

The Living Room Conversation Pilot Project

In Partnership With



As citizens and neighbors, we have so many shared dreams and aspirations for our family, community and the future. Yet, too often, listening to the media and political leadership we hear more about what divides us than what unites us. Our nation has become increasingly divided. Many Americans now listen primarily to news that is shaped to conform to their own beliefs and spend time with friends that share the same political affiliations. Even internet searches tend to be filtered to reinforce what we already believe. When we have dinners with family and friends that have different world views, more often than not, we look for safe subjects to talk about.

How many of us find that we barely know people who have different political or ideological points of view than ours? How many of us shy away from discussing topics where differences of opinion are likely to arise? The core inquiry of the Living Room

Conversation Pilot Project was, *What is required to have a 2 ½ hour, small group, living-room conversation between an equal number of people with differing beliefs that is respectful, overcomes defensiveness, reveals common ground, generates a heartfelt connection (based on shared values, concerns and interest) and leaves participants willing to talk further?* The Living Room Conversation Pilot Project included a focus on energy independence/climate change to demonstrate that meaningful conversation is not only possible among people with differing opinions; it is deeply appreciated and transformational for many participants.

"I've really been impressed by this conversation and this group! I didn't think it would be so easy. We did what most people out there are not doing. If I had these kinds of interactions, I would interact more in my community."

BH, California (conservative)

The Experiment

The Living Room Conversation Pilot Project was initiated to test the hypothesis that people can come together as friends and friends of friends, and through a self-guided structured process have a meaningful conversation about a highly charged political issue. The experiment was designed around a set of six observed living room conversations, two each in Colorado, California and Washington. Each conversation would have a self-identified progressive and conservative co-host, who would invite two of their friends or family for an evening of conversation on the topic of energy independence/climate change.



Recruiting participants for the conversations and designing the conversational process began in November of 2010. The project launched on three fronts simultaneously: 1) recruiting co-hosts through personal networks; 2) creating co-host and participant recruitment and invitation materials; and 3) pulling together the conversation design elements that would assure participants of a positive experience. Once one co-host was identified, they were supported and coached in their efforts to recruit a co-host/partner with a different political perspective than theirs. When both co-hosts

were recruited, they each then invited two others to the conversation who share their political worldview. Materials were designed (see attachments) to help the project team solicit/invite co-hosts and to support the co-hosts in recruiting/inviting the other participants. While the recruiting was underway, the project team developed the process design for the conversations. Conversation process and agreements were developed based on those suggested by World Cafe and Conversation Cafe. A fact sheet on energy independence/climate change entitled, “A Future with No Regrets,” was created with the intention of offering participants some common material as a basis for discussion.

Key Findings

People can and will come together through their social networks to have an intentional conversation, designed to accommodate differences, on a difficult polarized/politicized civic issue....but it is not easy.

To the surprise of the project team’s initial expectations and enthusiasm, it was difficult to recruit people to serve as co-hosts. Both progressives and conservatives reported that they had few friends whose political beliefs were different than theirs, and even fewer who were willing to talk about the differences, let alone take the step of co-hosting a living room conversation where the difference was invited into the conversation with conscious intention. Similarly, it was difficult for co-hosts to recruit participants. On numerous occasions people reacted negatively to being labeled as either progressive or conservative.

Barrier/Hindrance One: Silo mentalities are far deeper in daily life and in social networks than realized.

Related to the phenomena of the silo mentality, was the social convention of politeness, of not talking with family and friends about topics where there was already known disagreement—the practice of staying with safe subjects of conversation. Many of those invited to the experiment declined the invitation because of fear around trying to talk to others about a difficult issue. There was concern that it would not be worth the risk of potentially harming a valued relationship. The fear of being attacked and/or humiliated by *the other* for their political beliefs and their perspective on climate change was often given as the reason for not participating.

Barrier/Hindrance Two: Many people are deeply intimidated and anxious about their differences.

