

Field Playbook on Engaging Conservatives in the B...



Field Playbook on Engaging Conservatives in the Bridging Movement

See also, new in 2025: [Insights and Tips for Engaging Conservatives in Bridging Programs](#)

And in Chronicle of Philanthropy: [You Need Conservatives. Here's How to Engage Them in Your Mission](#)

Background - A Note from Pearce

The 500+ organizations in the [#ListenFirst Coalition](#) bringing Americans together across divides consistently express **two foundational, mission-critical challenges to their success: participant diversity and scale.**

We are executing [collective impact strategies](#) to achieve scale. However, **success in achieving mainstream scale would not ensure, and could actually inhibit, the ultimate goal of depolarization and social cohesion if we have not engaged a broadly diverse and representative constituency**, not only *through* our work but *in* our work, at the earliest and highest levels of engagement.

The dimension of representative diversity on which our field as a whole is traditionally most deficient is that of ideology. Specifically, **we observe an almost universal failure to deeply and proportionally engage conservatives in our programs to bridge divides.** As Liz Joyner of Village Square says, "To grow empathy toward those with different worldviews, moral psychologists tell us, we need to have positive interactions with 'the other.' The hard part is getting people who disagree on politics to occupy the same space so that the magic can work... This challenge appears to be particularly thorny when it comes to drawing conservatives into bridging divides as it's most typically practiced."

Instinctive distrust of invitations to engage across divides is pervasive among conservatives who often feel misunderstood, harshly judged, condescended upon, and culturally marginalized ("canceled"). They fear and expect that in a conversation across ideological differences they'll experience this judgment, silencing, and even bullying. We often hear conservatives say they "feel burned" by encounters in the public square amidst this culture of toxic polarization and thus have little interest in taking such a risk. That makes total sense given how some have treated conservatives in recent years.

Anger, contempt, and fear have reached new heights in the current political environment, leading some to dismiss an entire population of a given ideology or presidential preference. In addition to being morally questionable, this mindset is catastrophic to our stated missions. **Our goal of mending the frayed fabric of America is dead on arrival if nearly half of Americans are not well represented in the effort.**

Therefore, we must — understanding that our mission depends on it — proactively seek to engage all those who are underrepresented in our bridging work. Any intention to engage an ideologically diverse and representative group of residents in bridging often requires a very intentional, deep, and early investment in personal recruitment of conservatives, before less targeted approaches inevitably create a space that appears unwelcoming to them. The following pages, an evolving playbook, seek to illuminate a path to success in engaging these fellow Americans.

-Pearce Godwin



Foundational Premises

These premises underlie our basic theory of change and the specific challenge of engaging conservatives:

1. Intuitions come before reasoning so anything we can do to cultivate more positive social connections will alter intuitions and thus downstream reasoning and behavior... If you have at least one friendly interaction with a member of the other group, you'll find it far easier to listen to what they're saying and maybe even see a controversial issue in a new light, shifting to more constructive and respectful disagreement... Personal relationships are probably the most powerful means we have to diffuse disgust. You can be disgusted by a group of people, but then you meet a particular person and you genuinely discover that they're lovely. And then gradually that chips away or changes your category as well. (Jonathan Haidt)
2. People are not divided because some people are good and others are evil (a battleground of forces of light and of darkness). The explanation for division is that our minds were designed for groupish righteousness. We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning. This makes it difficult but not impossible to connect with those who live in other moral matrices. We all have the capacity to transcend selfishness and become a part of a larger whole. (Jonathan Haidt)
3. Our ultimate goals for society cannot be achieved without substantially proportional involvement of major segments of society, including conservatives and Trump supporters.
4. The bridging-divides field is overwhelmingly led and populated by progressives and moderates. Our challenge in engaging conservatives has more to do with us than them. It is NOT because conservatives inherently possess less goodwill for others or less genuine concern for our shared future.
5. If we better understand and proactively welcome conservatives, they will come alongside us in this work.
6. We must be intentional about our approach, language, and tactics to achieve a different outcome than we've experienced to date. Doing and saying things the same way will not produce a different result. These intentional strategic adjustments may not be comfortable or natural but are critical.



