

**ASHLEY:** What are the most effective ways to speak with family members who don't see the world the way you do? Let's say you voted for Trump, but your brother or parents went for Biden. How do you get past those differences that divide us so deeply, especially at the holidays? That's what we're going to talk about.

This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

**RICHARD:** And I'm Richard Davies. Today, a mother who voted for Donald Trump and her daughter who supported Joe Biden and put out a yard sign in a mostly Republican neighborhood. They discuss with each other and with us how they deal with difference.

**ASHLEY:** Rebecca Kearn is a managing partner at the nonprofit group, Living Room Conversations. She's a founding member of the Utah Dialogue Practice Network. Becca is also fully engaged in the nonprofit venture of raising five kids with her husband in Provo, Utah. She's the daughter.

**RICHARD:** And Robbie is her mom. Both are Mormons, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Robbie has six adult children and has received awards for her community projects. She lives with her husband in Alpine, Utah. First question to both: Robbie, you're the Republican?

**ROBBIE:** Yeah. Oh, yeah.

**ASHLEY:** And Becca, you're the Democrat?

**BECCA:** I'm all over the place. I'm a little more varied. Even with the local candidates, I voted for a Libertarian this time. I voted for someone from Utah United Party. I voted for Republicans, and I voted for Democrats.

**RICHARD:** Robbie, you're the Republican, as you say, but that doesn't always mean you go for all the party's candidates.

**ROBBIE:** I think, in the past, if I didn't know a candidate, I definitely voted a straight Republican ticket. These last two elections, I have not, and I don't know if I feel more like, "Really? You're saying you want this person. Do you even know them?" If I don't know someone on the ballot, some of the other elections, I will leave it blank, and I never did before.

**ASHLEY:** In this election a few weeks ago, Becca, you voted for Biden, and, Robbie, you went for Trump. Was that a hard choice?

**ROBBIE:** I would say probably my hardest decision in all my years of voting that I've ever made, and wasn't even, after I voted, that happy with my vote. So it was a very strange election for me, and it was very hard. And I think, for me, I just weighed so

many things. It was more deeply not the politics as much as it was the personalities. Both candidates, I just had to put aside them, and I basically voted for the vice president. I looked at them thoroughly and their stands and kind of voted on that term.

**RICHARD:** Robbie, have you ever voted for a Democrat?

**ROBBIE:** I have. I have, and that's probably a different question, but I was raised in a pretty good family that was pretty much, "Vote the candidate," and yet, there was definitely very strong party affiliation growing up in my family and how I voted in the past.

**ASHLEY:** And when you say you voted for the vice president, you mean you voted more for Mike Pence than Donald Trump?

**ROBBIE:** Yes. I'm sure the embarrassment factor is there. We've lived overseas several times. Donald Trump, for me, is sort of an embarrassment and how people perceive him and some of the things he says, I wish someone had just told him to lay off all his Twitter feeds and all his comments. If it sounds shallow to say I think Pence would be more presidential, I do.

**ASHLEY:** What else do you like about Pence? We didn't hear a lot about Pence, I feel, because Trump sort of sucks all the air out of a room.

**ROBBIE:** Correct. I just think, to me, he seems—and I could be totally wrong—he just seemed more moderate. I think he has the best interest. I liked him, and to be honest, if I compared the two vice-presidential candidates, I liked him better than Kamala because he fits more my traditional Republican views, where she, to me, is very not middle-of-the-road Democrat.

**RICHARD:** Becca, we've not spoken with you yet. You voted for Joe Biden. Was your vote difficult?

**BECCA:** Yeah. Listening to my mom talk, I know something that we... We talked a lot throughout this whole process, and one of the things she brought up was a concern, which I think led to the vice-presidential pick—correct me if I'm wrong, Mom—was that both presidential candidates, they would end up being the oldest president to take office. I heard that on a larger stage, as well, just this concern over whether you end up with someone with the Vice President having to step up into the role of President during the next term. So I think, Mom, wasn't that, for you...

