

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

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 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.

stance	polarization	dismissively	vociferously	exacerbate	fraught
staunchly	impasse	berate	partisan	segregated	tag

- expressing your opinion loudly and with force \_\_\_\_\_
- loyally; showing strong belief in something or strong support for something \_\_\_\_\_
- make a problem worse \_\_\_\_\_
- full of problems, difficulties or things that are confusing \_\_\_\_\_
- showing strong support for one particular person, group or idea \_\_\_\_\_
- describe someone or something in a particular way \_\_\_\_\_
- in a way that shows you think that something is not worth the effort \_\_\_\_\_
- the fact that there are two very different groups, opinions or situations that are completely opposite to each other \_\_\_\_\_
- separated according to race, sex or religion \_\_\_\_\_
- an attitude or view about an issue that you state clearly \_\_\_\_\_
- a situation in which progress is not possible because none of the people involved are willing to change their opinion or decision \_\_\_\_\_
- talk to someone in an angry way because they have done something wrong \_\_\_\_\_

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*Our political culture is becoming more and more polarized. In such a partisan world, can we still get along with those whose beliefs we can't abide?*

**Poppy Noor**

**30 September, 2020**

- 1 When Glenn Stanton and Sheila Kloefkorn first ended up in the same room together, 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 vociferously fighting gay marriage.
- 3 Kloefkorn, on the other hand, had 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 wed meant letting go of a life's share of feeling 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 differing 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 Reaching to the other side may sound like self-inflicted pain, but Kloefkorn took those steps for a very personal reason: she is the only liberal in her staunchly conservative, evangelical family.
- 7 Growing up, her mother was the only person she could relate to politically, so when she died in 2015, Kloefkorn found herself increasingly isolated. And Trump's election only exacerbated this feeling.
- 8 Stanton's motivations are less fraught: he sees pairing up with someone different from him as an opportunity. 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 The work can sometimes be tough, revealing, anxiety-inducing. It requires workshops, disabling one's own ego and sometimes even being subjected to offensive ideas.
- 11 And yet thousands of people across the US are returning every week to do the work and broaden their friendship circles and their minds, in the hope 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 work in a very partisan world, and I am an advocate for things I believe deeply. But I really am troubled by the divisive nature of our culture and the way we tag each other so dismissively."
- 13 That might sound simple enough, but the polarization currently gripping America is about more than just disagreement.
- 14 Most Americans today choose to spend their time with people who vote the same way as them. People increasingly look badly upon – even loathe – people with differing views: a 2016 Pew poll found that 47% of Republicans judged Democrats to be more immoral than other Americans; 35% of Democrats said the same about Republicans.
- 15 We find it more and more stressful to talk to people with different views, and people are increasingly also choosing to sort themselves into politically segregated communities.
- 16 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.
- 17 This increasing polarization has devastating effects on our capacity to show compassion and on our emotional and political health.
- 18 "When people become over-identified with a very negative or judgemental stance, it has a way of limiting their ability to perceive larger possibilities in their world," says Kirk Schneider,

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a psychotherapist who has been researching polarization and its effects on the human psyche for decades.

- 19 “Being continually consumed with seeing the other as evil prevents a person from experiencing a wider range of relationships in their life, of having new discoveries and also perhaps feeling a sense of wonder about the world,” he says.
- 20 Polarization is also dangerous for democracy. Schneider – who is a Braver Angels moderator – points out that when societies become heavily divided, they tend to reach an impasse. Political objectives seem less achievable. People who have a less mixed range of views tend to move away from a give-and-take approach to politics and start to endorse the idea that the other side – not their own – is the one that should be doing the giving.
- 21 Political divides tear families apart. Some no longer speak to their Trump-voting relatives; they find election season unbearable and already shudder to think about Thanksgiving.
- 22 Depolarizing is not easy. Some people years into the process say they still have paranoid fantasies: they fear the sum of 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.
- 23 Sometimes those fears materialize: after Kloefkorn joined Braver Angels, her own friends berated her, accusing her of compromising her values by being friends with a man who had opposed gay marriage.
- 24 That is why the Braver Angels model focuses on techniques taken from marriage counselling to help repair wounds. People listen to their partners talk about the stereotypes they have been subjected to and how it makes them feel.
- 25 “It helps to expose myself to other beliefs, and I have an understanding of where people are coming from, 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.
- 26 Now, at Thanksgiving, Kloefkorn tries not to persuade, not to rationalize or reason with, but to take in 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.
  - are related and 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 the opposite political views?
  - They'd like to understand them.
  - They really dislike – even hate – them.
  - They mostly don't care about others' political views.
- Why is polarization bad for society?
  - It limits our ability to be compassionate.
  - It makes it almost impossible to achieve political aims.
  - It is bad for both of the reasons above, plus it divides families.
- What do some of Sheila's friends think about her involvement with Braver Angels?
  - They say she's not being true to her beliefs.
  - They say she should become a moderator.
  - They say she should rather to go to marriage counselling.
- How have presidential campaigns noticeably 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.

1. see eye to eye
2. be out to get someone
3. be subjected to
4. hurl mud at someone
5. feel a sense of wonder
6. shudder to think about something
7. compromise your values
8. understand where someone is coming from

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any you do not know.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own about different topics. Which is the most useful expression for you?

#### 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 a divisive topic is completely different from yours?
- How could the world be different if we were all willing to talk amiably with people who we do not agree with and to really listen to them?

#### 6 Webquest

a. Find out more about the Braver Angels organization, what it stands for and hopes to achieve: [braverangels.org](http://braverangels.org).

b. Scroll down the homepage to watch the video 'Introducing Braver Angels'. Listen for the following terms, and explain what you think the speakers mean by them:

- a cold civil war
- bipartisan
- civic renewal
- your tribe
- patriotic empathy

c. Which one word comes up again and again in the video? Why do you think this word is used so often?