

# Tips for Navigating Political Differences with Family Members

The current sociopolitical climate has – and continues to – heighten tensions between liberals and conservatives in American society, ultimately contributing to verbal arguments and increased divisiveness. These dynamics have also emerged within families, often causing many VCU students to grapple with standing up for their values/beliefs without negatively impacting their relationships with family members. Because avoiding combative political conversations with family members can feel like the only option, here are some tips for navigating these dialogues with family members.

## During the Conversation

- **The first things to consider: What are your goals in having this conversation with the family member?** Is it to just hear their perspective and gain some information that way? Is it to explain your perspective, provide education, and/or change their views?
- **Avoid all verbal attacks and judgment; take a moment to listen.** You don't have to validate someone else's content that you may find inconsistent with your values, but you do need to at least validate their ability to share their feelings and willingness to be open.
- **Having a coping plan following political dialogues is key!** It is important for you to consider methods of taking care of yourself during political conversations with family members, especially since they can often leave us feeling exhausted, heartbroken, enraged, defeated, and a plethora of other emotions. What can you do for yourself following these conversations that will help you work through these emotions?
- **Attempt to keep the conversation about the topic/issue along, rather than connecting it to a political party.** Bringing up partisanship may actually further increase the divisiveness in the conversation and prevent the listener from hearing and processing the information you have to say, regardless of how valid and well-worded. Stick to the information (e.g., research statistics) at hand to back up your beliefs/claims.
- **People are more likely to side with you if you connect it to their emotions.** People are more likely to relate to and connect with issues that you bring up if you meet them where they are and connect it to their own experiences. For instance, in a situation about unequal pay for women in America, you may say something along the lines of "How would you feel if your daughter worked just as hard – or even harder – than a man, but was paid much less than him?"
- **Stick to and communicate your boundaries.** Boundaries serve as a limit in conversations with others and allow us to protect ourselves emotionally from others. Boundaries that are clearly communicated, and held firmly, help preserve basic human dignity. Examples of boundaries include: (a) dropping topics until the situation de-escalates and tempers cool down and (b) calling out and stepping away from instances of dismissing or degrading one another.



## Following the Conversation

- **Consider the factors that have shaped other family members' political identities.** Consider family member's past experiences, while also asking yourself the following question: "Is there some place where you can develop a sense of compassion for them, for who they are, for how they have given and invested in your life and for how they feel about you?"
- **Reflect on why the family member's disagreement bothers you personally, beyond political or moral reasons.**
- **Work on accepting that the other person is likely not going to change, especially if the argument has become heated.**
- **Change doesn't happen quickly.** Most people have held their beliefs for years; having a few conversations with them will not automatically change their values/beliefs, but you are planting