

FEE's Essential Guide to

KEEPING FRIENDS DESPITE POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

HOW TO HAVE OPINIONS AND FRIENDS
(AT THE SAME TIME!)



FEE FOUNDATION *for*
ECONOMIC EDUCATION

FEE's Guide to Keeping Friends Despite Political Differences

*How to Have Opinions and
Friends (at the Same Time!)*

FEE

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Introduction

Politics has always been one of those subjects to tread tread lightly around when it's time to cut the Thanksgiving turkey. But ever since the 2016 US presidential elections, things have been crazy. We're talking massive unfriendings on social media and violent protests across the US.

Despite living in a comparatively free and tolerant era, we're still vastly intolerant of differing political views. But why is that? Is it possible to preserve our friendships while still holding true to our personal principles and beliefs? Should we ever willingly associate with bigots?

The following guide has the answers to each of these questions.

Don't Lose Friendships Over Politics

Jeffrey Tucker

Has election season always been this rough on friendships? Friendships and families are actually too precious to throw away for transient reasons.

So many people I know are getting into Facebook fights, Twitter wars, Instagram arguments, and Snapchat squabbles. What begins as an ideological dispute ends in bitterness. People are provoking others, demanding those who do or don't support their candidate leave their networks, cutting ties with friends and family, and all because of political differences.

I can't even imagine what the Thanksgiving table will be like this year!

People perceive the stakes this year to be that high. To be sure, political philosophy does matter and does carry high stakes. However, the partisan struggle for the control of the state apparatus by this or that temporary manager doesn't matter as much as election season seems to suggest. You might be being manipulated, and friendships and families are actually too precious to throw away for transient reasons.

It's a pity to cause permanent rifts, and so unnecessary. The people who rearrange their personal relationships for the election imagine that they are taking control of their lives. They don't seem to realize that they are actually letting strangers control their lives—strangers who care nothing for them in a system that actually seeks to divide people so it can conquer them. To permit politics to fundamentally alter something so important as friendship is to give politicians more importance than they deserve.

Trolling and Banning

To isolate yourself, and hate others for their views plays into exactly what the political system wants for you to do.

Now, of course there is a proviso here. If there is someone in your network who is deliberately trolling you, harassing you, and goading you to respond, the best possible response is to block them. Not talk back. Not engage in a tit for tat. Just quietly block, without drama or announcement, much less denunciation.

Most public people I know have blocked as many as one hundred plus people over the past year, simply because this election season has been so contentious, with the [alt-right](#) and [alt-left](#) (who oddly agree on so much) battling it out on social media. Blocking is the far better path than engaging them. Vicious back and forths on the Internet can be life-consuming and draining. People who are trying to do that to you deserve exclusion from your conversation circle.

Apart from these cases, it strikes me as pointless to hurl someone out of your life because of political differences.

First, by denying yourself access to different points of view, you risk isolating yourself from a critic who might teach you something you need to know, maybe about anything in life, but maybe even about politics.

Second, talking to people with different opinions keeps you making sense and speaking in a civil way, addressing others in a way that could persuade them.

Third, and most critically, to isolate yourself, hate others for their views, and regard people with different points of view as less deserving of dignified treatment, plays into exactly what the political system wants for you to do.

But Aren't They Aggressors?

A counter to my point was offered by a friend of mine last year. Speaking as a libertarian, he said, he regards anyone who supports some government action—even just casually and without much thought—as wittingly or unwittingly contributing to an opinion culture that supports

rising political violence. The only friends he believes deserve the time of day from him must hold steadfastly to his voluntarist perspective, else he regards them as a direct threat to his life and liberty.

Now, this strikes me as vastly too severe. The truth is that most people who support some government action do not regard themselves as violent people. They believe that they are favoring something that is good for others, perhaps fostering the better life for the community.

For example, if a person favors higher spending on public education, they believe that they are pushing for policies that are good for others, not calling for violence against taxpayers to support unworkable programs. How can you possibly persuade them otherwise if you cut off all ties?

And it's not just libertarians who can be this way. A good friend of mine was a casual lefty and, like most from his tribe, he was dead serious about the issue of climate change. I had no idea until the subject came up over coffee. I expressed **some doubt** that the science was truly settled concerning all causes and effects, solutions, costs and benefits, and so on. I was actually very measured in my comments, but somehow they caused him to blow up, call me a science-denying, tin-foil-hat-wearing capitalist apologist, and then actually leave the conversation. And that was it.

The politics of identity is causing precisely these sorts of irrational and pointless splits among us.

