

Ditching a friend who is not like you can deepen social inequality

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Since the 2016 presidential election, [news accounts](#) and [scientific research](#) have illustrated how defriending, a term originally associated with dropping Facebook friends, echoes in our broader, offline social

lives. And what may seem like a simple decision to cut off a difficult relationship may actually deepen divisions in society.

As [social scientists](#) who [study social networks](#), we were keen to take a closer look at defriending beyond [social media](#) and the internet, particularly as the U.S. approaches what is likely to be another contentious presidential election.

Some relationships are difficult to keep going because of conflicts, disagreements, life changes or busy schedules. Those things make defriending practical and reasonable. After all, cutting [social ties](#) isn't new. The practice has likely been around [as long as relationships have existed](#). But we wondered if relationships across racial, political or religious boundaries are more at risk of being severed during highly charged political times than other relationships.

[Newly available data](#), gathered from northern California residents between April 2015 and May 2017, gave us a chance to look at relationships during a critical turning point in the United States. The study—comprised of 1,159 respondents—was a representative sampling of the six counties that make up the San Francisco Bay area. Researchers measured whether ties were family or nonfamily, close or not close, difficult or not difficult.

Cutting interracial ties

In an analysis of the data, [we found that](#) people were 2.5 times more likely to cut interracial friendship ties, which are often weaker than same-race ties, after the 2016 [presidential election](#). We also found that participants were 2.3 times more likely to cut ties with people of another religion. Importantly, a subgroup of study participants, the 21- to 30-year-olds, was almost two times more likely to drop weaker ties across the political divide due to disagreements.

In other words, [people were self-segregating](#), and younger people, in particular, were distancing themselves from exposure to people who were different from them.

In practice, defriending can range from silently [ghosting](#) old friends to more overt acts, such as Dilbert creator Scott Adams' [racist diatribe](#) exhorting white Americans to defriend Black Americans.

American history is replete with examples of people being excluded from certain segments of society because of race, politics or religion. But voluntary segregation is different, and [social scientists](#) didn't begin [formally measuring the extent across the country](#) until the 1985 [General Social Survey](#), a biennial, nationally representative survey of the attitudes and behaviors of American adults.

Our findings from California point to how defriending plays out in a specific state.

Vulnerable weak ties

One clear takeaway from our study is that people were more likely to drop [weaker ties](#) to people unlike them than they were to drop strong family ties. In other words, they weren't willing to cut off the uncle who says offensive things under his breath at every family gathering, but they did easily cut off casual acquaintances from the gym or grocery store.

Despite their seeming fragility, weak ties—which can range from the relationships [developed during short, water cooler conversations](#) at work to connections forged from interactions with strangers during the daily commute—are critically important to our lives.

They create [job opportunities](#), facilitate [social mobility](#) and promote [well-being](#).

Weak ties can also [foster creativity and innovation](#) and lead to new opportunities across social boundaries, defined by race, politics and religion. One example of that is the [new BFF](#) relationship between actors Michelle Yeoh and Jamie Lee Curtis. Though longtime acquaintances, they had never worked together until recently. The chance to collaborate [led to a much closer relationship and a pair of Oscar wins](#).

The price of insularity

Regardless of how it happens, when people segregate into groups that look or think like them, there are significant consequences for society. In addition to losing resources such as [job opportunities](#) that are controlled by someone to whom they were formerly associated, people may lose opportunities for [building successful, inclusive political coalitions](#). Others may not recognize challenges that people in a different group face. And because of an inability to understand someone else's problems, people may be [less willing to help](#).

These imbalances have long been difficult to reconcile, as pointed out in 1903 by pioneering sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois. He famously drew attention to "[the problem of the color line](#)" in American life. Radically for the time, he researched race relations and social interactions, [showing how race symbolically and physically divided](#) the country. This perspective resonates in [modern-day racial disparities in American life](#), such as [how Black Americans are expected to navigate white social spaces](#) and that Black and white workers [think about inequality and economic security in different ways](#).

Segregation then, now and in the future

Some of the most heinous epochs in American history have occurred when a dominant group has failed to recognize a common humanity.

Vestiges of slavery, for instance, lingered in [Jim Crow laws](#). And remnants of Jim Crow are present in our [system of mass incarceration](#), which legal scholar and author Michelle Alexander has described as [a system of racialized social control](#) that disproportionately affects Black men.

Even though modern American social segregation now emerges from a mix of voluntary choices to defriend and [residential segregation by race](#) and [class](#), the net result can be the same as enforced segregation.

Social boundaries can lead to population-wide inequalities because [segregation leads to differential opportunities](#) for different groups. These [inequalities are unjust, preventable](#) and, it turns out, very difficult to get rid of.

Fewer cross-group connections makes meaningful political conversation [more challenging](#) when neither group has a meaningful grasp of, or a willingness to engage with, another group's perspectives.

Self-segregation by defriending denies us the opportunity to learn from differences and to discover commonalities.

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