

Making Political Discussions Palatable For Association Chapter Members



Most of us can agree that U.S. politics has been a tremendous source of stress for a time now, and that stress won't be going away anytime soon. Your association chapter board might be inclined to steer clear of the topic and be very conservative about the conversations they think should be allowed in the chapter related to it. However, the reality may be different for many of your members; it's a conversation they want, and need, to have, for their emotional health, as well as the health of the industries they work in and serve. And they need a safe place to have it.



It would be a mistake to ignore this elephant in the room and dismiss how politics are impacting your chapter members.

Political conversations and all their angles can get personal and out of control, often quickly. What can you do, say and ask, of members and member guests that will make these discussions more comfortable, and make people feel that your association chapter is not only looking out for them but can be a useful resource?

3 ways to make politics easier on everyone in your chapter

Set some ground rules. To help maintain a sense of calm, it can't be "open season" on politics. Of course everyone will have their opinions, but it's important for the sanity and safety of your members

to decide what you are willing to accept when members and member guests are meeting, and when members are representing your chapter. What kinds of political discourse will you allow? Where can those discussions be had? Can the conversations happen only in a moderated forum on your chapter website, or should they be kept to in-person meetings? Can meeting attendees wear political t-shirts? And what about political signs, even if you're meeting virtually; can someone have a sign in their background?

Show people how to act. This includes providing guidance on ways to be good listeners. When people hear something they disagree with, many want to jump in with their thoughts and feelings without waiting for the other person to finish talking. Stress can escalate in these situations, as people raise their voices, and walk away in the middle of a conversation. A recent article in Sloan MIT Management Review, shared a concept called “jijutsu persuasion,” which they believe can help people have more amenable and rational political discussions. The concept focuses on the idea that, instead of jumping in, people should first take time to understand the opinions of the person they're talking to before they share their own opinions. Once they hear what the other person says, they may realize that their feelings aren't that different from each other, or even if they are different, the discussion can remain civil. Some may even realize that the best course of action is to agree to disagree and move on. Remind members to listen to others' perspectives to get a better idea of what the person is thinking and their reasons behind their feelings.

Provide tools. It's important to try to base political conversations held in your association chapter in respect and a desire to build understanding, while leaving out the personal. Share with your members how these conversations can be productive, learning experiences, if they remember to:

- Be empathetic. Try validating the experiences of the person you disagree with.
- Refocus the conversation. If things seem to be escalating, find ways to move from opposing ideas to ways of working together and partnering.
- Just breath. It's harder to remain angry if you're trying not to pass out!

There is always value in having discussions, political and otherwise, which include opposing viewpoints – people can learn things they don't know, understand people better and perhaps even make a new connection in the process. If your chapter can implement a plan for keeping political conversations, and other potentially edgy topics, civil and help people disagree in more effective and collegial ways, you'll watch chapter relationships blossom and grow instead of devolving into chaos.

