

# BROOKINGS

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## **Six ways to handle Trump's impeachment during holiday dinners**

Darrell M. West Monday, November 25, 2019

It is a holiday dinner and all hell is about to break out in the dining room. One of your relatives asks what you think about the President Donald Trump impeachment proceedings. There is silence around the table because your family is dreading what is about to happen. Everyone knows Uncle Charley loves Trump while cousin Betsy detests him.

Divided families are relatively common in the United States. According to Eitan Hersh of Tufts University and Yair Ghitza of Catalist, 30 percent of households are divided in the partisan leanings of the spouses, 30 percent are Republican-only, 25 percent are Democrat-only, and 15 percent are Independent-only. Our current divisions over Trump led cartoonist Walt Handelsman of the *New Orleans Advocate* to publish a script showing family members having solid dividers between them at dinner time to separate those with views ranging from “Trump 2020” and “Stop the Witch Hunt” to “Impeach Trump” and “Believe the Whistle Blower”.

I know this political reality because it is the story of my life. As noted in my book, Divided Politics, Divided Nation: Hyperconflict in the Trump Era, my two sisters support Trump while my brother and I worry about his personal contentiousness and wrong-headed policies. I grew up on a dairy farm in rural Ohio where the

politics were very conservative, yet moved away from those views during my adulthood. The book recounts how our family and the country as a whole became more polarized over the 40 years from Reagan to Trump.

So with the holidays coming up, how should you handle political conversations about Trump at Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's? Based on my experience, there are six ways for getting through the holidays with your relatives and friends.

### **Avoidance**

The classic way to navigate controversial topics is to avoid them entirely. This is the “see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil” strategy. Little good comes out of political conversations because people feel intensely about those subjects and are not very tolerant of individuals who have views at odds with their own perspectives. Schools spend considerable time teaching young people about tolerance and mutual respect, but many people do not practice those virtues on topics about which they feel strongly.

### **Confrontation**

With the strong views people have about Trump's impeachment, though, it is hard to avoid the topic entirely. Even with those who dislike him, it is hard not to talk about him because he makes so much news, loves to say controversial things, and is fun to psychoanalyze. In those situations where the topic arises, confronting those who disagree with you is a tempting approach. Just be aware that your ability to persuade someone with whom you disagree is quite limited and you likely are going to feel frustrated or angry at the end of the conversation.

### **Finding a friend and side-stepping the issue**

If avoidance and confrontation are out as possible strategies, another avenue is to only talk to people at dinner who share your political views. You can suss out people's viewpoints with seemingly innocuous comments like "what a wild time we are having these days" and await the response. If the person answers with a sympathetic viewpoint, you can bask in the glory of someone who shares your opinions and reaffirms your existing opinions. Sometimes, nothing is better than having confirmation that you are not out of your mind and there are others who share your perspective on public affairs.

### **Actual listening**

The hardest approach is listening to those who have opposing viewpoints without seeking to persuade them. It always is tempting to believe if you present some vivid fact or clear opinion that the other person will convert to your view. In today's contentious world, though, conversion rarely happens. People who are undecided may alter their views but those with strongly held views are not likely to switch from being a Trump supporter to opponent or vice versa.

In my family, I find it helpful to hear opposing viewpoints and how those opinions are formed in order to understand the sources of Trump's support and why many do not want him impeached. As a longtime political analyst, I need to understand why people in the rural Midwest feel left behind and see the need for someone like Trump who seeks to shake things up. Many of my relatives don't like the status quo and feel the system is rigged against them, and it is useful for me to understand why those views lead them to stand with the president.

My siblings and I gave up trying to persuade each other decades ago. As far back as the Ronald Reagan presidency, our political views diverged and we recognized if we wanted to have family peace, we could discuss politics but not try to persuade the other of the rightness of our own views. If you separate discussion from persuasion, it eases the entire atmosphere substantially by lowering the overall stakes of the conversation.

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## **Focusing on the undecideds**

You may get lucky and find someone at a holiday gathering who genuinely is undecided about Trump. If that happens, you should seize the moment and actually seek to influence him or her. If that person really doesn't know how he or she feels about Trump's presidency, putting some facts on the table and explaining why you think Trump has abused (or not abused) his office and obstructed (or not obstructed) justice can be productive. Of course, truly undecided people in America are rare on the subject of Trump and probably number less than 10 percent. But if you encounter one from this group, you should take that as a valuable opportunity for persuasion. The 2020 election ultimately will depend on those who right now are ambivalent in their political feelings.

## **Humor**

If all else fails, humor may be the last resort. Political jokes are abundant on the internet and in social media, and you can defuse confrontational situations that are spiraling out of control. Rather than see your family arguing around the dinner table, you can try humorous asides that deflect the anger and move the conversation toward a lighter touch. On the "The Daily Show", for example, host Trevor Noah told the audience that cheered after he announced the impeachment inquiry, "Melania, stop cheering!". Sometimes, humor is the best antidote for a divided family.