Sources of Insight & Table of Contents

The following insights on engaging conservatives have been drawn from conversations with conservatives, academic research, surveys, and conversations with experts such as Jonathan Haidt (social psychologist), Liz Joyner (Village Square), David Blankenhorn (Better Angels), and Bret Baier (FoxNews Chief Political Anchor). **Living Room Conversations** has compiled highlights from this full Playbook into a 2.5 page [Quick Start version](#).

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Playbook on Engaging Conservatives

Understand Conservative Impressions

To better engage conservatives, we must understand the impressions many of them have of our work.

- Conservatives often assume that any “diverse” conversation aimed at “bridging divides” is a ‘liberal thing’ and likely to be ‘a bunch of liberals.’ Currently, *they aren’t wrong!* This is a self-fulfilling prophecy in that if conservatives avoid conversations across divides because they expect to be outnumbered, they will be.⁴
- It is simply a descriptor of the essential philosophical underpinnings of conservatism that they have more confidence in their families and faith communities to deal with problems than government or a shared civic space. What this means is that the very nature of most civility initiatives begins with a frame that many conservatives don’t fundamentally share with their more liberal neighbors.²
- The essence of the problem is that “dialogue” is an almost entirely “blue” linguistic marker and institution. That’s why it’s no accident that liberals are typically eager for “dialogue,” while many conservatives wince at the use of the term and are wary of the concept. The result, if I may be allowed a sports metaphor, is that an effort to bring together tennis players and weightlifters is being led by tennis coaches working on tennis courts. Is it any wonder that the weightlifters are often less than receptive?³
- The entire concept and practice of dialogue—who funds it, who studies and writes about it, who advocates for it, who designs it, who convenes it, and who leads it—is overwhelmingly blue, which of course helps explain why conservatives tend to be wary.³
- Conservatives are generally reluctant to participate in a process in which they are expected as a condition of participation to alter their views. Wellesley College’s Guide for Dialogue Facilitators teaches that “the primary purpose of dialogue is for each person to learn from the other so that each can change and grow.”³
- Conservatives may conclude that the intent is to get them to moderate their views and be coerced into progressive-oriented advocacy.⁶
- Why so many conservatives mistrust this idea is not hard to discover. It has to do with power. In the overwhelmingly blue-dominated world of American dialogue, liberals have it and conservatives don’t. After all, in a typical U.S. dialogue, who gets to frame the questions? Set the tone? Do the coaching on how to be sensitive to others? In Orwell’s “Animal Farm,” we learn that, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” To extend this idea, conservatives considering whether to engage in liberal-sponsored dialogue might be displaying more than simply defensiveness or paranoia to suspect that, “All voices in a dialogue are equal, but some voices are more equal than others.”³
- The very process of workshops, alliances, advocacy fits more comfortably into a liberal wheelhouse. Conservatives are less well oriented to this process.⁶
- The number one issue is trust. Can I trust the experience I’m going to have? Can I trust the experience a friend would have if I invite them? Can I trust that this program won’t be so liberal-dominated that it’s a waste of time?⁶
- Conservatives do not feel understood at all right now. They know people see them as evil, stupid, unenlightened. There is a hunger among conservatives to be heard and understood as having a reasonable point of view.⁶
- Many conservatives feel condescended upon by progressives who believe and treat them as if they’re stupid. Conservatives are not wrong; they’ve seen it. Hillary Clinton called them a “basket of deplorables.” Barack Obama said “they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them.”⁴