Despite these difficulties, the experiment worked! In this sampling of eight (six observed, two unobserved & without field notes) conversational experiments (There were two unobserved conversation conversations initiated by highly motivated hosts. We have less data from these conversations so at times we will report only on the 6 conversations that were observed.) , small groups of people were able to self-facilitate a conversation on a polarized political topic and experience a sense of connectedness and improved understanding of one another and the topic. Without exception, the project team - as observers -and the participants have been inspired by the conversations that happened. Each conversation offered insights about our differences and provided participants with a meaningful experience.

“The more we address our concerns, the solution will unveil itself. It all starts with a conversation.”

RS, California (progressive)

Though the sample size is small, the Living Room Conversations Pilot Project has demonstrated success in designing a conversation model that creates conditions in which people have respectful and productive conversations on a difficult and polarizing political issue. The eight Living Room Conversations hosted through this project have proven to be effective at building relationships that cross divides and enabling participants to get to know one another and find areas of common concern that could inspire cooperation in our communities.

Patterns and Themes

Several patterns and themes emerged through the six observed conversations convened with project staff observers.

The basis of friendship and trust was a key success factor in getting co-hosts and participants to commit to attending the event. In every conversation, project staff heard about and witnessed the anxiety participants felt around the unknown of meeting up with people they did not know and who likely held values, beliefs and position different from their own. The strength of the relationship between the co-hosts and the project staff doing the recruiting and between the co-hosts and the participants they recruited was the glue that held the process together. A willingness to suspend the anxiety and in some way to trust trust was another key success factor. In all six of the conversations, the participants discovered that they felt more related and connected to one another than they had anticipated. Some discovered that they could enjoy each other and perhaps even be friends. Interestingly, the participants who expressed the most anxiety going into the event tended to be the most enthusiastic about meeting again for another conversation.

“The Future With No Regrets” information sheet did not create a basis of common ground on the facts or the science of climate change but did catalyze a shared sense that the science and the facts were so politicized and polarized as to not be a helpful basis for discussion. In almost all of the conversations there was some pushback on information sheet, but in no case did that pushback derail the conversation. Rather, participants accepted their differences in perspective and beliefs and found common ground around the complexity of the issue. Participants shared interest in discussing how to come together as better stewards of the earth and chose not to discuss who or what might be to blame for climate change.

The possibility that ordinary people could have a meaningful conversation on a polarized political issue was appreciated. Somewhat to their surprise, participants found that they could have a constructive discussion about a difficult, politicized civic issue. In all six conversations it was demonstrated that people don't have to be policy experts to have a meaningful conversation that can generate policy options/solutions. Though the focus was not to make commitments to a community action after one conversation, all groups expressed a desire to get together again for further conversation.

People responded to the invitation to co-host and/or participate out of friendship and trust more than attraction to the topic of energy independence/climate change. This supports the project's hypothesis that it is possible to convene conversations on difficult civic issues through social networks. In fact, the topic of energy independence/climate change was often more off-putting than attractive to people. Feedback suggested choosing topics such as job creation and the economic downturn or the decline in the quality of public education. Questions about the political neutrality of the science of climate change made it difficult to find common ground, thus shifting the conversation to an inquiry towards what could the participants agree on. In all the conversations a sweet spot was found in which people sensed the interconnectedness of the issues that mattered to them and realized that they had more in common with each other than expected. In every case the popular belief that we are more divided than united gave way; the fear of demonization of one another so prevalent in the media was transformed into a humanization of each other. The good feeling that was created in the conversation inspired participants to want to have more conversations of this kind in their community and on a variety of civic/political issues.

What Happened

Over the course of six months, six conversations with project staff as observers were convened in three states (Colorado, California and Washington) and two conversations without project staff observing were self-generated in two states (New Hampshire and North Carolina) in response to interest from

friends of the project initiator. There were six participants in six of the conversations and five participants in two of the conversations. Generally speaking there was the desired balance between conservatives and progressives.

Participants in all eight conversations reported having an enjoyable and meaningful conversation, in which they felt heard with respect and therefore safe to say what was true for them. Many participants expressed a degree of surprise that it was possible to “go so deep” with people they did not know and expressed gratitude for the experience. More than half indicated a desire to have more conversations of this nature.

