

Forget etiquette, let's talk politics at the dinner table
(or: Why politeness threatens our democracy and how we can stop it.)
By Cassandra Mancini



"A Thanksgiving Miracle." SNL cast members Aidy Bryant and Cecily Strong clash over politics at Thanksgiving dinner.

It's a rule I've heard so many times that it's ingrained in my mind: never talk politics at the dinner table. Linus Van Pelt, the famous *Peanuts* character, said it best in the 1966 classic [*It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*](#), "There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin." But it was recorded in the etiquette canon long before Linus. Published in 1886, Thos E. Hill's famous [*Manuel of Social and Business Forms*](#) warns:

Do not discuss politics or religion in general company. You probably would not convert your opponent, and he would not convert you. To discuss those topics is to arouse feeling without any good result.

And Emily Post's 1922 [*etiquette handbook*](#) advises, "a first rule for behavior in society is: 'Try to do and say those things only which will be agreeable to others.'"

Today, most people don't turn to etiquette guides or watch the *Peanuts* to understand appropriate behavior. Instead, we are socialized to, as Emily Post says, "say those things only which will be agreeable to others." Thos E. Hill and Emily Post would call this socialization good manners. **I call it a looming threat to our democracy.**

What's wrong with being polite.

From a young age, children are socialized to be polite in order to 'save face.' [According to linguistic scholars](#), this reflects a larger desire to be accepted and approved of by others, and simultaneously be free from others' constraints. Political speech threatens the 'face saving' tactic of politeness. It's stressful to speak without knowing how your words will be received, just as it's intimidating to come out as opposed to a relative's deeply held views.

And children are often unaware of their parents' political leanings. One study showed that [30 to 33 percent of children](#) cannot correctly identify their parents' party preferences. Without proactive cues as to the appropriateness of their speech, children exercise restraint in order to be polite (this is called negative politeness).

All of this is to say that we cannot expect children to proactively bring up taboo subjects like politics (or sex or The Great Pumpkin) without support and encouragement from their families. It follows that we cannot expect young adults to be comfortable discussing politics with their peers if they never learned how to conduct such conversations when they were young.

What's happening in the classroom.

Political socialization, or the acquisition of one's political attitudes and values, does not occur exclusively within the home. It also occurs in the classroom. Unfortunately, the classroom is an imperfect place for discussion due to political polarization in local communities. Teachers often [fear repercussion from parents and community members](#) for discussing and debating hot-button issues with students. It is ironic, or fitting, that proven strategies to combat political polarization are dismissed due to political polarization (but more on this later).

What's trending on Facebook.

Recent studies have shed light on the futility of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to foster engaging political discourse. A Pew Research Center study on ["Social Media and the 'Spiral of Silence'"](#) found that the desire to save face for fear of social isolation persists online. Social network users "were more willing to share their views if they thought their followers agreed with them... [and] were about twice as likely to join a discussion on Facebook about [the] issue." Social media best serves those who are already comfortable talking about politics in any setting.

Furthermore, the political news that we engage with on social media channels is largely influenced by both what our network of friends 'likes' or shares and what we have previously 'liked' or shared. This creates a [bubble effect](#) that limits our exposure to a diverse array of ideas and discussions. Even assuming that you proactively follow folks with different ideological perspectives, [one experiment](#) found that reading news online from the 'other side' actually further entrenched partisan beliefs.

Finally, all online discussions on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are susceptible to [hostile and counterproductive attacks](#) by ‘trolls’ and cyber bullies. The relative anonymity of typing from behind a screen enables users to disregard all social conventions and express their opinion with rage and vitriol. This disinhibition does not amount to effective political discussion as it often leads to personal attacks instead of attacks on policy merit.

The revolution in political communication will not occur on Facebook. This is because for some the problem of politeness persists online, and for others all notions of civility disappear. Effective discourse requires a happy medium between these two extremes.

What’s threatening our democracy.

Politeness and silence in the home constitute a creeping threat to our democracy for two reasons: they maintain political polarization and incivility.

Political polarization, or the gap between Americans who express consistently liberal and consistently conservative views, is rapidly rising alongside partisan animosity. And that’s all according to a [Pew Research Center survey from 2014](#); an extensive study about polarization in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election has yet to be conducted. A Pew report conducted after the presidential nominees were selected, but before the general election found that 55 percent of Democrats and 49 percent of Republicans said [the other party makes them afraid](#).

[Polarization](#) decreases willingness to compromise (effectively a requirement for governance in our political system) and fosters distrust. It also profoundly affects the demographic distribution of the population. That same Pew study notes that 75 percent of conservatives prefer to live in communities that resemble suburbs or towns, while 77 percent of liberals prefer to live in communities that resemble urban cities.

Pew paints a picture of a nation in which two increasingly divided groups of people fear each other and prefer to live in separate areas of the country. This is a recipe for disaster. Besides reproducing those ‘bubbles’ we encounter online in real life, polarization profoundly affects the makeup of our government. As liberals and conservatives migrate to separate areas of the country, the number of ‘swing’ congressional districts decreases. This means that politicians can take extreme ideological stances without fear of losing elections. There is no incentive for politicians to moderate their position or compromise with the other side.

An [Al Jazeera article on civility](#) in the 2016 presidential election led with the subheading, “With the presidential candidates unable to even shake hands, civility and substantive debate in US elections have all but disappeared.” In his first sentence, journalist Alan Fisher identified the crux of the problem with incivility in politics: it prevents substantive debate by causing candidates to attack each other personally, rather than politically. This hasn’t always been the case in politics. In 2008, Republican presidential nominee [John McCain congratulated Barack Obama](#) on television after he won the Democratic nomination. McCain’s attitude stands in

sharp contrast to the personal attacks Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump leveled at each other during campaign season. The United States is undergoing a crisis in political civility.

What's important about the dinner table.

The dinner table serves as an important space for combatting political polarization and teaching civility. We can combat polarization by helping children feel comfortable with disagreement. By normalizing political dialogue and conflict around the dinner table, we help reduce their fear of the 'other side' and teach them to confidently defend their opinions. When children do not feel personally attacked by differences in perspective, they can move forward to practice compromise. We must encourage and positively [reinforce disagreement](#).

In addition, discussing difficult political issues in the home, where family members often share common values and disagreements do not come from a place of malice, enables children to perfect their civil discourse. Parents in bipartisan or 'mixed party' homes can serve as role models for respectful disagreement, and children can parrot civil language in their own political conversations. By modeling good dialogue, we can step away from being polite or agreeable and move towards being civil.

Finally, [studies have shown](#) that young adults who were exposed to regular political discussion at home remained politically engaged later in life. In homes with frequent political discussions, young adults were almost 2 times more likely to report "always voting" compared to their peers. The authors of the study remark, "By talking about politics, families teach their children that it is important to pay attention to the world around them—and to take the next step of doing something."

The United States does not have to be a country of extremes. Our political system thrives on compromise between parties and our proudest achievements have occurred under a banner of bipartisanship. The extremes of politeness and incivility constitute a threat to our democracy by increasing polarization and fear. By teaching our children that disagreement is natural, not personal, we can normalize and depolarize political discussion, and ultimately strengthen our democracy.