- Conservatives often suspect bad faith, that “conversations” with liberals are a thinly veiled attempt to enlighten, educate, change their minds, and convince them why they’re wrong. This expectation of being on the receiving end of condescension or persuasion is a very understandable reason to avoid such an environment.⁴
- Conservatives who are open to reason and authentic human experience report being met with force — name calling, and overwhelming majorities of progressives in some spaces. They deal with fear and anger directed at them and within them, and “get a lot of messages that it’s not ok to be who I authentically am.”⁶
- Brene Brown says “People are using dehumanization as a social justice tool. Offloading anger and fear to dehumanize the other side.” This characterizes the behavior of some progressives right now, feeling scornful and angry. So that’s what conservatives expect to find in conversations across divides.⁶
- In the context of this public outrage, conservatives feel they’re making themselves vulnerable by engaging in this work.⁶
- Hillary Clinton suggested that the virtue of civility is conditional upon power by saying, “Civility can start again” when Democrats regain power.⁴
- We must do more to help conservatives trust that they won’t be yelled and screamed at, that their heads won’t be chopped off.⁶
- Conservatives must trust that the conversation will be a safe opportunity to honestly share their perspective without being attacked.⁶
- Conservatives are inherently less likely to be interested in the new, different, and uncomfortable experience of a conversation across differences with strangers.⁴ Liberals are much higher than conservatives on a major personality trait called ‘openness to experience.’ People who are high on openness to experience just crave novelty, variety, diversity, new ideas, travel. People low on it like things that are familiar, that are safe and dependable... Liberals score higher on measures of neophilia (also known as “openness to experience”), not just for new foods but also for new people, music, and ideas. Conservatives are higher on neophobia; they prefer to stick with what’s tried and true, and they care a lot more about guarding borders, boundaries, and traditions.¹
- Conservatives tend to see the world more in terms of good-versus-evil.¹ Some conservatives feel religious fealty to their principles as black and white. These conservatives have told me, “I don’t need to understand what they believe. I believe what I believe.” Others with the same convictions have nonetheless said, “I’d still be very curious to understand where other people are coming from.”⁴
- Some people suggest that conservatives are more reluctant than liberals to expose themselves to alternative viewpoints. In my experience, I’ve found no evidence to support this thesis and quite a bit, including recent findings from researchers, to discredit it. Most conservatives are just as prepared as most liberals to engage those with whom they disagree. No, the issue dividing the two groups is not *whether* to engage, but *how* they prefer to engage.³
- Charles Krauthammer wrote that “Conservatives think liberals are stupid. Liberals think conservatives are evil.” Consider how these perceptions might drive engagement or lack thereof. If you believe someone is evil, one reaction is to try to convert or kill them (active engagement). If you believe someone is stupid, you’re not going to engage with them, you’re going to stay away.⁶



Cultivate a Welcoming Heart for Conservatives

We must develop goodwill, graciousness, appreciation and empathy toward conservatives as people before positions. If we don't embody that mindset, it will be obvious to conservatives, and we will fail. We cannot fake it. Such humble affection is not only effective but right as we seek to model the future state for which we work.

- Believe in your soul that without deeply engaged conservatives, your effort will lack critical insights required to solve problems – insights liberals are likely blind to (even dangers liberals may be blind to). The shift in your organizing premise will come through clearly to conservatives and it will draw them to you.²
- Think about liberal and conservative policies as manifestations of deeply conflicting but equally heartfelt visions of the good society.¹
- Assume that conservatives, including Trump supporters, want good things for the country, and don't turn a Trump supporter into Trump himself.⁷
- The other side is living in a different moral matrix, and they see a completely different set of facts. And each one sees different threats to the country, and both sides are right. There are a lot of threats to this country, and each side is constitutionally incapable of seeing them all.¹
- John Stuart Mill said, "the besetting danger is not so much of embracing falsehood for truth, as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole. It might be plausibly maintained that in almost every one of the leading controversies... both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though in the wrong in what they denied; and that if either could have been made to take the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct."²
- Understand that we all think we're right — and then step out, even if it's just for a moment, step out. Step out of the moral matrix, just try to see it as a struggle playing out, in which everybody does think they're right, and everybody has some reasons — even if you disagree with them — everybody has some reasons for what they're doing. Step out. And if you do that, that's the essential move to cultivate moral humility, to get yourself out of this self-righteousness, which is the normal human condition.¹
- We often encounter liberal-leaning friends and colleagues doing civic work with incredibly sincere intention, but with a little digging it's clear that their central animating belief is that if one can create respectful conversation and do good fact checking, ultimately those intransigent conservatives will come around to a more liberal view of reality. In our era of jaw-dropping distortion of factual reality, we understand the impulse to see the problem this way (truth told, this describes many of us). But as valid as this aspect of the challenge is, you'll have much more success if you begin with another deep truth we've discovered along the way: conservatives can often see dangers, risks and challenges that liberals can't. All humans have significant blind spots in our ability to perceive reality and like-minded groups of people are even more prone to blindness (a moral tribe actually is glued together around those blind spots).²
- Take a continuous meter reading on whether the environment you've created welcomes conservatives. A lost liberal who stumbles into a gun show wouldn't need to see a single firearm to know they're not with their people. Conservatives will know too. It's a good exercise to think of everything you do through their eyes.²
- Respect that conservatives are going to be less thrilled with your forum or initiative for reasons that are truly legitimate (and have nothing to do with being mean, overly partisan or racist)²
- Challenges notwithstanding, the rewards you'll get for your efforts to welcome conservatives are both essential to your success and will be transformational for you.²

Understand Moral Foundations of Ideology

Moral Foundations Theory unlocks tremendous insight into what animates conservatives.

