Talking at the Table

7 Steps for the Holidays

From the *New York Times* bestseller *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times* by Skye Perryman

The holidays bring us to the table with people we love who don't always see the world the way we do. The purpose of "Tailgate Accountability," an action step in *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times*, is not to win someone over to your side – in the same way that when Cowboys fans play the Packers, they don't try to convert each other. The purpose is to break down our impressions of the "other" to minimize polarization.

01

Find your table.

Where do you go in your life where you interact with people who may not believe all the same ideas or identify the same way you do? This season, your table is likely the one with the turkey on it.

02

Focus on the person, not their politics.

What connections do you share? Do you both care for the same person? Building a relationship based on common interests is helpful to establishing trust and reminding all of us of our common humanity.

03

Explore common ground.

Do you both care about the quality of school that your kids attend? Do you both care about healthcare costs and grocery prices?

04

Get the facts.

Be sure to have the facts and bring them into the conversation, but don't use facts to silence the other person. When you do not know something, readily acknowledge your limitations.

05

Choose being heard over being right.

Your goal should be to melt a little bit of the ice between you, not sledgehammer a chunk off. And as much as you seek to be heard, it's also your job to hear them out.

06

Set and enforce boundaries.

No one – whether a member of the public, your community, or a member of your family – has the right to subject you to hate and demonization. Try: "Your comment is inconsistent with my values. We do not have to discuss it further, but you should know, we do not agree."

07

Understand how the steps work together.

Even if you never agree on a single issue, your focus on building bridges, listening to understand, and finding common ground can help reduce the grievance-fueled polarization that leads people (including ourselves) to make caricatures out of someone with a different background or political persuasion. Practice this when it is safe for you to do so.



Tips & phrases to keep the conversation productive:

1

Acknowledge common emotions.

"I hear you." "I understand that you are afraid."

2

Affirm the person, not the politics.

"I understand that you believe this. I don't agree with that, but I respect you and appreciate you sharing your views with me."

3

Affirm common values (where they exist).

"We both value the future for our kids."
"We both want people to be safe."

4

Don't shy away from *your* values.

"I will listen to you and have an open mind, but I do want you to know where I am coming from."

Keep going.

More facts, conversation starters, and a holiday scavenger hunt can be found at **ordinarypeopleaction.com**.

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Get the Facts

Having the facts shows the other person that you respect them enough to research and come prepared.
Six topics that might come up over dinner:

01 What things cost

- **You might hear:** "Prices are just how it is now."
- **What's true:** Tariffs will cost the typical household more than $1,000 a year, according to the nonpartisan Yale Budget Lab.
- **Say this:** "*It doesn't have to be this way. These costs came from decisions, and decisions can change.*"

02 Health care

- **You might hear:** "Nobody's losing coverage. That's fearmongering."
- **What's true:** Extra federal help for ACA premiums expired at the end of 2025. This year, what people pay each month for marketplace plans rose 58% on average, deductibles hit a record $3,786, and about 4.8 million fewer people are expected to have marketplace coverage than last year, according to the nonpartisan health research group KFF.
- **Say this:** "*At this table, someone is going to need a doctor this year. I want them to be able to afford one.*"

03

Food on the table

- **You might hear:** “Those programs are full of fraud.”
- **What’s true:** 79% of SNAP households include a child, someone 60 or older, or a person with a disability. The average household gets $341 a month, about $11 a day.
- **Say this:** “*Most of the people who rely on these programs are kids, seniors, and people who work. I’d want help to be there for my family.*”

04

Our schools

- **You might hear:** “The federal government has no business in schools anyway.”
- **What’s true:** Right before the 2025-26 school year, the administration froze nearly $6 billion in federal education funding that Congress had already approved.
- **Say this:** “*I want every kid in this family to have a good teacher and a safe school. Can we start there?*”



05

The rules apply to everyone

- **You might hear:** “These lawsuits are just a witch hunt against Republicans.”
- **What’s true:** Of 154 cases with rulings against the administration, 41 were decided by judges appointed by Republican presidents, and 15 of those judges were appointed by Trump himself.
- **Say this:** *“Same rules for everybody. I’d want that no matter who was in office.”*

06

Trans kids and families

- **You might hear:** “Schools are turning kids trans” or “Now I have to ask everyone their pronouns.”
- **What’s true:** No federal law bans gender-affirming care for young people. Sixteen states and D.C. have sued, arguing the administration is pressuring doctors and hospitals into a de facto national ban.
- **Say this:** *“I think those decisions belong to families and their doctors, not politicians.”* or *“It costs me nothing to call someone what they ask to be called.”*

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Thanksgiving Tip Sheet

One way you can join Democracy Forward in reimagining a democracy that works for all of us is to reimagine connection this holiday season. During the holidays, friends and families—often with significant differences of opinion, belief, and life experience—gather to spend time together. As stressful as the holiday season can be, with some intentionality, empathy, and active listening, holiday gatherings can also be a great time to reconnect with friends and family and get to know them better.

Tips for Meaningful Conversation

- [ ] Remember that the hyperpolarization sold to us in sensationalized media coverage often exaggerates the real distance between us and our friends, families, and neighbors.
- [ ] In conversation, seek to understand and to be understood (rather than seeking to be right or convince someone else of your perspective).
- [ ] Try to center curiosity as you engage in conversation.
- [ ] Set boundaries when needed.

