



# **A GUIDE TO CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE PARTISAN DIVIDE**



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDE

The term *polarization* describes any situation where people sort themselves into opposing sides, erase the complexity of the individuals as well as the issues, and then spiral into increasingly inhumane treatment of “the other side.” Any difference in views or identities can become polarized.

Partisan polarization (e.g. Democrats versus Republicans) has become particularly harmful for American democracy. It turns our huge, complicated, diverse country into a two-sided political sport. It is corrosive to our communities, our institutions, our relationships, and makes it impossible to address the many challenges we face together.

Drawing on four decades of real-world experience and rigorous research, this guide will equip you to address polarization in your own context.

It will help you speak about what is most important to you in ways that can be heard. It will help you hear different views and experiences with openness and curiosity. It may create opportunities to repair trust, reach new understandings, and forge authentic relationships—even across different convictions and perspectives.

What this guide will not ask you to do is erase or diminish your genuine self. It does not require you to find “common ground” or pretend that political differences don’t have real consequences. We will not ask you to endure verbal abuse, threats, or hate speech.

Here you will find effective tools to help you navigate conversations across the partisan divide in your own context —plus a section at the end focused on constructive social media practices. We believe in you.

### About Us

**Essential Partners** helps people build relationships across differences to address their communities’ most pressing challenges.

Our proven approach helps people live and work better together. Since our founding in 1989, we have collaborated with more than

- 350 college campuses
- 140 organizations
- 400 local communities
- 100 secondary schools

We believe that the most urgent problems can only be addressed by people who live and work together every day.

The strength of relationships rooted in trust and mutual understanding empowers people to address the most pressing challenges without compromising their deepest values or identities.

# WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT PARTISAN POLARIZATION TODAY?

**It's not your imagination.** Talking about politics has become more and more difficult. People are most likely to describe politics today as “divisive” or “messy,” and more than 60% of Americans find it stressful to talk politics with people they disagree with, according to [2023 Pew research](#).

Politics has always been a way to express what we care about—our hopes and concerns, values and commitments, our sense of justice. There are real stakes to political outcomes. Policies affect our livelihoods, our children's education, our health, opportunities, and safety. Politics matters. The differences also matter.

Because they matter, discourse around politics and elections can always become contentious, divisive, and polarized. Over the past thirty-plus years, though, American political life has become more divided across partisan lines (Democrats and Republicans) than we have seen for several generations.

There are many theories about the reasons for this change. Some research tells us that both major parties have become less ideologically diverse, so there's less overlap in policy views. Some analysis points to the huge technological revolution we face (e.g. the internet, AI, and social media). Economic forces, changes in the media, styles of political organizing, and generational shifts all likely contribute as well.

**One thing is certain: partisan polarization has eroded political discourse where we live, work, worship, and learn—the spaces where we *should* be hashing out our values and visions together.**

In a healthy democracy, we can discuss our differences on Monday and then collaborate on some other issue on Tuesday. Instead, we are stuck in a cycle of polarization: only one side can win, the other side is always wrong (about everything), viewpoints are wrong simply because the other side holds them, and the stakes of losing any political struggle are catastrophic. There's no nuance and no compromise. But it doesn't have to be this way.

**Polarization is a natural tendency, not an inevitable outcome.** Simple interventions in your daily life can interrupt this cycle, reducing its influence on you and those around you. If you can do that consistently, you can build a network of resilience in your context. If enough people do that, we can break this cycle at higher and higher levels. But it begins with you. It begins with community.



## ARE YOU READY?

The suggestions in this guide are most effective when the people involved are talking about something that matters to them. It works best when they're willing to hear perspectives that are different from theirs. These questions will help you gauge your readiness:

- Why do you want to connect? What do you want to learn? What do you hope to make possible?
- Are you willing to acknowledge strong emotions that come up and still hold to boundaries?
- Can you resist frustration enough to avoid making assumptions about another person?
- Can you listen without interrupting, tap into your own curiosity, and speak with care?

If you can answer these questions, you're probably ready to take the next steps. If you're not sure, take some time to reflect and then come back to this guide.

## IS THIS THE RIGHT SITUATION?

Context has a huge impact on hard conversations. What does this one need to go well? Do you need a place that is private? Can you find enough time and be free from distraction? Can you find a time when people don't feel pressured by limited time? Where is the place that brings out the best in you? Might a cup of coffee or tea help? What about food?

