

How politics divide Facebook friendships

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Those who say one should never talk about politics in mixed company have never logged on to Facebook. These days a typical newsfeed is peppered with links, opinions and jabs about the latest political topics.

A [new study](#) from the Georgia Institute of Technology suggests that politics are the great divider. People who think the majority of their [friends](#) have differing opinions than their own engage less on Facebook. For those who choose to stay logged in and politically active, the research found that most tend to stick in their own circles, ignore those on the other side and become more polarized.

At the same time, the study suggests a few design changes that could allow the [social media](#) platform to bridge political differences. By displaying shared interests between friends during their prickly conversations, Facebook could help diffuse possible arguments and alleviate tension. The research also notes that increasing exposure and engagement to weak ties could make people more resilient in the face of political disagreement.

"People are mainly friends with those who share similar values and interests. They tend to interact with them the most, a phenomenon called homophily," said Catherine Grevet, the Georgia Tech Ph.D. student who led the study. "But that means they rarely interact with the few friends with differing opinions. As a result, they aren't exposed to opposing viewpoints."

Facebook's algorithms don't help the cause. Newsfeeds are filled with

the friends a person most often interacts with, typically those with strong ties. Grevet suggests that the social media site should sprinkle in a few status updates on both sides of political issues. That would expose people to different opinions, which are typically held by weak ties.

"Designing social media toward nudging users to strengthen relationships with weak ties with different viewpoints could have beneficial consequences for the platform, users and society," said Grevet.

The study surveyed more than 100 politically active Facebook users in the spring of 2013 amid debates about budgets cuts, gay marriage and gun control regulations. The majority of participants were liberal, female and under the age of 40, mirroring the traditional Facebook user. More than 70 percent said they don't talk about politics with their friends with different opinions. When they saw something they didn't agree with, 60 percent said they ignored it and didn't comment. When they did, sometimes it made the person question the relationship and disassociate and from the friend.

"Even though people could simply unfriend someone with different opinions, and there were certainly those who did that, there were many relationships that were able to be maintained," said Grevet. "Through a combination of behaviors on Facebook like hiding, tuning out, logging off or avoiding certain conversations, people negotiated around those differences to stay connected."

That's why she feels social media sites like Facebook could support those relationships better, for instance, by highlighting shared interests between acquaintances.

Grevet will present the study in February at the Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing conference in Baltimore. Her advisor is Eric Gilbert, an assistant professor in Georgia Tech's School

of Interactive Computing, who has recently [studied office gossip](#) and [successful phrases on Kickstarter](#).

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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