- Our righteous minds were designed to unite us into teams, divide us against other teams, and blind us to the truth.¹
- People don't adopt their ideologies at random, or by soaking up whatever ideas are around them. People whose genes gave them brains that get a special pleasure from novelty, variety, and diversity, while simultaneously being less sensitive to signs of threat, are predisposed (but not predestined) to become liberals. They tend to develop certain "characteristic adaptations" and "life narratives" that make them resonate—unconsciously and intuitively—with the grand narratives told by political movements on the left (such as the liberal progress narrative). People whose genes give them brains with the opposite settings are predisposed, for the same reasons, to resonate with the grand narratives of the right (such as the Reagan narrative). Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix. They see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere, and it's difficult—perhaps impossible—to convince them that they are wrong if you argue with them from outside of their matrix.¹
- Morality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.¹
- Liberals understand moral good to be constrained primarily to whether it is caring or harmful and whether it is fair. While conservatives also believe that care and fairness are moral goods, they believe those goods must be balanced with other moral goods (loyalty, authority, and sanctity).²
- The six moral foundations are Care/harm, Liberty/oppression, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, Sanctity/degradation.¹
 - The left builds its moral matrix on three of the six foundations (Care, Liberty, Fairness), but it rests most firmly and consistently on the Care foundation. For American liberals since the 1960s, I believe that the most sacred value is caring for victims of oppression.¹
 - Conservatives have the broadest set of moral concerns, valuing all six foundations relatively equally. Their breadth – and particularly their relatively high settings on the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations – give them insights I think are valuable, from a Durkheimian utilitarian perspective (i.e., recognizing that human flourishing requires social order and embeddedness).¹
- I suggested that liberals might have even more difficulty understanding conservatives than the other way around, because liberals often have difficulty understanding how the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations have anything to do with morality. In particular, liberals often have difficulty seeing moral capital, which I defined as the resources that sustain a moral community.¹
- John Stuart Mill said of liberals and conservatives: "A party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life." I believe that liberalism—which has done so much to bring about freedom and equal opportunity—is not sufficient as a governing philosophy. It tends to overreach, change too many things too quickly, and reduce the stock of moral capital inadvertently. Conversely, while conservatives do a better job of preserving moral capital, they often fail to notice certain classes of victims, fail to limit the predations of certain powerful interests, and fail to see the need to change or update institutions as times change."¹

- Conservatives are the “party of order and stability,” in Mill’s formulation. They generally resist the changes implemented by the “party of progress or reform.” But to put things in those terms makes conservatives sound like fearful obstructionists, trying to hold back the hands of time and the “noble human aspirations” of the liberal progress narrative. A more positive way to describe conservatives is to say that their broader moral matrix allows them to detect threats to moral capital that liberals cannot perceive. They do not oppose change of all kinds (such as the Internet), but they fight back ferociously when they believe that change will damage the institutions and traditions that provide our moral exoskeletons (such as the family). Preserving those institutions and traditions is their most sacred value.¹
- But I think what we’re seeing now, increasingly, is a divide in all the Western democracies between the people who want to stop at nation, the people who are more parochial, people who have much more of a sense of being rooted, they care about their town, their community and their nation. And then those who are anti-parochial and who want more global governance, they don’t like nation states, they don’t like borders.¹
- Conservative caring is somewhat different—it is aimed not at animals or at people in other countries but at those who’ve sacrificed for the group. It is not universalist; it is more local, and blended with loyalty.¹
- I think the big issue, especially in Europe but also here, is the issue of immigration. And I think this is where we have to look very carefully at the social science about diversity and immigration. Once something becomes politicized, once it becomes something that the left loves and the right hates — then even the social scientists can’t think straight about it. Now, diversity is good in a lot of ways. It clearly creates more innovation. The American economy has grown enormously from it. Diversity and immigration do a lot of good things. But what the globalists, I think, don’t see, what they don’t want to see, is that ethnic diversity cuts social capital and trust.¹
- I’m very enamored of yin-yang views of human nature and left-right — that each side is right about certain things, but then it goes blind to other things. And so the left generally believes that human nature is good: bring people together, knock down the walls and all will be well. The right — social conservatives, not libertarians — social conservatives generally believe people can be greedy and sexual and selfish, and we need regulation, and we need restrictions.¹
- Conservatives believe that people are inherently imperfect and are prone to act badly when all constraints and accountability are removed.¹
- Conservatives tend to favor economics and religion as explanatory models of human conduct, whereas liberals, particularly in recent decades, have become significantly more friendly than conservatives to explanatory models rooted in psychology and the other social sciences.³
- Devoted Conservatives, Traditional Conservatives and Republicans generally place more emphasis on military service and on the symbols of the flag and national anthem. By comparison, Progressive Activists, Traditional Liberals and Democrats on the whole place more emphasis on addressing injustice.⁸
- Charles Krauthammer [wrote](#) that “Conservatives think liberals are stupid (hopelessly naive). Liberals think conservatives are evil.” These generalizations are understood by moral foundations theory and remind me of what my mom used to joke, “If you’re conservative and 20, you don’t have a heart, if you’re liberal and 40, you don’t have a brain.” Apply these generalized stereotypes as helpful rules of thumb: liberals tend to be more heart-led, while conservatives tend to be more head-led, or at least operate and speak as such despite the fact that ultimately we’re all more intuition/emotion led (the elephant).⁴

