

Voters, it's time to talk turkey

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It's always risky when a dinner conversation veers from "pass the gravy" to foreign policy or taxes, but with the federal election just over a week away, that's no doubt that will be happening this weekend at Thanksgiving gatherings across the country.

Those dinner-table conversations are part of electoral lore. When a holiday weekend falls before voters go to the polls, the received wisdom holds, families argue politics over turkey and undecided make up their minds. With huge numbers of Canadians still unsure for whom they'll vote on Oct. 19, and with advance polls open through the weekend, these late-campaign conversations must be looming large in political strategists' minds.

In fact, according to Samara Canada, a charity that focuses on civic engagement, the social pressure created through simply discussing political issues is one of the top six reasons why people end up actually making the effort to go to a polling station and vote. "We take cues from those around us," says Jane Hilderman, executive director of Samara. "Even talking about politics is a signal that this is something of value, and this is something worth engaging in."

Samara found that last year, 39% of Canadians didn't have a single political discussion. "This speaks to the growing divide that democracy is seeing in Canada, where fewer and fewer people see the relevance of politics in their day-to-day life," Hilderman said.

She's hopeful that the 11-week federal election campaign has led to a higher percentage of people engaging in political talk. And this weekend is a prime opportunity for more of it.

If you're unsure of how to strike up that political conversation, Hilderman suggests asking the other person what issues matter to them, or how these issues might be shaped after the vote.

"That avenue is far more accessible than opening up the conversation with 'Who are you voting for?' because I think it can be alienating if you don't have a sense of the party

platforms,” she said. “Rather than start there, start with something everyone has something to say about.”

And while you may be tempted to avoid talking politics with people who reside on a different part of the political spectrum, Hilderman says: “Democracy wouldn’t exist in an environment without conversation.”

If you don’t want to risk having a gravy boat flung at you, remember to keep it constructive and respectful when faced with opposing points of view. Hilderman suggests looking for common ground in the discussion and exploring questions like, “What should be a ballot box issue?” or “What election promise do you wish could be broken?”

“These are questions that invite a slightly different angle, rather than immediately putting a stake in the ground,” she says.

It’s worth the effort, Hilderman says, because elections shouldn’t be a spectator event — being a vote “should be an active role that we engage in, and that we feel is communal.”