

Americans should talk about politics more

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In the 1950s TV show “Father Knows Best,” the daily newspaper provided fodder for stimulating conversation.

“The Martins are coming to dinner - be sure you don’t bring up politics.” That familiar injunction may make for domestic tranquillity, but it is also killing our democracy.

Americans don’t talk politics enough. We have outsourced the conversation to quarrelsome politicians and talk show celebrities. The consequence is that Americans are failing at the most basic task of civics: the obligation to fully understand the issues facing us and participate as informed citizens in running our country.

It is time to take the conversation back. Our democracy is utterly dependent upon an informed and engaged citizenry. We must talk to each other about politics to form thoughtful opinions and maybe learn something that will help us run our communities. We may as well start at home.

Contrast our aversion to politics at mealtime with attitudes just about anywhere abroad. I remember the first time I was a guest at a dinner in Paris where most of the evening was occupied by a vigorous debate over European Union policy and politics. At the end of the evening, everyone warmly air-kissed all around, promising to continue the discussion at the next gathering.

Of course, conversation alone is insufficient if the participants are clueless. Political conversation is not welcomed at American dinner tables in no small part because most Americans have no idea what they are talking about. A recent Newsweek poll suggests that 38 percent of Americans would fail the U.S. citizenship test, and a shocking 73 percent couldn’t explain why we fought the Cold War.

This ignorance is precisely the problem we need to fix, and we can do it over dinner. Pick a topic to discuss, inform your guests and invite them to read up on it in advance. Something in the news is great, but make it bite-size. Tackling the entire federal debt crisis is unrealistic, but exploring the future of defense spending, high-stakes school testing or the Amazon tax would make for a fine conversation. Not everyone will work out in advance, so choose something that tardy guests can study on their iPhones en route to dinner, provided of course that spouses are doing the driving.

The Amazon tax is a good candidate for another reason: It just popped up in the public debate last month. Because it is a new topic, guests are unlikely to have a settled opinion about it and thus will be more inclined to explore. Pick a long-standing subject (like the debt crisis) only if you also think up a novel angle that will spark conversation.

Confecting the right guest mix is, of course, essential. A table full of vigorously agreeing guests makes for dull conversation, while too extreme a variation can make it difficult to find common ground in a single dinner. It is tempting to avoid friends who are known offenders when it comes to dinner table bloviating, but that also risks missing the point of the exercise. We need to learn to talk with each other about touchy issues, and that includes talking with friends who tend to lecture. Invite other guests inclined to keep the conversation congenial, or design the topic to minimize the possibility of tedious speechifying.

The point of the evening is to explore and not to persuade, but it is a sign of success if guests actually change their minds. It dismays me when politicians are accused of “flip-flopping,” because I expect my representatives to be intellectually flexible and willing to change their position based on what they learn. I expect no less of my neighbors. As John Maynard Keynes observed, “When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?”

As citizens, we must do the same. We must question our opinions and listen to the insights of others, and I can think of no better place to do it than over dinner.

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