

They hate each other's political views – so why have they become friends?

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

Imagine that you are in a large group of people who you do not know very well, for example at a wedding. Rank the topics below in order from 1 (the topic you really *don't* want to talk about) to 8 (a topic it's ok to talk about).

- | | |
|----------|--------------------------|
| 1. _____ | a. politics |
| 2. _____ | b. gay marriage |
| 3. _____ | c. racism |
| 4. _____ | d. the environment |
| 5. _____ | e. football |
| 6. _____ | f. the use of face masks |
| 7. _____ | g. veganism |
| 8. _____ | h. smoking |

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

isolated	antagonistic	impasse	compromised	disable	divisive
effort	evangelical	activism	fraught	compassion	polarization

- relating to a form of Christianity in which people express and share their religious beliefs in an open and enthusiastic way _____ (para 2)
- the act of taking part in activities that try to achieve political or social change _____ (para 5)
- feeling alone and unhappy, with no friends to support you _____ (para 7)
- full of problems, difficulties or things that are confusing _____ (para 8)
- physical or mental energy needed to do something _____ (para 9)
- stop something from working as it should do _____ (para 10)
- likely to cause arguments between people _____ (para 12)
- disliking someone or something very much and behaving in a very unfriendly way towards them _____ (para 14)
- the fact that there are two very different groups, opinions or situations that are completely opposite to each other _____ (para 15)
- a feeling of sympathy for someone who is in a bad situation because you understand and care about them _____ (para 15)
- a situation in which progress is not possible because none of the people involved are willing to change their opinion or decision _____ (para 18)
- lost or harmed _____ (para 20)

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Poppy Noor

30 September, 2020

- 1 When Glenn Stanton and Sheila Kloefkorn first met, they knew they were not going to see eye to eye.
- 2 Stanton, the director of Global Family Formation Studies at Focus on the Family, an evangelical Christian values organization, had spent years fighting gay marriage.
- 3 Kloefkorn, on the other hand, married her wife in 2014, on the day gay marriage became legal in Arizona. Having fought for equal marriage for decades, finally being able to marry meant she no longer felt like a second-class citizen.
- 4 But today, Stanton and Kloefkorn are friends. They met through Braver Angels, an organization that encourages people to befriend and understand people who have different political opinions. Today, they laugh when people are surprised at their friendship.
- 5 "I don't believe that Glenn is out to get me in the way I probably would have in the beginning of my activism. I just really believe he feels strongly about the things he cares about, and that's a great thing," says Kloefkorn.
- 6 Making friends with the other side may seem crazy, but Kloefkorn did it for a very personal reason: she is the only liberal in her strongly conservative, evangelical family.
- 7 Growing up, her mother was the only person in her family with the same political views as her, so when she died in 2015, Kloefkorn found herself increasingly isolated. And Trump's election only increased this feeling.
- 8 Stanton's motivations are less fraught. He likes the idea of making new friends and wants to learn how to become a better citizen.
- 9 "Gaining all the friends that we can and learning all of the different stories that I know nothing about: that's worth the effort," he says.
- 10 It can sometimes be tough. It requires workshops, disabling your own ego and sometimes even listening to offensive ideas.
- 11 Nevertheless, thousands of people across the US are returning every week to make friends and broaden their minds, hoping that the country will be healed by learning to get on.
- 12 "Where did we get the idea that we can't be friends with people we don't agree with?" asks Stanton. "I strongly support things I believe deeply. But I really am troubled by the divisive nature of our culture."
- 13 Most Americans today choose to spend their time with people who vote the same way as them. People increasingly look badly upon – even hate – people with different opinions. We find it more and more stressful to talk to people with different views.
- 14 And while it might feel like politicians have always hurled mud at each other, our political culture is becoming increasingly antagonistic: during the 1960 presidential campaign, only 10% of political advertisements were negative; by Obama's second election in 2012, only about 14% of campaign ads were positive.
- 15 This increasing polarization has devastating effects on our capacity to show compassion and on our emotional and political health.
- 16 "When people can only see things from a very negative or judgemental point of view, it limits their ability to see larger possibilities in their world," says Kirk Schneider, a psychotherapist.
- 17 "Continually seeing the other as evil prevents a person from experiencing a wider range of relationships in their life, of discovering new things and also perhaps feeling a sense of wonder about the world," he says.
- 18 Polarization is also dangerous for democracy. Schneider – who is a Braver Angels moderator – says that when societies become heavily divided, they tend to reach an impasse.
- 19 Political divides tear families apart. Some no longer speak to their Trump-voting relatives; they find election season unbearable and don't even want to think about Thanksgiving, when families normally come together to celebrate.
- 20 Depolarizing is not easy. Even after years of trying, some people say they still fear their values could be compromised by talking to their political opponents, that the other side will take over and destroy society and that those they care for could be harmed as a result.
- 21 That is why Braver Angels focuses on techniques taken from marriage counselling to help heal

