

Divisive dialogue: Why do we engage in virtual political talk?

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There's a saying that true friendships stand the test of time. But does that

apply to Facebook friendships that are tested by differing longtime political beliefs?

As we approach a contentious Election Day 2020 that mirrors or perhaps even ups the ante on the divisiveness of the 2016 cycle, we turned to UNLV communication studies assistant professor Natalie Pennington. Pennington is an expert on social media and relationships, and we asked her for answers about political posturing online, and how it's led to thousands of online breakups among family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances who just couldn't play nice during partisan political discussions.

Pennington—in collaboration with Iowa State assistant professor and Catt Center for Women in Politics research and outreach coordinator Kelly Winfrey—is the co-author of a new study that analyzes what motivates people to engage in politics on social media, and examines why some people are more willing to broach the subject as well as the factors that make some of us hold back.

In this (virtual, of course!) interview, Pennington lets us in on how political talk plays out in our virtual communications, and how increasingly divisive online dialogue could further push us away from compromise.

What prompted you and your colleague to explore this topic?

For both of us, there was a personal level to understanding what was going on: Kelly tends to post about politics online a lot. Me, not so much. As an interpersonal researcher, I saw the arguments people would get into leading up to and following the last election and struggled with the effects I saw it having on people I care about. I wondered whether it was

worth it for me to talk about politics and other important issues with someone if it was only going to turn into a fight. At the same time, I also recognize how Kelly, as someone who primarily studies politics, saw sites like Facebook as a way to connect with people and share about important issues we are facing today. So there was this push-pull between the interpersonal and political from the start, creating a great opportunity for us to collaborate and learn more about what motivated people to communicate about politics online.

What are the main motivators that drive people to engage in political talk on Facebook?

A few things that we noticed in our study demonstrated how the political-interpersonal push-pull played out. If someone primarily used social media to build and maintain relationships, they were significantly less likely to post and talk about politics on Facebook. The same was true for those who were really concerned with impression management online. On the flip side, people who were both interested in politics and had high influence goals (i.e., believed it is important to get people to agree with their political views) were more likely to engage in political talk on the site. Those who saw themselves as concerned with relationships were much more likely to avoid political talk than those who were generally interested in politics and motivated by their desire to persuade others to their views, suggesting interpersonal relationships may outweigh the political. But we need more research to know if that's really the case.

So, what's the breaking point for someone to choose whether or not to engage? Informal political talk is really important in encouraging people to get engaged in the political process, and has been a predictor of voting in the past—but disagreement with friends and family about politics can actually stifle voting or other types of political engagement, which may be why we saw such a strong negative push back from our participants in

terms of relationships coming first over sharing their political views on Facebook. Technology, of course, adds a whole other level to the equation because people may misinterpret text-based responses on posts due to a lack of social cues. In exploring the upcoming 2020 election, we hope to delve deeper into this topic to find a balance between these two competing interests.

Can you compare and contrast the social media climate between 2016 and 2020?

Claims about 2020 at this point would be purely speculative. But, from what I've seen within my own social networks, I can say that people continue to be fired up as the political climate has become more contentious in the last several months compared, I think, to what we have seen in a long time. At the same time, the decision to un-friend is not one people take lightly, and more often I see calls to "snooze" (i.e., hide posts from someone) for 30 days in the lead up to the election so people can avoid political content. I've also heard of people taking breaks from social media right now to keep their mental health in check, and I can't blame them. A recent poll from the Pew Research Center indicates 55% of [social media](#) users are worn out from political talk online, which suggests that one possible difference from 2016 to 2020 is political talk surrounding the election started earlier, and is occurring more often, leading to this frustration. I'm concerned about the increasing polarization occurring around politics, period. Without learning how to talk with each other, both sides continue to struggle to find civil ways to have productive political conversations. This isn't helpful for anyone involved.

Your study surveyed people across a wide range of ages, as well as a variety of racial/ethnic groups and political leanings. Who is most likely to talk about

politics online, and why?

We found that women were slightly more likely to engage in political talk online compared to men. We argue that this may be because we collected our data right around the time Hillary Clinton was a candidate for the 2016 presidential election and the Women's March that followed in the spring of 2017—bringing women's rights issues to the forefront. We did not find any major differences across age groups or [political parties](#); however, previous work has found that those who identify as Republican (or Republican leaning) are more likely to avoid talking about politics online for fear that their views are the minority opinion.

What takeaways do you hope the public gleans from this research?

One thing we've seen in our past research is that issue salience can bring people into a political discussion online, and so can emotional involvement. When you care deeply about a topic, or feel like it may affect you, you're more likely to jump into a conversation, regardless of possible adverse outcomes.

We also suspect that people who want to build and sustain relationships online are much less likely to post about politics because of a fear of disagreement; we don't choose our friends (at least at first) because of their political affiliation. As that tie grows stronger, we may struggle with how to balance our perception of that relationship with [political views](#) that feel inconsistent, and the concern for disagreement can lead to that pull back. I hope that in future studies we can come to understand how to push past these fears, because civil dialogue across party lines can help to overcome the polarization and contentious political climate we see ourselves in today.

More information: Natalie Pennington et al, Engaging in Political Talk on Facebook: Investigating the Role of Interpersonal Goals and Cognitive Engagement, *Communication Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2020.1819844](https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2020.1819844)

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