Making sure that everyone feels comfortable in the space goes a long way to setting the stage for a good conversation.

## EXTEND AN INVITATION

**Try this:** "I really want to be able to talk about this with you. Do you think we can have an honest conversation—not an argument? Can we try to understand one another and listen even when one of us says something we disagree with?"

If they say no, then you have to accept that choice. Some folks aren't ready. But few people will say no to an honest and open-hearted request. This also serves as an invitation to both of you, to sign on to a shared purpose of understanding rather than debating or arguing.

**Just by asking, you're interrupting the cycle of polarization.**

## SET SOME GROUND RULES

Conversations are a lot like driving: it's amazing how well and safely people can navigate around each other once they all understand the rules of the road. Explicit ground rules can feel awkward, but setting expectations will help you both stay on track and aligned with your purpose.

**Try this:** "It will help me bring my best self if we can agree to a few simple guidelines. How would you feel if we:

- share the time, so we don't interrupt each other and no one person goes on too long;
- speak for ourselves, from our personal experience, and not try to represent or defend an entire party;
- ask questions, so we don't make assumptions.

"Will these work for you? Is there anything you'd want to add or adjust? Can we hold ourselves to these together?"

In most cases, these make a world of difference. But when we facilitate difficult conversations in groups, we often also recommend some structures to help create an intentional container for conversation.

We use structures like go-rounds, where each person has the same amount of time to respond to the same prompt, or giving people time to write notes before responding, or inviting people to interview each other before having a larger group conversation.

These structures can help one-on-one conversations as well as small group discussions. And again, you are intervening on the cycle of polarization just by inviting people to reflect on the way they engage in political conversations.

## QUESTIONS TO GET STARTED

If you ask a yes or no question, you will get a yes or no answer. If you ask a question that invites a personal story, a reflection about what values and hopes, what issues are most fraught, or what future they hope for—it can open up a new way of relating across your differences.

### Here are some questions to help get started:

- What is at the heart of your political beliefs?
- What hopes, concerns and values do you have that underlie your beliefs?
- What in your life experience has led you to believe the things you do?
- What are the political issues today that impact your life the most? Can you tell a story from your life to help me understand how that issue impacts you?

Once people have been able to talk about the things they really believe in and care about, they may be more willing to talk about what is complex and difficult. Try one of these next:

- In what ways have you felt out of step with the party or groups you generally support, or in what ways do those groups not fully reflect what's important to you?
- What aspects of the other party or advocacy groups do you admire—or at least see as reasonable counter-balances to the groups you generally support?

One important possibility is for someone to define themselves and step away from stereotypes they feel are placed on them. These questions can help you see the individual:

- During political debates, are there ways that your values and perspectives are stereotyped by the “other side”?
- If so, what about who you are and what you care about that makes those stereotypes especially frustrating or painful?
- Are there some stereotypes about you that you feel are somewhat deserved—even if they are not fully true?

## TECHNIQUES TO LOWER THE TEMPERATURE

When things get really tough or the disagreement is profound—and there is a good chance that will happen—remember your purpose is to understand, not persuade.

**First, reflect.** Take a moment to ask: Am I really listening? Am I listening to understand or to criticize? When you hear something that doesn't make sense to you or that you really disagree with, check in to make sure you have heard the person and then let them know you are trying to understand their perspective. Try saying:

“Let me make sure I understand what you mean, you are saying that this is important to you because \_\_\_\_\_ and that you really wish\_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?”

**Next, get curious.** When you are most frustrated, you have to get most curious. First about yourself—Why is this so difficult for me?—then about the other person or people. Try asking:

- How did you come to believe that? Is there a story there?
- Why is that really important to you?
- Do you ever feel conflicted about it in any way or have questions or uncertainties?

**Appreciate each other.** Name what you learned. Thank the other people for sharing their views and experiences, for being vulnerable or being patient, or being generous.

**Take a break.** It's one of those things we learned in kindergarten, right? It's also based in science. Research says that it takes 20 minutes for our bodies to return to normal after we have gotten really upset. If it gets too difficult to continue, name your desire to continue, and suggest a short break.

## TIPS TO REMAIN CURIOUS & OPEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a hard place to have good dialogue. It's tough to read a person's tone, impossible to see facial expressions, and sometimes you have no real-life relationship with the person in question. All that creates space where polarization flourishes.