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wounds. People listen to their partners talk about the stereotypes they have been subjected to, and how it makes them feel.

- 22 "It helps to listen to why people believe what they believe, even though I don't agree. It helps me because then I don't have to feel so bad all the time, especially at family dinners," says Kloefkorn.

- 23 Now, at Thanksgiving, Kloefkorn tries not to persuade, not to rationalize or reason with, but to listen to what her father's fears are. "On a bad day, I just try not to talk about it," she says. "But when it is good, we just focus on the things that we love about each other."

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3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

- Glenn and Sheila ...
 - hate each other and their political views.
 - laugh when others are surprised by their friendship.
 - plan to spend Thanksgiving together.
- What has Glenn Stanton been speaking against for many years?
 - Christianity
 - Democrats
 - gay marriage
- Who was the only person in her family who shared Sheila's political views?
 - her father
 - her mother
 - her brother
- How do most Americans feel about people who have different political views from them?
 - They really dislike – even hate – them.
 - They try to understand them.
 - They mostly don't care about others' political views.
- How have presidential campaigns changed in the past 60 years?
 - They have become more democratic.
 - They have become more compassionate.
 - They have become more negative.
- How does Sheila plan to enjoy Thanksgiving with her family?
 - by only joining them virtually
 - by listening to others' points of view
 - by persuading them to agree with her

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4 Phrases

a. Find and underline the following phrases in the article. Then match them with the meanings.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. see eye to eye | a. intentionally try to cause problems or difficulties for someone |
| 2. be out to get someone | b. become more able to accept other people's ideas and beliefs |
| 3. broaden your mind | c. be in awe of something that makes you feel happy and appreciate life |
| 4. get on | d. say insulting or unfair things about someone, especially to try to damage their reputation |
| 5. hurl mud at someone | e. like someone and be friendly to them |
| 6. feel a sense of wonder | f. agree with someone or have the same opinion as them |

b. Use the phrases to complete the following sentences. Change the form if necessary.

- I _____ well with most of my colleagues.
- We're taking the children to help out at a homeless shelter to _____.
- During the TV debate, the candidates continuously _____ each other.
- I don't _____ with my father on many things.
- When I'm at the top of the mountain, I _____.
- Someone _____, and I think I know who it is.

c. Decide which expressions are the most useful to you, and write your own example sentences that are relevant to your life.

5 Discussion

- In addition to those in task 1, what other topics would you rather avoid discussing at a social gathering? Why?
- Is it ever possible to be good friends with someone whose opinion on one of these topics is completely different from yours?
- How could the world be different if we were all willing to really listen to people who we do not agree with?

6 Webquest

- Find out more about the Braver Angels organization: braverangels.org.
- Scroll down the homepage to watch the video 'Introducing Braver Angels'.
- Which one word is used again and again in the video? Why do you think this word is used so often?