectrum. We respect that we don't all think and believe the same. In fact, we not only respect it, we appreciate that we enrich each other's lives by the very fact that we *are* different. And because we respect that we are different, we don't try to force our beliefs or positions onto each other. A comment or inference may come up from time to time, but we don't dwell on it. We don't feel the need to argue about it, and we certainly have no desire to degrade or berate each other because of it. It's like our collective attitude is "Steve's conservative—ok." Marcy's liberal—ok." "Sara's Muslim—ok." Michael's Catholic—ok." In other words, the differences are there, but they don't warrant any discomfort or special attention. The overriding principle is respectful acceptance as is.

The other way of detaching is to nip it in the bud.

That is, if the subject comes up, let it be known

that you do not wish to join in. A simple statement can suffice: "This is such a great meal. Let's enjoy it without politics." To be fair, though, effective detaching means you are detaching from the subject altogether, not just an opposing opinion. What you're saying is you don't want to discuss politics, not that you don't want to discuss a certain political viewpoint. If you're not honest and fair about it, you'll only set yourself up to be accused of being intolerant or one-sided. (That's ok for a conversation among like-minded thinkers,

but I'm talking about across-the-aisle acceptance here.)

Neutralize. Neutralizing is a form of detaching. It is gently removing the power of the argument enough to discontinue it and is best done as early in the conversation as you

Neutralizing allows the other person to save face.

see where it's headed. I was at a party where a guy made a comment that started something like, "Man, it's a real shame how [a high-ranking political figure] treated [members of the opposite party] over that [particular political situation], isn't it?" Pretty obvious where his comment was headed: he was looking for someone to agree with what was sure to be a political gripe. I shrugged my shoulders as I replied, "Well, I don't really keep up on that stuff." The guy shook his head with a look of disgust on his face, then turned to someone else to express a similar remark. I was off the hook.

The purpose of the neutralizing remark is not so much to stop the other person (the guy at the party soon turned toward another available ear), but to diffuse the conversation enough to provide both of you a safe detour around it. I didn't have to tell him outright that I didn't want to discuss politics, and he didn't have to hear me tell him. It's a subtle difference, but a good tool to have at your disposal (especially in a situation like a party where people are mingling).

Neutralizing allows the other person to save face. Another way to neutralize a conversation is to say something like, "Well, you may be right." (You're not really saying whether or not you agree—or even if the person actually *is* right!) It's a good way to steer a conversation in another direction when someone is tending to go on and on.

The overriding principle is respectful acceptance as is.

I used a variation of this after receiving several unwanted forwarded emails of a political nature from an acquaintance. I responded by saying I appreciated him thinking of me, but I get many, many emails forwarded to me. While I agree with most of them, I'd prefer that in the future he would only send me emails that are specifically related to [the organization we both belonged to]. He stopped forwarding political emails, and my reply in no way diminished our friendship.

Not every situation is cut-and-dried, and you've probably noticed that some of these categories and responses can overlap. You'll no doubt be able to figure out some diplomatic responses of your own, based on the particular situations and people involved. The point is you don't have to "throw out the baby with the bathwater"—you don't have to reject a friendship just because you reject some of a friend's views. Your friendship might actually be enhanced if you both are willing to listen and learn about your respective viewpoints. Not seeing eye to eye on certain things doesn't have to be a negative; it can bring some breadth and depth to your relationship.

The bottom line is to ask yourself a couple of fundamental questions. The first question: *Would you rather be right or happy?* Being right is an ego boost. It feels good to be correct about something. But is being right (or worse, assuming you're right, whether or not you actually are) something that must be driven home at any cost? Is it worth all the shouting? Is it worth high blood pressure? Is it worth making others around you

miserable? Is being right so important that it's ok to drive away friends and family? And if so, how happy does that make you feel?

You don't have to reject a friendship just because you reject a friend's views.

Which leads to the second fundamental question: *Which is more important, the argument or the relationship?* If being right and winning an argument is more important than the relationship, it

becomes a moot point because the other person won't want to be around you much longer anyway. As long as there's an endless supply of people to burn through, you'll continue to feel victorious, but at some point you'll discover you don't really have long-time friends. When my younger brother was only about five or six years old, he unwittingly observed this in a distant relative. "How come," he asked our mother, "all of Cora's friends are either new or they're not speaking anymore?"

If it weren't for your political differences, would you still want this person to be a part of your life? Maybe the relationship can bring some healthy variety to your life if you're willing to give a little leeway for differences and practice the above tips to avoid some of the pitfalls of disagreement.

Do you have to agree with everyone? No. Do you have to continue to love (or even like) everyone in your family? That's up to you. But getting into a big argument or unfriending friends and relatives just because they're on the other side of the aisle doesn't need to be your only recourse, either.



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