How to Win Every Argument
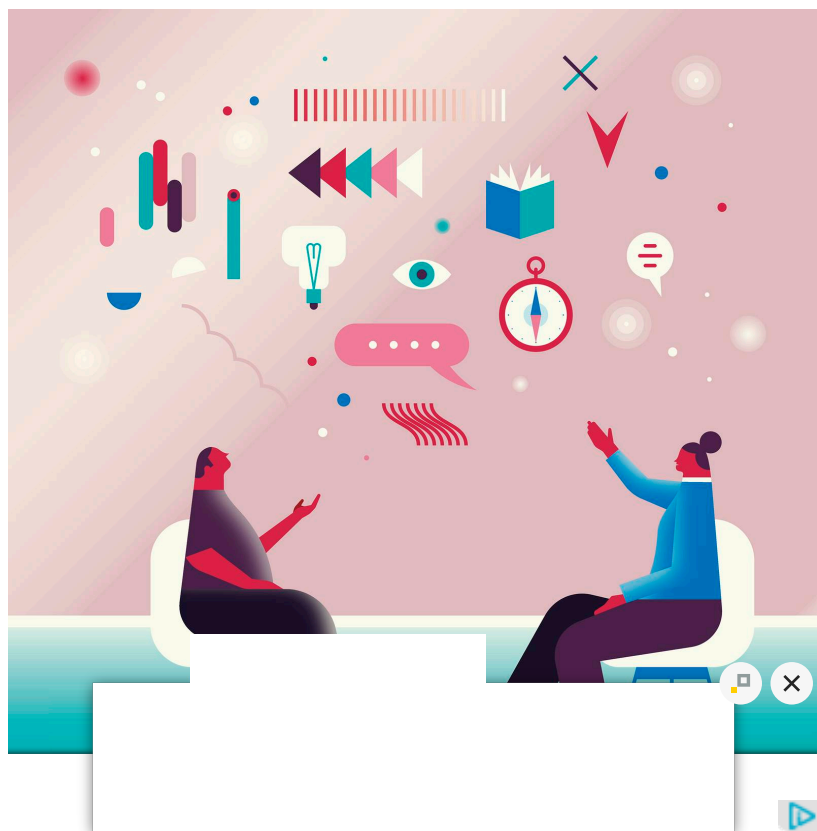

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IDEAS

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In his 1936 work *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, now one of the bestselling books of all time, Dale Carnegie wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument — and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes." This aversion to arguments is common, but it depends on a mistaken view of arguments that causes profound problems for our personal

and social lives — and in many ways misses the point of arguing in the first place.

Carnegie would be right if arguments were fights, which is how we often think of them. Like physical fights, verbal fights can leave both sides bloodied. Even when you win, you end up no better off. Your prospects would be almost as dismal if arguments were even just competitions — like, say, tennis tournaments. Pairs of opponents hit the ball back and forth until one victor emerges from all who entered. Everybody else loses. This kind of thinking is why so many people try to avoid arguments, especially about politics and religion.

These views of arguments also undermine reason. If you see a conversation as a fight or competition, you can win by cheating as long as you don't get caught. You will be happy to convince people with bad arguments. You don't mind interrupting them. You can call their views crazy, stupid, silly or ridiculous, or you can joke about how ignorant they are, how short they are or how small their hands are. None of these tricks will help you understand them, their positions or the issues that divide you, but they can help you win — in one way.

There is a better way to win arguments. Imagine that you favor increasing the minimum wage in our state, and I do not. If you yell, "Yes," and I yell, "No," then you see me as selfish, and I see you as thoughtless. Neither of us learns anything, so we neither understand nor respect each other, and we have no basis for compromise or cooperation. In contrast, suppose you give a reasonable argument: that full-time workers should not have to live in poverty. Then I counter with another reasonable argument: that a higher minimum wage will force businesses to employ less

people for less time. Now we can understand each other's positions and recognize our shared values, since we both care about needy workers.

What if, in the end, you convince me that we should increase the minimum wage because there are ways to do so without creating unemployment or underemployment? Who won? You ended up in exactly the position where you started, so you did not "win" anything, except perhaps some minor fleeting joy at beating me. On the other side, I gained a lot: more accurate beliefs, stronger evidence and deeper understanding of the issues, of you and of myself. If what I wanted was truth, reason and understanding, then I got what I wanted. In that way, I won. Instead of resenting you for beating me, I should thank you for helping me. That positive reaction undermines the common view of arguments as fights or competitions, while enhancing our personal relationships.

Of course, many discussions are not so successful. We cannot learn from our interlocutors if we do not listen to them patiently or do not trust them to express their real values. Constructive conversation becomes impossible—or at least much more difficult —if neither side gives any arguments or reasons for their positions. The mistaken tendency to avoid arguments, as Carnegie did, results from misunderstanding the point of argument, which is to appreciate each other and work together. The growing political polarization in the United States and around the world can, to this extent, be traced to a failure to give, expect and appreciate arguments.

Admittedly, many arguments are bad. They pretend to give reasons without really presenting anything worthy of the name. When someone argues simply, "You must be wrong because you are

stupid (or liberal or conservative)," they do not really give any reason for their conclusion. Still, we need to be careful not to accuse opponents of such fallacies too quickly. Nobody benefits if I misrepresent your position and then attack it viciously, or if I interrupt you so that you never finish your thought. We need to learn how to spell out arguments charitably and thoroughly step-by-step from premises to conclusion. Then we need to learn how to evaluate them properly — how to tell good arguments from bad. A large part of evaluation is calling out bad arguments, but we also need to admit good arguments by opponents and to apply the same critical standards to ourselves. (*Why do I believe my premises? Is my argument valid or strong? Does my argument beg the question? What is the strongest objection to my view?*) And when someone else tells you how bad your arguments were, it doesn't help to get defensive. Humility requires you to recognize weaknesses in your own arguments and sometimes also to accept reasons on the opposite side. You still might hold on to your convictions, but you will have learned a great deal about the issues, about your opponents and about yourself.

None of this will be easy, but you can start even if others remain recalcitrant. Next time you state your position, formulate an argument for what you claim and honestly ask yourself whether your argument is any good. Next time you talk with someone who takes a stand, ask them to give you a reason for their view. Spell out their argument fully and charitably. Assess its strength impartially. Raise objections and listen carefully to their replies. This method will require effort, but practice will make you better at it.

These tools can help you win every argument—not in the unhelpful sense of beating your opponents but in the better sense

of learning about the issues that divide people, learning why they disagree with us and learning to talk and work together with them. If we readjust our view of arguments—from a verbal fight or tennis game to a reasoned exchange through which we all gain mutual respect and understanding—then we change the very nature of what it means to "win" an argument.

IDEAS

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