The first remedy is to assess whether or not you want to enter the conversation at all. Ask yourself these three questions:

1. **Can I share a perspective** that might inform someone else's understanding? Do I have an insight or an experience that might help someone shift the way they are thinking?
2. **Is this already an argument** with an attack-and-defend dynamic, or are people really listening to each other?
3. **Are there things I'd like to learn** from people whose viewpoints are different than mine?

**If the answer to some of the above is YES, then by all means proceed.**

## COMMON ONLINE MISSTEPS (WE ALL MAKE THEM)

### **Belittling other people's hopes or fears.**

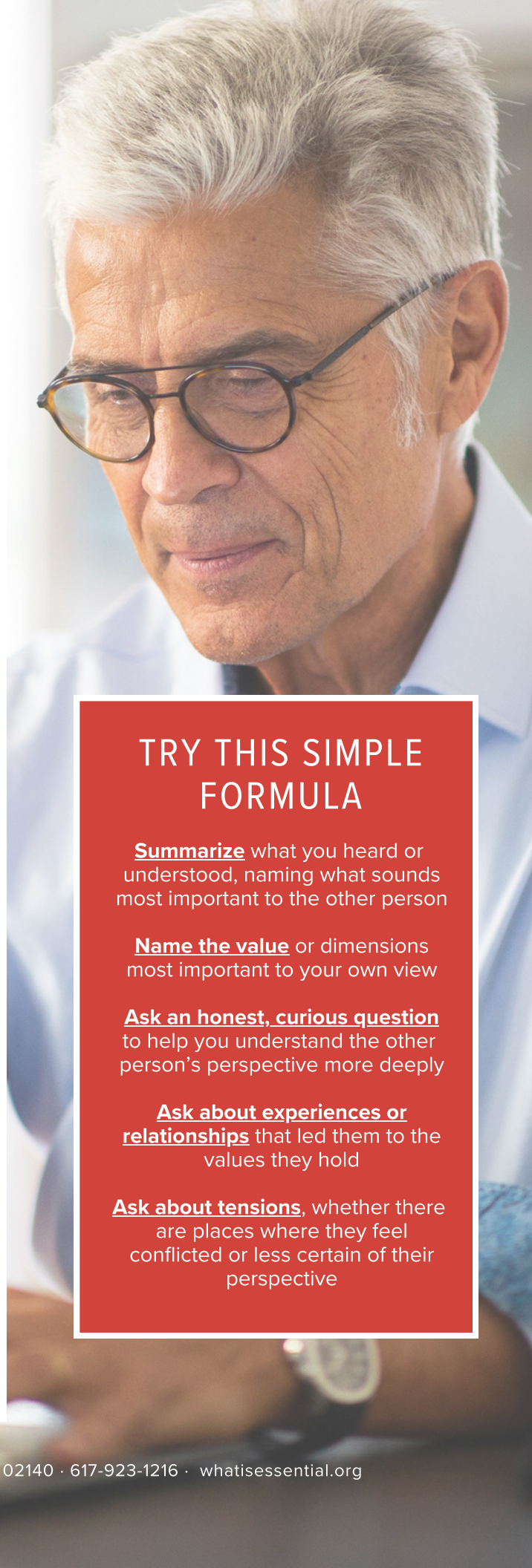
This will invite the same in response, escalating the polarized conflict. Every person's hopes and fears are grounded in their experiences.

### **Deploying statistics to "win the argument."**

Statistics and facts are useful to explain why you have come to a conclusion you have—but there is a good chance that someone who sees an issue differently has their own set of stats to back it up. Focus on your own values and experiences.

### **Generalizations about "people like you..."**

It can be hard to remember that you're interacting with an actual person online. Deploying stereotypes or generalizing about an identity will generally make people more defensive, more guarded, less open, less honest. It limits the person to a single identity and strips away all their complexity.



## TRY THIS SIMPLE FORMULA

**Summarize** what you heard or understood, naming what sounds most important to the other person

**Name the value** or dimensions most important to your own view

**Ask an honest, curious question** to help you understand the other person's perspective more deeply

**Ask about experiences or relationships** that led them to the values they hold

**Ask about tensions**, whether there are places where they feel conflicted or less certain of their perspective