

## **The politics of friendship**

Getting tired of all the election snark on Facebook? Have you unfriended someone over her views? You're not the only one.

By Alyson Ward

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Sandy Mansfield decided she'd had enough.

"As of today, I'm declaring my Facebook page a Politics-Free zone," she posted.

The Woodlands resident wouldn't post about the presidential election anymore, she pledged. She hoped her friends might do the same. "Let's all take a deep breath, step back and remember that we are friends - in spite of our political views," she urged.

Mansfield - who watched her Facebook feed turn over the summer into a hateful parade of insults and arguments - isn't alone. In a Pew Research Center survey, 18 percent of adults said they had blocked, unfriended or hidden updates from a friend because of a political post. Thirty-seven percent of people who post political content said they'd gotten some strong negative reactions. And that was in January and February, well before the election season heated up.

Political fighting over social media reached fever pitch during the parties' national conventions in August and early September, and the rancor is likely to pick up again Oct. 3 with the first presidential debate. The presidential election is just six weeks away, but for some, it can't come soon enough.

Linda Cowles likes to post informative articles about the issues, and she likes to read the articles her friends post. But she's had just about enough of people calling each other "zombies" and "terrorist-loving commies."

Cowles, 62, a recently retired nonprofit executive director, calls herself an independent. And she has been horrified by the "vicious" tone of friends' partisan posts. She questioned a friend's remarks about Obama voters the other day, and a few seconds later she was bombarded with nasty retorts from people she didn't even know.

"Some of the responses were just downright belittling: 'How can you be so stupid to think any other way?'" said Cowles, who lives in Pearland.

"It's not just, 'I disagree with you, '" said Ed Truitt, 56, of Houston. "It's 'X is better than Y, and you're an idiot because you don't think so.'"

Truitt, an IT security analyst, has experienced the same whiplash feeling with Facebook friends and acquaintances.

"It'll be fine until you manage to push one of their hot buttons," he said. "Then they proceed to unload on you, and it's like, 'What the heck just happened to me?' It gets very personal and very uncivil."

It's not just Facebook, of course. Truitt said he finds politics on Twitter "equally annoying." But only 15 percent of Americans have Twitter accounts, while more than half have joined Facebook.

That's a significant increase from the previous presidential election, when only 8 percent of Americans had Facebook accounts. In Election '08, the candidates were on Facebook and Twitter while most citizens were still using email to forward pictures, stories and ugly rumors to a short list of friends - who read it alone, unable to join an immediate choir of commentary.

For many, Facebook isn't a tight circle of close friends; it's where we keep up with distant relatives, old high school buddies, coworkers and the kid's soccer coach. And those people have viewpoints - and ways of expressing themselves - that sometimes surprise us.

We've all seen the comments about Obama fans "drinking the Kool-Aid." We've read conspiracy theories about Romney's tax returns. And haven't we all - on both sides of the aisle - seen enough "empty chair" jokes to last a lifetime?

Heather Says, a hoop dance instructor who lives in Spring, has blocked updates from friends on social media who post too much about politics.

"Oh yeah, I have, absolutely," she said. "It's just some people. I just can't take it."

Says, 30, enjoys a good political discussion. But she has seen way too many mean-spirited pictures and cartoons this year, along with rumors ("Michelle Obama was disbarred!") that could be debunked with a Google search.

"People feel so much more bold on Facebook," Says said. "They'll say anything, knowing they don't have to see you face-to-face."

Her friends don't spout all that ugliness offline, she points out.

"I always tell my husband, 'I wish I could hang out with these people and have real debates,'" Says said. "But when we get together, no one wants to talk about it."

All this opinion-sharing should be a good thing, says Homero Gil de Zúñiga, director of the Community, Journalism and Communication Research collective at the University of Texas at Austin. He studies the way new technologies - including Facebook - affect civic engagement and the political process.

"We have evidence that social media, when used in a particular way, actually enhance political participation and civic engagement," he said.

The Pew survey in early 2012 revealed that 36 percent of users believed social media are "very important" or "somewhat important" to them for keeping up with political news. And it's good for democracy, Gil de Zúñiga said, when our online friends are of all persuasions.

"We're finding that because your network is larger online, you are going to be exposed to heterogeneous networks," he said, "people who are different from you, have different thinking and different views."

And that's great, he said. Except when all that difference of opinion dissolves into name-calling and tacky jokes.

"When things get out of hand is when people polarize," Gil de Zúñiga said. "They get reinforced in their ideas, and that doesn't help democracy. The liberals become more liberal and the conservatives become more conservative; they don't listen to each other."

That's why people are hiding updates from the friends who irritate them. They're using browser extensions that will automatically hide updates with political content. They're posting funny memes and e-cards that make a joke of the political acrimony. Or, like Mansfield, a 68-year-old retired banking officer, they're posting pleas for an end to the sniping.

"It would be so much better for the whole political conversation," Cowles said, "if everybody remembered what your mama always said: If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

That might work for some. But Ben Canales, 45, says it's fun to argue politics online.

"I certainly post stuff, if it's something pertinent," he said. "The discourse is more important than avoiding discourse."

The key, he says, may be to limit your audience. Canales, who works in construction administration, keeps his Facebook friends list limited to people he really knows.

"Everybody knows where I stand and I pretty much know where they stand," he said, so he can debate the issues with his friends instead of just trading insults with strangers.

Matthew Conner, 28, said he views Facebook "as a political avenue." Of course, the University of Houston senior is chairman of the campus College Republicans. His friends include Republicans, Democrats and a few Libertarians, and he likes to post articles and start discussions about politics, even if it gets ugly.

"I've been called names before, and I'm pretty sure anybody who's posted stuff on Facebook has been called names," he said. But to Conner, that's OK: "Without talking about these key issues, it wouldn't really be America."

For some, these online dust-ups are no big deal; Truitt said he's glad to have friends with whom he disagrees.

"I don't want to lose connection with these people," he said. "I don't want to get into a position where I'm in an echo chamber."

But for others, election season has been eye-opening; they'll never see some friends the same way again.

"The problem I'm having right now is deciding how much I want to continue my friendships," Mansfield said of the posters of some downright hateful content. "In some ways they're my friends, but in other ways we have gone in different directions."

She's even gotten flack from the folks who agree with her on the issues. When Mansfield declared her page politics-free, one friend responded in all caps, calling Mansfield a "PACIFIST" and scolding her for "GIVING UP."

"I've got friends on both sides of the fringes," Mansfield said, laughing.

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