

Talking politics with strangers isn't as awful as you'd expect, research suggests

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Many of us avoid discussing politics with someone who holds an opposing viewpoint, assuming the exchange will turn nasty or awkward. But having those conversations is far more gratifying than we expect, a new research paper suggests.

Across a series of experiments involving hundreds of U.S. adults, a team of scientists found that individuals underestimate the social connection they can make with a stranger who disagrees with them. The [findings](#) are published in *Psychological Science*.

These low expectations may help to explain why people think those on the opposite side of the political spectrum have more [extreme views](#) than they actually do, behavioral scientists Kristina A. Wald (University of Pennsylvania), Michael Kardas (Oklahoma State University), and Nicholas Epley (University of Chicago) wrote in an article about their research.

"Mistakenly fearing a negative interaction may create misplaced partisan divides," they wrote, "not only keeping people from connecting with each other but also keeping people from learning about each other and from each other."

The experimenters found evidence, through experiments conducted online and in person, that people prefer to avoid hot-button issues, especially with people who disagree with them. People also tend to advise their friends and relatives to avoid such conversations.

But Wald, Kardas, and Epley believed people would find discussing their political differences to be a more positive experience than expected, at least partly because people fail to appreciate the extent to which conversations are informative and draw people closer together.

To test their theory, they asked nearly 200 participants in one experiment for their opinions on divisive political and religious topics, such as abortion and climate change. The researchers then divided the participants into pairs and assigned them to discuss one of these topics. Some participants were told in advance whether their partners agreed with them or not, but others entered the discussions unaware of their partners' views.

All the participants reported how positively or negatively they expected the conversation to be, then engaged in the discussion while being video recorded. Afterward, the participants rated their sentiments about the

dialogue. Research assistants also viewed the videos of the conversations and evaluated them across several dimensions.

As predicted, the participants underestimated how positive their conversation experience would be, but this tendency was largest when they disagreed with their partner. Participants in this disagreement condition also underestimated the similarities in their opinions. Coders who watched the videos of these conversations confirmed that participants tended to stay on topic, and that the conversations were consistently positive whether the participants agreed or disagreed.

In another experiment, the researchers tested their hypothesis that people underestimate how the process of conversation itself—actual back-and-forth dialogue—connects people. To do so, they randomly assigned participants to discuss a divisive topic they agreed or disagreed on, but they also randomly assigned participants to either have a conversation about the topic in a dialogue format or to simply learn of their partners' beliefs on the topic in a monologue format. In the monologue format, each person separately recorded themselves talking about their opinion and then watched the other person's recording.

Overall, the participants underestimated how positive their interactions would be, especially when they disagreed with their partner, the researchers noted. But this tendency was especially strong when people actually had a conversation with their partner rather than simply learning of their beliefs in a monologue. The social forces in conversation that draw people together through back-and-forth dialogue are not only powerful, but they appear to be even more powerful than people expect.

The researchers cautioned that their experiments involved participants talking with strangers; the experiments did not reveal how disagreements unfold among family and friends. Still, they said their findings illustrate the benefits of talking and listening to others rather than typing and

broadcasting in debates on social media.

Our reluctance to discuss our differences denies us some positive social interactions, the authors concluded.

"Misunderstanding the outcomes of a [conversation](#)," they wrote, "could lead people to avoid discussing disagreements more often, creating a misplaced barrier to learning, [social connection](#), free inquiry, and free expression."

More information: Kristina A. Wald et al, Misplaced Divides? Discussing Political Disagreement With Strangers Can Be Unexpectedly Positive, *Psychological Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976241230005](#)

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