No one expressed having changed their basic point of view on either the validity of the science of climate change, nor on the relative importance of this issue compared to the others about which they were also concerned. Those who believed climate change is the most important issue we face as a country remained passionate in their concern. Those for whom job creation and economic stability was the most important issue to resolve remained committed to that priority. For some, ranking jobs/economy and/or education over climate change reflected a desire to focus on a more immediate and practical issue that they could actually understand and work on, whereas climate change seemed overwhelming in its complexity and inevitability.

There was little disagreement among participants that something was happening in regards to climate change. There was some disagreement on the role of human activity being the primary, causative factor creating global warming. Some/many felt that even if they did agree that climate change was happening, it was already too late to reverse the negative impacts that have been projected. These participants were interested in figuring out how to respond and prepare for the changes that are coming, more so than trying to figure out how to reverse or slow climate change. This perspective created openings to talk about the importance addressing energy consumption and conservation through implementing clean or green energy technologies and through localizing economies at the community level as the best hope for us to be able to take care of each other when we go through what appears to be an inevitable disruption to our current way of life.

Many participants acknowledged and appreciated that being able to talk about their differences in values and beliefs did help them better understand how what they believe has implications for what they believe to be true--what the facts are. In four of the conversations there was a genuine improvement in understanding the difference in world view or paradigm between conservative and progressive in regards to the importance of individual vs. shared responsibility for the wellbeing of one's self and others. Interestingly as well, in four conversations a shared value of caring for one another during hardship and adversity was discovered. Through the course of the conversation, contradictions and paradoxes in our belief systems began to be revealed.

Scope of Project

- Reach out and invite friends-of-friends for a relationship-based, self-hosted and self-guided living room conversation among people with different perspectives.
- Focus the conversation first on creating a basis of shared sense of personal purpose and passion.
- Allow everyone to express and take in the full range of one another's priority issues, concerns and/or visions on any topic and at any scale.
- Move the conversation to a subject that may also be highly politicized; for this pilot project, the subject was energy independence/climate change.
- Steer away from debating differences of opinion or differences of priority concerns and instead listen for and discover intersections of common concern.

- Explore the ground that has been established for opportunities to continue the conversation, gather for socializing/further relationship building, and/or perhaps find opportunities to cooperate on a new or existing project or initiative.

Core Questions

How can the topic and purpose of the conversation be framed and themed in a neutral and common sense way to provide a strong foundation for the invitation and for conducting the conversation?

What are the essential ground-rules for the conversation to support active listening as demonstrated by openness, curiosity, and respect?

What are the essential questions, sequence of questions, and participant agreements that provide a structure of safety to guide the conversation and provide an effective vehicle for most of the people in a small group to connect with their own and each other's deep, heartfelt concerns/commitments about what is happening now relative to climate change and the legacy the current generation is leaving for our children and grandchildren?

What are the sub issues/areas/aspects related to climate change where an opportunity for further conversation and even action would be welcomed?

What process guidelines are effective for returning a group to a respectful and productive interaction if one or more people become upset, belligerent or even enraged?

What are the various next steps that groups might invent and agree to based upon finding common ground/concern and passion?

Process Design Elements

The Process Design Elements focused on social connections as the basis for the conversation, rather than on issue knowledge or political activism. It was designed to base the conversation on social connectedness to allow for a basis of trust to exist among participants prior to the conversation taking place. In actual practice, this was only partially accurate. Trust existed between the observer, who recruited the co-hosts, and between the co-hosts and their invitees. Trust was the basis for the conversations to take place and the strength of that trust allowed the conversations to move forward.

The Process Design for the Living Room Conversations Pilot Project focused on five steps:

1. Recruiting Co-hosts

"This evening exceeded my expectations. I was skeptical when you asked me to co-host. I expected more strident views from the other side and thought that they would expect the same from my side. This was a great dialogue and I have genuine interest in continuing."

DW, California (conservative)

For this initial experiment, Changing the Game relied on personal networks to recruit co-hosts in three states: California, Colorado and Washington. Initially, we believed it would be simple and easy to ask friends to host conversations, have them find a co-host and voila! A conversation would happen and the project would move forward rapidly. What we envisioned would take a matter of weeks has took months. We found that the majority of people we asked about co-hosting a conversation did not have friends that were politically across the aisle with whom they would be comfortable asking to co-host a potentially contentious political conversation.