**ROBBIE:** Definitely, definitely.

**BECCA:** The decision was hard for me, as well. I'm unaffiliated. So I go back and forth. I voted for President Obama. I voted for Mitt Romney. I look at the whole package. That being said, I wasn't overly excited about either of my options again this election. I think

that what I've discovered is that everyone has a line they have to draw in the sand. There are things about Biden that I didn't necessarily like or resonate with. There are things about President Trump that I definitely don't agree with.

Then, at the same time, I always try to pull back and think about, "Well, the people that support him, why are they so drawn to him? What is it about him that resonates with people?" And I think there is a certain draw to someone who seems more common, who's not politically really polished, who just tells you like it is. I can appreciate that. I can appreciate him challenging some of the things that we've done for so long, that that would appeal to people, like pulling out of the Paris Accords, where it's just like he's going to do things his own way. I can appreciate how that might appeal to people.

For me, the line in the sand was kind of like what my mom referred to. So many of the things he says rub up against my personal moral values. It's all about him, and I think that when you have a position of power, part of that responsibility is to look out for the people who have no power. I think, for me, immigration was definitely something that I had to draw a line, or the refugee population, the migrant population, these people that are on the fringes and are more marginalized. I've worked with marginalized populations before. So that, for me, was where I had to draw the line.

**RICHARD:** Becca, you went public with your decision.

**BECCA:** For the first time, I put a political sign in my yard, which I've never done before, and it was terrifying. My mom knows the first time I put it up, my in-laws are definitely conservative, and I took it down before they came to our house the first time because I wasn't ready to talk to them about it. Whereas, with my parents, even though I knew that they were back and forth and have traditionally been more Republican as far as their voting goes, I felt like I had the relationship enough to leave it when they came and talk about it and how it was scary. Yeah.

**RICHARD:** Becca, talk about that. You put a yard sign up for Joe Biden, and you had a range of reactions, is it fair to say?

**BECCA:** Yeah, I definitely did have a range of reactions. We live right by a high school, and one morning I was taking my 14-year-old to school, and these high school students walked by, and they started swearing about the sign while my son was outside, which was a little nerve-wracking.

**RICHARD:** To be clear, you live in Provo, Utah, and that's a pretty conservative area.

**BECCA:** It is overwhelmingly conservative. There was a little pocket of a little area in Provo that went blue, that showed up as a little blue hotspot. Other than that, it's Park City and Salt Lake City, and the rest of the state is overwhelmingly conservative and Republican. Down the street, around the block, there's someone... I thought there were

only five. There were actually seven Trump flags hanging from their roof. One is Trump as Rambo with a giant machine gun and everything. So I think that seeing all of that, part of putting the sign out for me was, "There's another option," just to show it's okay because I think, a lot of times, the predominant faith religion, which is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons, gets conflated with being Republican, that being a good Mormon is being a good Republican.

For me, that was really hard this election where, because part of my voting went for, "This is my moral compass. These are the values that I care about, and I don't think President Trump represents that at all." So it was like my faith was pulling me to vote one way, whereas my community overwhelmingly, their faith was pulling them to vote another way. So it was really tricky, and I was really nervous. But I did have people that I hadn't even talked to, they would walk by walking their dog and be like, "We saw that you put your Biden sign out. Thank you. There aren't very many of us." So I think it was affirming in the end, but it was also nerve-wracking.

**ASHLEY:** How did it go down with your church family? Did you discuss with people at church, or did they discuss it with you, perhaps?

**BECCA:** Well, right now, no one's actually meeting. So there's less of that space to have small conversations or bring up politics.

**ROBBIE:** And I would say, I live in a different area but again very predominantly Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormons, and for my neighborhood and area, I think a lot of people, of my friends, felt the exact same way I did. It wasn't a happy vote. We may have voted for Trump, but it wasn't that any of us were passionate about it. I think, when I talk to my friends and stuff, we really wish there'd be some alternatives. Is it time that we have more than two parties? I know on the ballot, I saw all these other parties listed that I had no idea about.

