Relative strangers? How to talk politics with your friends and family?

Billy Clark, Sarah Duffy, Graham Hall

**1. Introduction (100 words)**

Talking politics with people you disagree with is always tricky, and it can be especially hard when talking to your closest friends and family. We’re used to seeing professional politicians being negative and aggressive and to seeing their conversations quickly becoming dysfunctional. It can be more upsetting when conversations with people we’re close to go wrong. Some of the problems arise because of how politeness (and impoliteness) works in interactions.

[70 words]

**2. Politeness is more than please and thank you (200 words)**Everything we do can be more or less polite. The way we move. The way we look at each other. And, of course, the words we use. Being polite is not just about using words like ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ (and some ways of using these can be impolite too).

Suppose somebody is swimming too fast for the slow lane in your local pool. There are more or less polite ways to ask them to move and it can be quite hard to know what will work best. A straightforward ‘You’re in the wrong lane’ is less polite than ‘Excuse me, I don’t know if you know about the lanes here. This one is for very slow swimmers.’ In some contexts, though, the more direct form will seem fine and the longer utterance could seem rude (or even ‘passive-aggressive’). To get things right, you need to make the right assumptions about the person you’re talking to.

[156 words] **3. Treat everybody like a stranger (200 words)**

We often don’t use markers of politeness when we say things to people we know well. At a family breakfast table, it can be fine simply to say ‘pass the salt’ rather than saying things like ‘excuse me’, ‘please’ and ‘could you . . .?’ If a family member asks whether you’d like a cup of tea, it can be fine just to say ‘no’. if the offer comes from someone you don’t know well, just ‘no’ would be very risky so we usually say things like ‘No, thanks. I’ve just had one’. Saying ‘thanks’ makes sure that the other person knows you appreciate the offer and giving a reason reduces the chance that they’ll think there is a negative reason (such as not wanting to become too friendly or spend much time with them).

When it comes to tricky topics like politics, the absence of politeness markers is likely to lead to problems.

If a stranger expresses a political opinion you don’t agree with, you’re likely to think carefully about how to respond. When someone close to you does, you might well just say something direct like ‘That’s rubbish’ or ‘I can’t believe you think that!’ Responses like this are very risky. As well as showing that you don’t agree with them (which already risks giving rise to impoliteness effects), this might:

* suggest you don’t mind contradicting them
* suggest you don’t care about upsetting them
* suggest you’re not interested in their point of view

This is just the kind of thing to suggest that you are not bonding well and do not want to be on friendly terms. This can be much more upsetting to someone who thinks they are close to you than it would be to a relative stranger!

[295 words] **4. Some do’s and don’ts (200 words)**So if you want things to go well when talking about politics with your close friends and family, here are some things you might want to do and to avoid.

**Do’s:**

* give the other person space to tell you what they think
* ask them to tell you more about their opinions
* show that you care about their feelings and that you don’t want to upset them
* make it clear that you are listening carefully to what they say
* include politeness markers. ‘Hedging’ markers, which reduce the strength of statements, are useful here, e.g. ‘actually’, ‘maybe’, ‘could be’

**Don’ts:**

* be too direct or blunt
* interrupt them
* suggest that things are simpler than they are, e.g. that there is one definite right answer to a question
* suggest a negative attitude towards them for their opinions (e.g. ‘I can’t believe you think that’)

[149 words]

**5. Conclusion (100 words)**This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are lots of other things you might think about when discussing tricky topics. We haven’t mentioned the content, for example. One mistake we often make is to assume that others know things they don’t know or don’t know things they do (both of which can be really annoying).

It might seem like there’s lots to think about but you don’t need to change drastically to make it more likely that you can talk politely with those closest to you. Even little changes can lead to big improvements in how you get along.

[101 words]

[815 words not counting title and author names]