2. Inviting Participants

The anxiety around “differences” that created difficulty in creating co-host partnerships also arose around the process of inviting participants. Even when willing co-hosts had friends with differing political beliefs, their friends were also often fearful of being attacked and therefore declined to participate. This was a common theme among progressive and conservative invitees, with no distinction.

Others simply did not think the idea of this kind of conversation sounded fun and didn’t want to spend their time with this project. This was true of people with all political beliefs, but more pronounced amongst conservatives.

3. The Evening Process

The first three rounds of questions were designed to deepen participant’s knowledge of one another, prior to introducing the topic of energy independence/climate change. The questions in these rounds invited people to share what had meaning and purpose for them, to find common ground, areas of common concern and/or to learn more about each other’s lives.

In the fourth round, the questions allowed participants to share their beliefs and positions on energy independence/climate change. In this round, information on the topic was offered in the form of a piece titled, “A Future With No Regrets.” Questions were suggested to help participants to query for clarification only, not to push for advocacy or persuasion.

Rounds five and six were designed to help participants to debrief the experience, reflect on what they had heard and learned, and discuss what, if anything, they would like to do going forward. The question sets invited participants to share what they heard from other participants and the possibilities they saw for common ground. The question sets opened up space for participants to acknowledge and appreciate each other, the conversational process, and their learning from the evening.

4. The Fact Sheet

A sincere effort was made to develop a simple and unbiased ‘here are the facts about energy independence & climate change’ information sheet. We did, however, get input from many participants, both progressives and conservatives, that the information sheet had a liberal bias. Regardless of the response to the information sheet, it did open up discussion around how science can be politicized and rendered suspect to people, regardless of political beliefs. Where one set of facts would be presented, another set of facts would contradict. And while participants could mostly agree that science does overwhelmingly suggest that climate change is happening, the participants may or may not be swayed by science that suggests that human activity is the primary cause of the climate change that is occurring.

Since our goal was to have participants seek and hopefully find common ground, we did find that common facts may or may not be a requirement in finding a common ground of concern about what to do to address the impacts of climate change. We did discover that shifting the focus to the theme of energy independence and to admit to public confusion on climate change, did tend to create a more neutral approach to the subject.

Despite our best attempts, the prepared fact sheet was not received as being neutral, but as being biased towards a belief in human caused climate change. For the groups that formed, some groups chose not to use the Fact Sheet at all, others lightly. One group actually came to a common agreement that all science on the issue has become so politicized that no one knows what to believe, and there is no authoritative source which cannot be repudiated.

5. Host & Participant Feedback

Feedback from all participants and hosts was overwhelmingly positive. Many indicated they would

return to another conversation or host future conversations. Once they had the experience of the LRC, they didn't want to leave. Most people stayed after the end of the conversation for 30-90 minutes.

- ❖ *"Just having 'the other side' becomes human to each other. I don't think anyone's mind was changed, but at least we understand what the 'other side's' thought process is."* -AS, Colorado (declined to state)
- ❖ *"Delightful people whom I really enjoyed, regardless of their views."* --IR, Colorado (conservative)
- ❖ *"I learned that people who on the surface, didn't seem to share my views, did share my views."* -SG, California (Independent)
- ❖ *"I found we all had a common ground consensus for America and our community."* -MK, California (conservative)
- ❖ *"Regardless of background or political results, all want better results."* -AK, California (progressive)
- ❖ *"I felt I had a say and an opinion and was respected for it."* -MK, California (conservative)
- ❖ *"I appreciated the other people's opinion and felt a sense of belonging."* -MK, California (conservative)

What's Next?

We have been inspired by this pilot project and are eager to launch the next generation of Living Room Conversations. We will experiment with making the inviting process more streamlined and appealing to an even broader audience. We will explore how to support and encourage ongoing dialog as well as collective action for groups that are so inclined. The 2.0 Living Room Conversation project will include a comprehensive website to chronicle progress and provide resources for anyone or any organization that is interested in using the Living Room Conversation materials. Because this is an open-source format we look forward to sharing all that we learn and constantly refining and improving our materials with the help of a growing community of conversationalists. Partners in conversation design and promotion for Living Room Conversations 2.0 are Joan Blades and Amanda Kathryn Roman; for more information please contact Joan joan@momsrising.org or Amanda amandakathrynroman@gmail.com.

