

Polite politics? Learn how to talk about issues calmly

By JESSICA YADEGARAN

MCT News Service

Let's face it, today's political climate is a tad tense. These days, what starts as a healthy debate of current events at the dinner table or water cooler can easily turn into an ugly, irreversible brawl.

As Election Day nears, how do you talk to friends, co-workers and loved ones about politics without ruining your relationship? The answer is somewhat bleak.

For the most part, don't bother, says Barbara O'Connor, a communications professor and director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media at Sacramento State University. Unless you can separate opinion from values, "why ruin a good meal?"

"Remember that politics are about values and values are deeply held and resistant to change," O'Connor says. "Families have enough of their own value conflicts without adding political ones to the mix."

Joseph Tuman, a CBS political analyst, disagrees. Engaging each other in political dialogue is vital, he says.

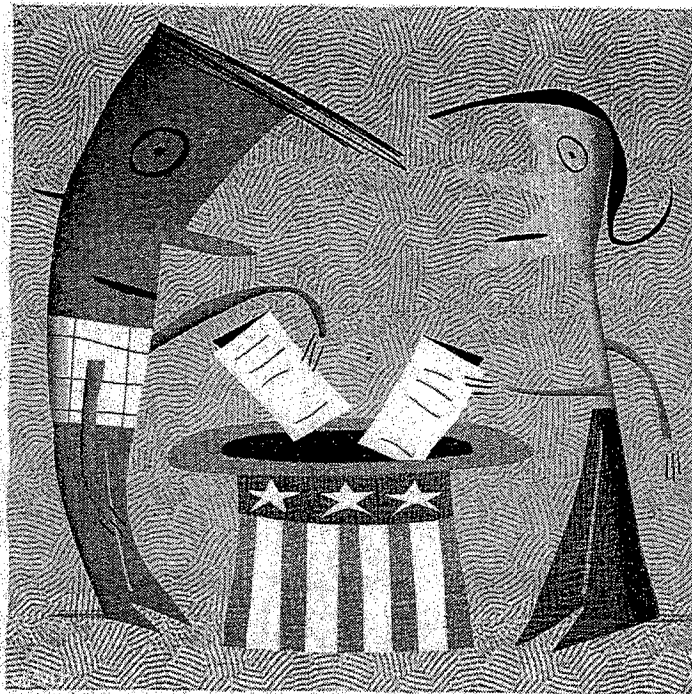
"The real exercise in democracy is not going to be found in watching debates or reading political advertisements," says Tuman, professor of political communication at San Francisco State University. "The place where the rubber hits the road is around the dinner table, in the living room, in the carpool on the way to work."

Tuman teaches his students how to talk about politics without insulting one another. Both experts suggest focusing energy on an exchange rather than a debate. Here's how:

► **Abortion, the death penalty, feminism.** Those are based on values and you can't change people's values overnight, but you can **share your opinion.** "You can always take in new data," O'Connor says.

► **Be specific.** Is it Arnold Schwarzenegger you don't like, or free-market economics?

► **Use science, logic and facts to back up your arguments, not personal attacks.** "If you say something outrageous, you have to be accountable for your



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Polite politics primer

- Share your opinion. It's your right to speak up.
- Be specific in your opinions.
- Personal attacks won't fly. Just the facts ma'am.
- In a discussion, keep focused on one subject at a time.
- When cracking jokes, offer a poke at EACH candidate, not just your least favorite.
- Keep a sharp eye for hypocrites on both sides. Politicians are more alike than you'd think.
- Corruption can happen on both sides of the political arena. Recognize examples from both.
- Engage in question-and-answer discussions. If you're doing all the talking, you won't get anywhere.
- Think about how your words will be received. Will your opinions make you an outsider? Be respectful.
- Take a walk in the other person's shoes. Tolerance is key.

words," Tuman tells students.

► Likewise, if you're countering, **stick to the subject at hand.**

► **Be an "equal opportunity comic."** Tuman says: "If you're going to make a joke about Bush's vocabulary, be sure to make one

about (someone else's) use of voluminous hair mousse."

► **Recognize the hypocrisy.** "There's so much on both sides, they're far more alike than different," Tuman says. "The one thing they share is the desire to keep power to themselves."

► **Find equal examples of corruption.** The shenanigans and behavior that give us so much to debate know no partisan lines. "This time Mark Foley was caught with his pants down," Tuman says. "A few years ago, it was a Democratic president."

► **Ask a lot of questions.** If you're doing all the talking, you won't get anywhere. Plus, it makes you look egocentric.

► **Be logical.** Let your war opinions flow if you're with a group of people who share your value system. But if you're with the VFW, you'd be considered an outsider. Think about it. "If you're out with the girls, you can trash men, but you wouldn't do that in a group of guys," O'Connor says.

► **Above all is tolerance.** "I grew up with conservatives from Texas, and I'm a liberal Democrat," O'Connor says. "You haven't walked in people's shoes. Finding out what brought them to where they are can be very powerful."