It was very interesting and not as many signs as I would've thought around where I lived. It, to me, showed there was a little bit of apathy. There were a lot of people that, we may have voted for Trump, but we weren't going to put a sign out just because it wasn't a firm vote. It wasn't like it used to be.

I remember, as a child, I mean, I think I was in junior high, the Nixon campaign headquarters was down the street. Every junior high kid went. It was door-to-door. We got buttons, we did this. In high school, I remember, as a community, you saw the headquarters. You went in. There was all this excitement, and you campaigned, and I think the way campaigning, the way the whole political process is now, it's virtual, it's remote, and of course, with the pandemic, it made it very different this year.

**RICHARD:** Both of you sound very reasonable, but you do have political differences. How do you talk about them? Does it ever give rise to tension?

**BECCA:** Maybe from siblings right now there's some tension just because of the way that they lay out their ideas. I would say that, for me, it's more about seeing the human being, both in how I consider the issues, it's seeing the human beings that are affected by issues or by policies, and the same thing when I'm talking politics. It's about seeing the people that I'm talking to. So, if you have a really good relationship of trust, if you're able to be honest and authentic with each other, then I think it's easier to talk politics because I can understand all the reasons that lead you to vote the way that you vote or, with my parents this election cycle, it was understanding how conflicted they were and how much thought and how much processing led to their ultimate decision. I was able to separate it from the larger rhetoric of: if you vote this way, you must be fill-in-the-blank.

**ROBBIE:** That's just what I was going to say, Becca. I think we have developed a family culture that we can talk about difficult things. Especially with this election process, I think we kind of went on the journey together. Becca ended up doing the fork in the road and going one way, and we did the other, but we were both pretty honest in things that we would find or hear or see. I just think having that open communication also helped.

**ASHLEY:** And do you think that communication, did that originate in the way you raised your kids? I'm really curious about how you grew up as a family, whether you raised your kids to talk about current affairs at the table, how that came about.

**ROBBIE:** I'll let Becca answer.

**BECCA:** My dad really emphasized the importance of communication, and it wasn't something that I always appreciated. I remember, even, there was a time when I didn't like face-to-face communication, which is interesting based on what I do for a living now, but he would write me a note. I would read the note, and then I would respond. It was easier for me, but it was so important that there was communication for him that he was willing to think outside the box. There are six of us children. I'm the oldest, and we all have very different lives. We all look at things in a different way and bring a different perspective. But I feel like we were always able to be ourselves.

**ROBBIE:** Yeah, I would agree. I think, too, one of the practices we did was at the dinner table. Dinner table was not just a time to complain or whatever. Becca's whole life, we do highs and lows. So you go around the table, and you say what your low was today and what your high was today. I think that opened up communication at a really young age. I think Becca still does it with her kids. We still do it, and we do it with our grandkids. I just think having that open communication, because on the political spectrum, I think, of the six kids, five of the six all voted for Biden. I'm perfectly fine with that, and we all have talked about it.

**ASHLEY:** This is Let's Find Common Ground, and we're speaking with Becca Kearn and her mom, Robbie Lawler. I'm Ashley.

**RICHARD:** And I'm Richard. I love that highs and lows suggestion I just heard. I think I'll try it with our family, see if I can weave it in without sounding awkward or pretentious.

**ASHLEY:** I think that might be a bit of a challenge. Coming up, Robbie and Becca share Thanksgiving tips for families with different opinions who might be struggling with how to talk about politics and the changes that are coming.

**RICHARD:** Our podcast is a production of Common Ground Committee. Find out more about our mission and events at [commongroundcommittee.org](http://commongroundcommittee.org).

**ASHLEY:** We'd like to hear from you about what you'd like to hear more of or less of. Tell us in your podcast reviews, or email us at [podcast@commongroundcommittee.org](mailto:podcast@commongroundcommittee.org).