Use the questions that follow in whatever way works best for you. Here are some ideas:

- Informally sprinkle these tips and questions throughout your holiday gatherings, discussing them as you cook, drive, decorate, or share meals.
- Have a focused conversation using the questions below. Set aside a chunk of “unplugged” time, where everyone leaves their phone in another room and leans into sharing and listening.

Holiday Conversation Starters

01 What is one of your favorite holiday traditions or memories?

02 How has your experience of the holiday season changed throughout your lifetime?

03 What places or events do you most associate with your favorite holiday?

04 What does your hometown or current community (neighborhood, town, city, etc.) do best for the holidays? Are there parades, markets, community events, productions, concerts, etc. that stand out or that you want others to know about?

05 If you could travel to any U.S. city for any holiday, where would you want to travel and for which holiday? Tell us why and what you imagine that holiday trip would be like.

06 What is your favorite holiday food or meal? What memories or emotions are associated with this food?

07 Do you have a favorite way or place to volunteer or spend time helping others during the holidays? How did this tradition start?

Additional Resources

If your holiday conversations move toward polarized topics or if you are facing challenging relational dynamics, here are some resources that may help you navigate boundaries, safety, wellbeing, and support during the holiday season:

01 Ask the expert: 5 ways to approach political conversations with family over the holidays (Michigan State University)

02 Boundaries, respect keys to political discussions with family (UT Southwestern Medical Center)

03 Healthy Holiday Boundaries (*Psychology Today*)

04 Holidays with a blended family (Penn State University)

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Begin at Your Front Door: Holiday Scavenger Hunt

Are you looking for a meaningful activity to do with family and friends over the holidays? At Democracy Forward, we believe that both democracy and holiday adventures can start right out your front door, so we created a low- and no-cost holiday scavenger hunt designed to help families and friends connect with one another and learn more about, support, and serve their communities.

We hope you'll share pictures and stories of your new holiday memories with us! Take pictures or group selfies at your stops and post them on social media or email them to us. Let us know your favorite activities and what you learned! Tag @DemocracyForward or email us at info@democracyforward.org.

01 Support a local, independently-owned business or restaurant	02 Visit the public library	03 Explore your city hall or town hall
04 Visit a public park	05 _____ (Choose your own! Pick something unique/important to your community)	06 Visit a local historic site, historical marker, or museum
07 Take public transit or walk around a part of your town that you've never walked through	08 Serve at a food bank, clean up trash, weed a community garden, or do some other act of community service	09 Find some local public art—like a mural, statue, free art gallery, or free art museum

Scavenger Hunt Options

- Get a bingo (pick your own three-in-a-row)!
- Black out the grid; do all nine!
- Complete the scavenger hunt over time or spend a whole day exploring!
- Adapt it in whatever way works for you!

01 **Support a local, independently-owned business or restaurant**. While you get hot chocolate at the local coffee shop, do some holiday shopping, or grab some lunch, talk together about the many reasons to support small and independently-owned businesses. Keep an eye out for locally-sourced products and locally-made goods!

02 **Visit a public library.** Libraries are vital community hubs. They provide spaces to gather and free and low-cost entertainment and education for all ages. Taking friends and family to renew or get library cards for the first time or to check out books to read together is a great way to celebrate and support your community this holiday season!

03 **Explore your city hall or town hall.** Government doesn't just happen in Washington, D.C. Explore this interactive infographic to help kids (and adults!) understand what goes on in city or town hall, and then head to yours to explore. While you're there, wish a public servant "happy holidays"—whether a security guard, custodian, council member, clerk, city planner, or mayor, the folks in city and town hall make government happen every day!

04 **Visit a public park.** In a public park, you might find people running, taking pictures, throwing a football, picnicking, hammocking, attending a concert, or many other favorite activities! Shared public spaces make communities healthier and more connected. So, show off your favorite public park to your friends and family or go explore a new one!

05 **Choose your own! Pick something unique/important to your community.** What makes your neighborhood, town, or city special? Sharing a local treasure with your friends and family will both help them know you better and deepen your sense of belonging and pride in your community.

06 **Visit a local historic site, historical marker, or museum.** Exploring a cultural site has educational, health, and local economic benefits, as well as significance for understanding and cultivating identity, memory, creativity, and community. So, visit a favorite place or somewhere new and connect with your community's history!

07 **Take public transit or walk around a part of your town that you've never walked through.** People around the country (and world!) rely on the many forms of public transportation to get around their communities. Many other people walk or bike to get around town. See your hometown in a new way and deepen your connection to it by either taking a new form of public transit or exploring a new part of town on bike or foot!

08 **Serve at a food bank, clean up trash, weed a community garden, or do some other act of community service.** Democracy is people powered! Serving our communities reminds us that our decisions should be rooted in care for ourselves and our neighbors, because we are all connected. So, pick a way to serve and show your community that you love and appreciate them!

09 **Find some local public art—like a mural, statue, free art gallery, or free art museum.** Art expresses the values, memories, hopes, fears, and imaginations of the people and communities that create it, and experiencing and sharing public art is powerful. Take your friends and family to see your favorite local art or search online or drive around to find something new!