

Election Day is October 21

what to expect when you're ELECTING

Presented by The Samara Centre for Democracy

4 Getting into Discussions



Welcome to the fourth explainer in the What to Expect When You're Electing series. This week: **how to keep political conversations constructive**, even when we disagree.

For more explainers, go to samaracanada.com/what-to-expect

LEARN ABOUT:

- Why it's difficult to have civil political conversations
- Tips for discussing politics in a constructive way
- Ways online political conversations are different than in real life

1 You want to talk about *what* at the dinner table?!

Discussing politics doesn't have to mean talking about complicated or controversial topics. A political conversation can be as simple as asking, "What would you like to see improved in your community?"

2 But there are so many different opinions out there! What if someone disagrees with me?

Someone probably will, but that's great news! Disagreement is a sign of a healthy democracy. People should be comfortable expressing their own opinions and should come to decisions by hearing different sides of an issue and about different people's experiences.

3 I can see why we need to have political discussions, but don't they get pretty messy?

You're right, political conversations can be hard. Psychologists and scientists have many explanations for why that is:

Identity issues: We're wired to get upset if someone challenges the political beliefs that are central to our group or personal identity, and we feel threatened as soon as divisive topics come up.

Confirmation bias: We accept information that confirms what we already believe and reject information that doesn't support our opinions.

Solution aversion: Sometimes, we refuse to accept that problems exist if solving them might lead to solutions we don't like.

Different moral "languages": Our political choices are rooted in our moral values—our ideas about what is right and wrong. We speak past each other if our ways of seeing the world are based on very different moral values. For instance, research suggests that conservatives tend to emphasize values of loyalty and authority, while liberals value fairness or care.*

4 What should I do to make sure political conversations are constructive, especially with people who disagree with me?

Lead by example: Acting civil can cause others in a conversation to follow your lead and—bonus!—can help the conversation stay on topic.

Police people on your own side: Calling out incivility works best when it comes from someone on the same political team or side of an argument.

Get into the weeds: Inviting people to share detailed explanations of what political views they support, and doing so yourself, can make us realize that we know less than we think and make it easier to find common ground.

Reframe your language: Thinking about the moral foundations of your argument, reframe what you're saying to fit with the values of the person you're speaking with.

Find shared identities: Focus on identities that unite you and the people you're speaking with (like living in the same city or country, or supporting the same sports team) instead of identities that divide you (like party affiliations).

5 Okay, this seems possible in person. But what about online? Social media can be nasty!



Conversations on digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram aren't like discussions in person. Online, there are fewer cues to help us recognize when someone is upset or joking. It's often possible to be anonymous, which allows people to say whatever they want without fearing social backlash. Even the way social media works—its instant notifications, the way we scroll through these apps when we're bored—can encourage replies that are poorly thought out. And fake accounts, robot accounts ("bots"), and trolls (those who make inflammatory posts to provoke strong emotions) can make it look like extreme, fringe opinions are widely held.

Even though chatting about politics online is different than in real life, the tips above still apply. Be polite, encourage others to be respectful, ask others for detailed explanations, reframe your language, and draw on shared identities.

For more tips on how to have constructive discussions online, check out our [Field Guide!](#)

*Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt & Brian Nosek (2009), "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96(5): 1029-1046.

Still have questions? Want to learn more? Visit samaracanada.com/what-to-expect or email info@samaracanada.com

Coming up next: Some formal and informal ways you can get involved in the election

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