Take Care to Use Widely Resonant Language

The language we use to describe the problem, our mission, and our work can make or (more easily) break our best intentions of engaging conservatives. A single word can send all the wrong signals and shut down a potentially rich relationship before it ever begins.

- In all of these initiatives it's easy to attract center-left and center; very hard to draw anyone on the right, so that's what you should aim for with your language.¹
- Once upon a time, liberals and conservatives used many of the same words and phrases to convey the same or similar meanings. Today, not so much. How Americans speak increasingly reflects their political identities. Though we seldom fully realize it, not just our ideas, but the very words and phrases we use to express them typically come out of our mouths already distinctly colorized as red or blue, signaling to others our partisan political affiliation as clearly as if we were wearing ID badges.³
- Conservatives, as we all do, follow their intuition first as their factory default setting, so in a highly divided political world, they can immediately sense liberalism in how you speak.²
- Consider the stereotypes that liberals are more heart/emotion driven and that conservatives are more head/logic driven. Make a clear-eyed, tangible, and practical case for change and engagement to resonate with conservatives, including individual and American consequences of inaction. Why should conservatives care based on their interests, not yours?⁴
- If you're liberal, don't use your mother tongue. Direct appeals to "unity" can have an unintended effect in this dysfunctional, highly siloed political environment – where individual words even have tremendous partisan valence. Efforts to unite across division – often led by citizens who lean liberal (for reasons that have nothing to do with the worth of conservatives) – unintentionally and understandably frame their efforts using language that draws in like-minded liberal audience. In this way their framing unintentionally conveys to conservatives that the project is a liberal one, predisposing a failure to engage conservatives adequately.²
- Don't call it a dialogue. The word "dialogue" is so deeply blue I doubt anything can be done at this point to depolarize it.³
- The point that listening first to understand will make you a more effective advocate for your own position is a strong argument for conservatives.⁵
- Anything that sounds like attention to care and fairness actually drives conservatives away, as they intuitively understand "this is not my tribe."²
- Making matters worse, liberals perceive that in many cases conservative moral values are, in fact, amoral, responding to this perception with even more care and fairness (sometimes "virtue signaling"). This caring on steroids often has the unintentional effect of creating a backlash with conservatives rather than building the bridge these liberals truly do seek.²
- To conservatives this kind of an over focusing on "care" and "fair" feels immature (lacking in broad situational awareness and some critical qualities a healthy society must have to function, like authority) as well as too often weaponized by social justice warriors.²
- The more conservatives hear "care more," the more they actually seem to do the opposite; the "meaner" liberals think conservatives are, the stronger liberals catapult the "care" into the next round of hostilities. This is the cycle of equal and opposite reactions where the worst in our politics now resides.²
- When a conservative hears "care more," it implies that they care less and puts them on the defensive.
- The conservative values template tends to produce a style of expression called "inner-directed." *I am what I am—let others think what they will.* In contrast, the liberal values template tends to produce a style of expression that is more "other-directed." *I am what I am—in sensitivity to others.*³
 - This difference may help to explain why liberals frequently endorse "dialogue," stress the importance of "diversity" and "inclusiveness," and emphasize the importance of a "safe space" in which group

members do not feel attacked or distressed. Their style often tends toward the invitational. Many of their sentences end with question marks. They see the value of sitting in a circle.³

