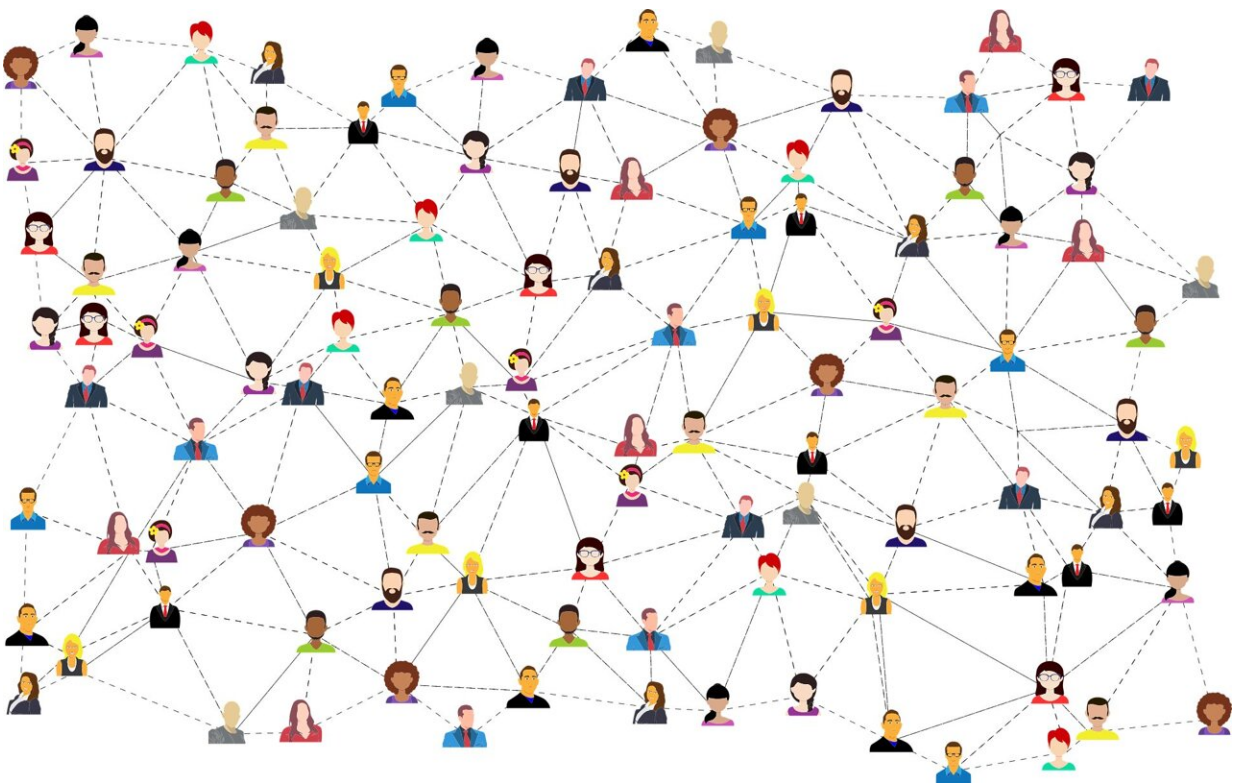


Study finds interracial connections were more than twice as likely to 'defriend' after the 2016 election

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Interracial relationships between friends, acquaintances and relatives were more than twice as likely to dissolve after the 2016 election than those of the same race, a study recently published by sociologists at the

University of Massachusetts Amherst has found.

The study examined "defriending," the decision that we sometimes make to discontinue a relationship. Using data from the University of California Social Networks Study (UCNets)—a rigorous and well-designed study concerned with personal networks of individuals from California's Bay Area —gathered immediately before and just after the election of Donald Trump as president, the UMass Amherst researchers created a novel analysis of defriending across political and racial lines.

The regionally representative results contained two [age groups](#), a younger cohort of millennials, and an older cohort of baby boomers, which allowed the researchers to compare relationship dissolution between older and younger Americans.

They found that people with similar racial backgrounds were 60% less likely to have dropped ties across the time boundary of the 2016 election than those from differing racial backgrounds.

"There are many reasons why friendships form, and just as many reasons why they may go away, and we wanted to probe those reasons with an eye towards folks' political and racial identities," says study co-author Mark Pachucki, associate professor of sociology and core faculty in the Computational Social Science Institute at UMass Amherst.

"Different-race relationships are often weaker—less close and non-kinship based—and we find that the persistent tendencies of Americans to exclude individuals of a different race from families and friendships is linked to the tendency to dissolve [social ties](#)," Pachucki explains.

"Initially, when we pooled all the study participants together, we didn't see evidence that people of different political persuasions dissolved friendships any more or less than people with similar politics. But, when

we compared the younger and older groups of adults, it turns out that the younger adult group did, in fact, tend to drop weaker ties—for example, friends—due to disagreements, while the older adult group didn't."

"After the 2016 [presidential election](#), there were a bunch of different media accounts of people cutting ties with friends and relatives who held different political views," says Anthony Paik, co-author of the study and professor of sociology.

"One part of our study asks: did defriending really happen in as widespread a way as the popular media narrative suggests? But also, given that Trump's years in office were characterized by racialized politics surrounding immigration, white nationalism and policing, there was reason for us to also look carefully at relationship dissolution across racial lines."

Paik and Pachucki, [social scientists](#) with expertise in [social network analysis](#) who share an interest in how our social networks shape—and are shaped by—society, collaborated with advanced graduate student Hsin Fei Tu on the project and as equal co-authors on the study.

"There's often good that comes from befriending people with a shared background in terms of social cohesion and solidarity, but there are downsides to that insularity," Pachucki says. "The decision to sever ties with people who aren't like us contributes to the reinforcement of social segregation in our collective life, and that's a big social problem, both in terms of race and politics."

"In general, our results point to the continuing significance of racial lines in Americans' social relationships," Paik concludes, "and they also indicate that younger adults may not be as willing to look past a partisan divide in their politics. Both these trends should give us pause."

The complete paper, "'Defriending' in a polarized age: Political and racial homophily and tie dissolution," can be found online from the journal *Social Networks*.

More information: Anthony Paik et al, "Defriending" in a polarized age: Political and racial homophily and tie dissolution, *Social Networks* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socnet.2023.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2023.01.006)

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