**RICHARD:** Now more from Becca, who voted for Biden, and her mother, Robbie, who voted for Trump.

**ASHLEY:** What are some Thanksgiving or Christmas for families to try and bridge their differences?

**BECCA:** I think that the biggest thing is how you set up the framework. I think that you can lead out with your uncertainties, in a way, invites uncertainties from others. When you lead out with your convictions, that you're just absolutely certain about everything, it doesn't leave a lot of room to engage. So I would suggest something like, "This political season has been exhausting, and for me, personally, it's been hard. I feel like it's been emotionally exhausting. There's been so much polarization. What has it been like for all of you? What did it feel like for you to be in this election?" instead of jumping into a certain candidate or a certain political policy issue. It could be a nice place to just set up this framework. And, "I want to learn from all of you. I want to understand how you went through this, I mean, this whole year, really." There's so many different things to grab that people have gone through.

But you don't have to talk about politics during Thanksgiving. If you don't have this background of sharing highs and lows, of developing these communication skills with your family members, maybe you start with that, with building communication skills. Start with a high/low, and start with something that builds empathy rather than diving straight into politics if you're not there yet.

**RICHARD:** And mom's advice?

**ROBBIE:** I would say the other conversation is moving forward. I mean, the election has happened. It is what it is. Let's move forward. I can remember, as a young child, another heated political contest. I remember hearing my parents say, "Well, just so you know, if XYZ gets elected, we are moving to Australia." And I think that, even though

we didn't move to Australia, the sky didn't fall, I think a lot of people need to just take a deep breath. We're going to be okay. We're going to be okay as a nation. There's lots of checks and balances. Whoever got elected, that is our new president, and let us support them. Let's move forward, and, as a family, being able to talk about those things.

The other thought I just have to mention because Thanksgiving is about gratitude is we've done this exercise, and that is say what you're grateful for or thankful for, for each person. I think there's nothing greater than when you can hear those things about yourself from people that love you around the table. I think that's a great bridging thing, especially if there has been a lot of tension, to look at what things within our family circle or pod or whoever's gathering virtually or in real, we are thankful about that.

I would say that about Becca. She makes me think, and I did think of things this political turn. It didn't change my mind, but I am open. I did think about things, a few issues, differently than I might have.

**ASHLEY:** I was going to ask each of you, actually—Becca, as far as you're aware, have you ever changed your mom's mind about anything?

**BECCA:** I would say that I get really passionate about issues that affect people. So I don't know that it would translate to a specific policy, but I think that I definitely influence my parents in that way. Last year, I had a nonprofit initiative called Court Watch. We took volunteers into the courtroom and watched proceedings dealing with domestic violence, sexual assault, and childhood sexual abuse. I think that maybe that was an issue that my parents weren't necessarily aware of or aware of the scale that it was happening in our state.

So I think that, definitely involving them in that... And we had monthly community conversations throughout that process for people that were volunteering, as well. So I would say things like that, I think that I have impacted her and the way she thinks about issues and maybe votes. But I don't often pull for a specific candidate.

**ASHLEY:** Robbie, what about you?

**ROBBIE:** Oh, I was definitely influenced. I mean, when would I ever go sit in a court? I was just amazed. This is my community, and the level of domestic violence... Becca kept saying, "Mom, you have to be unbiased when you're looking in." I was like, "Aah!" It was shocking on the level of domestic violence and opened up something else because they all came back. I mean, 99% came back to drug abuse.

So we have a huge issue in our country that has to be addressed. Anyway, I get emotional because these were people's lives, and I think I'm most passionate about children and protecting them. I think I have passed that on to Becca. I did a lot of

national work years ago in that spectrum, and I'm very passionate that we have to protect our children.