- Conservatives, by contrast, often mistrust such relationship-centered words and usually prefer alternative language. When it comes to speech, they tend to favor clear, formal, and comparatively fewer rules. They desire to speak their minds as freely as possible and are often wary of being coached on how to be more sensitive. They don't particularly value sitting in a circle. They explain themselves. Their style often tends toward the declarative. They often de-emphasize the emotional and the psychological aspects of conversation in favor of attempts at more formal rationalism.³
- There's the language-colorizing influence of each side's basic attitude toward the other. I do believe that the great conservative sin in our public discourse today is anger, while the great liberal sin is condescension, and each sin is reflected in its side's style of expression. For conservatives, the sin is evidenced mainly in the harshness in the voice, the insistence, the heat. For liberals, it's in the dulcet tone, the style that seeks graciously to educate those in need of it.³
 - These less overt but more primary forms of colorization reveal themselves in tone, style, and body language as much or more than they do in specific words or phrases. In this sense, speaking red or blue is more dialect than lexicon. At the same time, the political messaging is clear enough. If you're paying attention at all, the vibes can't be missed.³
- In my experience, blues speak bluer than reds speak red. By this I mean that blue vocabulary strikes me as more specialized, with a longer list of technical terms.³
- All evidence notwithstanding, neither blues nor reds seem truly prepared to believe that they speak in dialect. In my experience, blues tend to understand their partisan dialect as mainly an expression of expertise, while reds tend to understand theirs as mainly a form of plain speaking.³
- To get out of the mess we're in, we don't need to agree about politics and we don't need a shared morality. But we do need a shared moral language. For this shared language constitutes our only pathway toward recognizing each other's humanity and seeing what unites as well as what divides us. Today, we see each other through a glass, darkly. Our aim must be to find those words which allow us to see each other face to face, in the light.³
- There are some hot-potato words you might want to avoid in your official communications (or at the very least balance them with some words that speak to conservatives). It isn't that conservatives don't care about some of these things, it's just that in this polarized environment they've become toxic markers of partisanship and should be used only with caution by bridge builders who truly want to build the gosh darn bridge.²
- Liberals tend to be a little more flexible with language variations than conservatives unless it sounds mean to them (care/fairness moral foundations)²
- Check the titles of your programs with both liberal and conservative friends.²

Note: I, Pearce Godwin, am always happy to serve as your Quick Conservative Resonance Check.



Language that's colorized blue, elitist, and/or off-putting to conservatives.^{1,2,3,4}

- In how we talk about our work...
 - Civility
 - New unpublished research Listen First Project conducted with Civil Politics found that “civility” is rated negatively by both conservatives and liberals. Of the 80 terms tested, only four (white privilege, fake news, brutality, and poverty) were rated more negatively than “civility.” We’ve anecdotally experienced “civility” as deeply toxic and offensive to progressive activists.
 - Civil discourse
 - Dialogue
 - Diversity
 - Equity
 - Inclusive/Inclusion
 - Transpartisan
 - Safe space
 - Tolerance
 - Identity
- In discussing issues...
 - Social justice
 - BIPOC
 - Antiracist
 - Privilege
 - White privilege
 - White supremacy
 - Marginalized
 - Racist
 - Institutional racism
 - Sustainability
 - Climate change
 - Women's health



Language that resonates with conservatives.^{1,2,3,4}

- In how we talk about our work...
 - Mend the frayed fabric of America
 - Among the ways Pearce has described this movement, this is the one that best appeals to the right, with its sense of decline, decay.¹
 - Note: Jon's feedback here led us to zero in on this phrase in describing our movement—"to mend the frayed fabric of America (*right resonant*) by bridging divides (*left resonant*) one conversation at a time"
 - Focus on American greatness, what made this country great, what can make us strong, the wisdom of the founders, also hinting at competition with other nations; if we can't come together and start sailing our ship rather than fighting each other, we're going to lose out to the other ships.¹
 - Note: In light of Jon's feedback here, consider how brilliant "Make America Great Again" is.
 - Strong words appealing to higher moral virtues
 - Patriotism, Love of country, the flag
 - Family values
 - Personal responsibility
 - Free speech
- In discussing the issues...
 - American exceptionalism
 - Fiscal responsibility
 - Religious liberty
 - Self-sufficiency
 - Self-reliance
 - Self-discipline
 - Dependency
 - Competition
 - Military Power

Consider How to Reach Out to Conservatives

We are unlikely to attract conservatives as easily as liberals, so reaching out to conservatives deserves especially thoughtful intentionality.