"I have been so hungry for so long for a chance at conversation like that. I would be interested in having ongoing structured and facilitated conversations which would delve deeper into some of the different perspectives which we discussed last night."

MS, Colorado (progressive)

Project Team Biographies

Judith Ansara MSW has been a consultant, trainer and executive coach for over 30 years. Co-founder of the Peacemaker Institute in Boulder, CO., she has served as a trainer for the Rockwood Leadership Institute and facilitated organizations and leaders including Search for Common Ground; Center for Community Change; Just Vision; UNICEF; Spitfire Strategies and the City of Boulder. Judith has taught at Naropa and the University of Massachusetts, and has been a long-time faculty at centers like Omega, Hollyhock and Esalen. She has special mastery in program design and facilitation, interpersonal and inter-group communications, and transformational coaching and group processes.

Joan Blades is a co-founder and President of MomsRising.org as well as co-founder of MoveOn.org. She is the co-author of *The Custom-Fit Workplace* published for Labor Day 2010, as well as *The Motherhood Manifesto* which won the Ernesta Drinker Ballard Book Prize in 2007. She has been engaged in transpartisan dialog on both a formal and informal basis since 2004. Last century she co-founded Berkeley Systems best known for the flying toaster screen saver "After Dark" and taught mediation at Golden Gate Law School.

Debilyn Molineaux is a founding team member of Changing the Game, currently on assignment as Executive Director for Coffee Party, USA, a national movement tackling to issue of money in politics. She is also an Executive Coach, Business Consultant, Facilitator, Marketing Strategist and Political Independent. As a local candidate in 2003, she attracted people from all ideologies to work on her campaign. She is a collaborative partner with Transpartisan Center, based in Washington, DC. Debilyn has 20 years successful experience in advertising, marketing and small business ownership.

Walt Roberts is partner with Transformation Systems International and a founding team member of Changing The Game. Walt lead the design and facilitation effort for the Transpartisan Alliance's American Citizens Summit and served as a member of the Alliance's core leadership team. Walt has extensive experience advising and supporting groups, institutions, communities and "movements" that are working cooperatively to generate their desired/shared future together strategically, intentionally and collaboratively. Walt offers innovative and unique approaches to the design and orchestration of alliances, coalitions, forums, conferences, keypad polling assisted deliberation and decision making, citizen engagement processes, and generative change initiatives.

Heather Tischbein has been a citizen activist and community builder for over three decades. Her youthful passion for working for peace and the well-being of children and for advocating for sustainable farming and food justice has evolved to a broader focus on the well-being and resilience of human communities and the eco-systems that support all of life on Planet Earth. Heather has worked in an executive director capacity for several nonprofits in start-up or start-over phase, bringing a developmental perspective to the work. Heather currently serves as the acting, interim executive director of the Co-Intelligence Institute. She has also served as executive director of the Western Colorado Congress in Grand Junction, CO; as interim executive director of the Climate Neutral Network, and as executive director and board chair of the Cold Spring Conservancy, a biodiversity reserve located in the Columbia River Gorge. She is the sole proprietor of Dragonfly Dialogues, providing facilitation, mediation and organizational development consulting services. Heather is certified as a mediator with Community Mediation Services of Vancouver-Clark County, WA, where she also serves on the board of the Nonprofit Network of SW Washington.

Amanda Kathryn Roman is a Co-Founder of Changing the Game: Power, Politics & Participation, mom, wife, game-changer, transpartisan grassroots organizer, commonsense patriot and crunchy conservative. Roman has been making a difference as a political bridgebuilder for the past sixteen years working to awaken the spirit of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. She is passionate about shifting the corrosive political power and conflict game to one aimed at fostering constructive and cooperative solutions for our country and our communities. Amanda is a firm believer in the power of genuine, respectful conversation and is committed to empowering others to have those conversations.

For more information on the Living Room Conversation Pilot Project please contact:

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