**BECCA:** Yeah. I think another one that was huge that wasn't necessarily my mom or I, but I grew up in Maine, and immigration was not on my radar. There is not a mass influx of immigrants coming into Maine. So it just wasn't something I thought about, and I was like, "Yeah, we've got to strengthen the borders," definitely a more conservative approach, I would say. Then my sister married someone who was undocumented, who just got his citizenship a couple weeks ago after a very long time. But knowing him and his story, I would say, impacted both of us and how we vote on that.

**ROBBIE:** Yes.

**RICHARD:** Let's talk about political stereotypes. Journalists like myself usually speak of politics in terms of Right versus Left or how the two parties oppose each other. But you're speaking with a lot more nuance, and that might surprise some people who think that all Mormons or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are Conservatives and all think the same. Becca?

**BECCA:** Yeah, and I think, honestly, that was the biggest concern putting the sign out, that people would make assumptions about who I am based on this outward label that I just gave myself and my household. And I think it's the same thing even in family dynamics, that on some level, we hear a piece of information and maybe because the media reinforces that polarization or those stereotypes, we assume intent behind how people vote or what people do.

I think that's another really interesting thing to explore at your table over Thanksgiving, is: what assumptions do you think people make about you, and what would you want people to understand about you? This extreme polarization doesn't help anything, and because we get these more extreme voices or stereotypes, it makes it hard just to see each other and to understand that there is definitely more nuance in what people are bringing to the table and how they're making decisions.

**ROBBIE:** I think if we take a step back from all the biases, whether that's religious, whether it's political, whether it's whatever, I do, in the end, feel we have more in common than we have apart. I have friends who are extreme Right and Left. I can still have great conversations. Still, at the core, we have more in common than we have apart, but it's getting those in-common conversations going that, a lot of times, we can't look beyond what we're seeing right up here in our faces.

I worked in the media. Sometimes the media doesn't help that. We are so anxious to get the more exciting news or confrontation or whatever that we're not always looking for what's behind and that common ground. Becca and the kids, we lived outside the United States for many years. You get a whole different perspective when you do.

Again, I had more in common with many of those people, but on the surface and up front, you would think, "Well, she's got nothing in common. She's a Mormon living in a Catholic country," but I had many more things in common than some of my neighbors I have right now. So I think making it human, making it personal... when Becca talked about the border situation, I grew up right in San Diego. I was all for it. Let's close the borders. Let's stop this. But when it became personal, I changed my mind completely. I had a different perspective.

**ASHLEY:** It seems like you both really value listening.

**BECCA:** Yeah.

**ROBBIE:** We also both like to talk.

**RICHARD:** We heard that.

**ROBBIE:** I have three daughters, three sons. If you ask Becca's husband, Jamie, or any of the spouses, it's super hard to get a word in at our family table.

**BECCA:** I feel like we're a long line of storytellers. We enjoy telling stories. So I think stories are really compelling for us to listen to and hear. And I think it doesn't necessarily have to change your opinion. It just allows it to be more complex, and I think that we've grown so accustomed to wanting to simplify things to have a really easy, straight answer that we start to push back on that complexity. Then you get those echo chambers on social media and all of those things that just make you feel safe in that really simple understanding of a stereotype, a policy, a whatever it is. And when you hear someone's story, it shifts, and I think it just lends well to our family because we are all storytellers. We love telling stories and listening to stories.

**RICHARD:** Well, Becca Kearl and Roberta Lawler, thanks for sharing your story and your similarities, your differences, and, above all, your love for each other.

**ASHLEY:** Yeah, it's been so nice. Thank you.

**ROBBIE:** Well, thank you. This has been great fun.

**BECCA:** Yeah, thanks for having us.

**RICHARD:** Becca Kearl and Robbie Lawler. If you'd like to learn more about how to navigate awkward family gatherings, there are some helpful hints and tips at [livingroomconversations.org](http://livingroomconversations.org). They have a page on their website called Great Gatherings.

**ASHLEY:** They say great conversations begin with good questions. We can't argue with that.

**RICHARD:** Thanks for listening to Let's Find Common Ground, produced for Common Ground Committee.

**ASHLEY:** Happy holidays!