- The first step of getting people with diverse views in a room together has proven a frequently experienced circular challenge – we don't like each other because we don't spend time together and we don't spend time together because we don't like each other.²
- Your team has to include a minimum of two people with an authentic ongoing relationship who disagree on politics. There is no group of politically like-minded people, no matter how well meaning, who will ultimately succeed in an endeavor lacking some honest feedback from the other side. A truth-telling conservative partner will tell you important things that you will never imagine otherwise.²
- Build an expanding bipartisan network incrementally. Grow an intermediate-sized ideologically and demographically diverse group that essentially creates the social "glue" that will ensure you draw from different tribes when you either go big or go long with the public. Early on, there was much vouching we had to do for each other with potential panelists, elected officials and members of the public. They were suspicious.²
- Having an elected Republican leader publicize the event resulted in the highest ever turnout of conservatives.⁶
- Look to a small key group of catalysts to become separate "hubs" to build a diverse audience. The very problem we face is that ideologically diverse groupings of people aren't naturally occurring "in the wild" so you can't just assume diverse people will naturally show up for you because you want them to. Creating diverse groups now requires a new intentionality.²
- A "cell" structure has long been powerfully deployed to create worldwide terror, or if you'd prefer something morally worth emulating, cells create the close connections that form the organizing ballast of megachurches. Point is, it works. Almost all of us can find 7 people who look and think differently than we do and invite them to join us to do something. Once the engineered diversity starts shaping attendance, its momentum makes a diverse audience now grow naturally. Voila, you've essentially begun formation of a new tribe.²
- Consider partnering with an ideologically diverse church congregation or a politically diverse group of churches. Churches are institutions that have more street cred for conservatives than the average town hall does. Additionally, church partners naturally help you speak to hearts, not heads.²
- The biggest why for my involvement as a conservative is my faith, bringing people together and loving others, that's what we're called to do.⁶
- Suggest that conservatives come in groups, to alleviate fear of being on an island, alone in the lion's den.⁶
- Keep a conservative bench. You're more likely to lose conservatives along the way. Take the time to get feedback from conservatives you've lost.²
- Don't ask or expect people to change their views. I think we should stop saying that red-blue engagement means being open to moderating your views or changing your mind. Most conservatives, for understandable reasons, simply won't sign up for such a project. It's true that part of the beauty of this activity is that participants often do enlarge their thinking—if not about issues, then at least about each other. That is a kind of change in thinking, but not a flat either/or sort of change. But why is it necessary to imply upfront that participants are likely or expected to "change and grow," as opposed to simply permitting change and growth to happen or not happen freely, organically, and individually, as unforced and unrequired results of the activity rather than as a required component of it?³
- A liberal recruiter told me that "there are qualities found in the conservative camp that we as a country need sorely. Society needs your perspective" and that asking people to moderate their views isn't part of the mission. That I didn't need to betray myself to fit in. That made all the difference to me getting involved as a conservative.⁶



- Change who's in control. This reform is by far the most important, and without it none of the other changes are likely to make much difference. If today we put into one arena every person in America who funds, organizes, leads, studies, or advocates for structured red-blue conversation, you can be sure that more than 90 percent of them would be liberals. And here's the hard but inescapable truth: Meaningful red-blue engagement in America is flatly inconsistent with this fact. That's why this socio-political reality must change dramatically and at every level, from who pays, to who plans and designs, to who attends, to who evaluates and publicizes—otherwise what the nation needs most simply will not happen.³
- An incredible strength of so many conservatives we know is that they've got their guiding principles and they're a little too busy following them to make it to an evening forum. We've learned that ultimately it's our deep embrace of what they bring that's unique that's made all the difference.²
- You can do everything right and it's still likely your engagement will lean left (spending an evening immersed in dialogue across diversity can seem to conservatives like a liberal thing to do). But it is critical that you stay highly aware of the imbalance – it will affect every decision you make toward keeping conservatives comfortable and lead to increasing success attracting conservatives into your project over time.²
- “In terms of targeted outreach to conservatives...the short answer is trusted messengers, framing, and listening. The key is really having many conservative connectors with credibility within their own in-groups who've experienced our work before and want to champion their networks participating in it.
- “We find that many conservatives are deeply hungry for this work but suspicious of it and to some extent anxious about it (“will I be subjected to a firing squad, called a bigot, etc., or [will I] actually be able to express myself and say what I really think.”). That distrust is easy to overcome when the outreach is done through people they trust.”⁹
 - Speaking of specific strategies Resetting the Table has used: “For this particular workshop, we had doing our recruitment: a few Evangelical pastors and their wives, a libertarian connected to strong libertarian networks, a conservative Reform rabbi, working-class people we connected to through our work in WI and Iowa, Black conservative networks, etc.

In the past, in reaching new demographics who are under-represented in the bridge-building space, we've done a kind of cultural immersion. For example, we did a Listening Campaign in WI and Iowa in which we conducted 330 interviews and reached out to nearly every church in 30 counties, gun clubs, veterans associations, agricultural associations, chefs that source from farmers, etc. We built relationships through these efforts with a lot of people who are hungry for this kind of work but don't tend to be around the table.”¹⁰

Consider How to Engage Conservatives

Once conservatives have joined your program, ensure they have a positive experience.

- The primary focus on bridge building efforts has to be on creating conditions that make people from feuding tribes want to like each other. Once those positive relationships exist, we want to hear others out, which changes everything.²
- I think you have to make an effort — that's the main thing. Make an effort to actually meet somebody. If you start by acknowledging, if you start by saying, "You know, we don't agree on a lot, but one thing I really respect about you" or "... about you conservatives, is ..." And you can find something. If you start with some appreciation, it's like magic. If you do that, then the conversation goes really well, and it's actually really fun.¹
- When trying to bridge divides, don't just jump right in. Don't bring up morality until you've found a few points of commonality or in some other way established a bit of trust. When you bring up issues of morality try to start with some praise or with a sincere expression of interest.¹
- No matter how good your logic, you'll never change someone's mind when they're in combat mode, too. Because our righteous minds so readily shift into combat mode, the rider and elephant work together smoothly to fend off attacks and lob rhetorical grenades of our own.¹
- When discussions are hostile, the odds of change are slight. The elephant leans away from the opponent and the rider works frantically to rebut the opponent's charges. But if there is affection, admiration, or a desire to please the other person, then the elephant leans toward that person and the rider tries to find the truth in the other person's argument. The elephant is easily steered by the mere presence of friendly elephants, more so than objections of its own rider.¹
- Empathy is an antidote to righteousness although it's very difficult to empathize across a moral divide. You must be warm and see things from their perspective. Elicit new intuitions not new rationales.¹
- Keep teaching and coaching to a minimum. Here I mean that we should significantly cut down on things like correcting people who make insensitive remarks, intervening when someone in the group appears to be uncomfortable, or in other ways instructing participants on how they should speak to and act toward one another. Grassroots democracy is an often rough but essential activity, and my colleagues and I have found that, while it's important to establish basic conversational guardrails to insure civility, it's also important to let people speak freely, doing as little policing as possible. On a practical level, there are definitely some things more counterproductive than liberals trying to teach conservatives how to speak, or vice versa, but not many.³

Sources

¹ Jonathan Haidt ([Righteous Mind](#), [TED Talks](#), Conversations with Pearce Godwin)

² Liz Joyner ([Welcoming Conservatives](#), Conversations with Pearce Godwin)

³ David Blankenhorn ([Blue Said. Red Said](#), [My Debate with "Dialogue."](#) Conversations with Pearce Godwin)

⁴ Pearce Godwin (Personal experience and conversations with other conservatives)

⁵ Bret Baier (Conversations with Pearce Godwin)

⁶ Better Angels Organizer call on the challenge of recruiting Reds

⁷ Dr. William Doherty's Better Angels guide for Blues talking with Trump supporters

⁸ American Fabric: Identity and Belonging report from More in Common ([PDF](#))

⁹ Melissa Weintraub, *Resetting the Table* (via email correspondence with Pearce Godwin)

¹⁰ Ibid.