I was stunned. I was merely disagreeing with him, however cautiously. But somehow, he had come to believe that anyone who disagreed with him bears some responsibility for the rising sea levels, the melting of the polar ice caps, and the gradual disintegration of the planet, even though I've written very little on the topic at all.

He was letting politics control his life and even determine his friendships. Both of us are spiritually poorer as a result of this friendship loss.

And consider the toxic effect the rising politics of personal identity—on the left and the right—are having on the ability of people to find value in each other. Imagine how you would make me feel if you believed my whiteness represents a continuing stain on the world order. There is no

chance for any kind of engagement; after all, I cannot change my race. Or what if I believe your blackness or gayness or atheism or whatever is leading to demographic or cultural destruction—how can we possibly be civil to each other? The politics of identity is causing precisely these sorts of irrational and pointless splits among us.

What Is the Point of Friendship?

What the libertarian and the lefty I mentioned above do not realize is that they are guilty of the same error of allowing politics to invade the conduct of their lives and determine the conditions of their personal happiness. Once this kind of thing starts, there is truly no end to it.

Must everyone agree with you on every jot and tittle of your ideology to be your friend? Must there be zero tolerance for even the slightest difference in outlook, priority, application, and goal of your particular political outlook? In other words, must all your friends believe exactly as you believe?

If this is your perspective, you might consider: there is not much point to being friends and engaging in conversation with someone who has the exact same view on all things that you have. It seems rather boring. Might as well stay home and reflect on your own infallibility.

If we long for a better world of mutual understanding and peace, one way to help achieve it is to live as if it already exists.

I like to think of friendship much the way we think of economic exchange. In economics, goods and services do not exchange in the presence of perfect sameness. They exchange because each party to the exchange believes himself or herself will be better off than he or she was before the exchange. It is only in the presence of unequal expectations that exchange becomes mutually rewarding.

It is the same with friendship. We need to hear different points of view. We need the insights of others. Even if we don't accept them in total, we can still hope to understand people and the world better by considering what others have to say—with sincerity, warmth, and honesty. In other words, friendships like this help us have an open mind and keep us all humble and teachable.

Candidates Will Betray You

Neither is it a good idea to give up a friendship based on loyalty to a particular candidate. The top two contenders for the presidency have held many different and conflicting views on a huge range of political issues, from taxation to immigration to war. These people are wired to be adaptable based on the polls. To follow one or the other all the way to the point that it affects your associations is to risk compromising your own intellectual integrity.

Neither is worth that.

One of the great tragedies of politics is that it can take people who in real life would be peaceful and loyal and loving friends and turn them into bitter enemies. I'm always struck by this when I see a political rally, with face offs between backers and protesters. What exactly is gained by this? If you put these same people in a shopping mall or movie theater or restaurant, they would have every reason to get along and no reason to be screaming obscenities at each other.

We should hold on to that realization. Each of us is a human being with feelings, hopes, dreams, and a vision of a life well-lived—every single person, regardless of race, religion, gender identity, or ideology. Politics should change nothing about that.

If we long for a better world of mutual understanding and peace, one way to help achieve it is to live as if it already exists. Above all, that means never letting politics get in the way of rewarding human relationships.

Can We Talk About Politics Without Sounding Like Jerks?

Matt Zwolinski

A lot of people—especially the kind of people who read blogs like FEE's!—have very strong views about politics. This is especially true when our political views are based on *moral* views.

If we think that universal health care is a good idea because we think it's likely to result in more people getting the medical treatment they need, then we might be open to changing our minds if evidence comes forward showing that it doesn't. But if we think that universal health care is a mandate of *justice*, then we're often much less willing to listen to the other side. After all, being against universal health care means being against justice, and why on earth should I waste my time listening to someone who's against *justice*?

The result of this mindset is that political discussions are often frustrating, unproductive, and hostile. We often assume the worst about those who disagree with us on matters of political morality. Either they're too *stupid* to recognize the obvious truth of our claims, or they're too *evil* to care. And you don't deal with stupid or evil people by rationally engaging with them. You deal with them by subjecting them to ridicule, vitriol, and shame.

Can we do better than this? Is there a way of talking about social justice, or the importance of individual liberty, without being so hostile and alienating toward those with whom we disagree? Can debates about political morality be friendly and productive while still respecting the profound *seriousness* of the issues at stake?

Thankfully, the answers to both these questions is “yes.” We can treat political morality as an issue of the utmost seriousness and importance

without vilifying people who disagree with us. How? By always keeping at the forefront of our mind that political morality is a subject about which *reasonable and well-intentioned people can and will disagree*.

There are at two main reasons why reasonable disagreement is so common.

1) The moral values that underlie our political debates are plural and conflicting.

There isn't just *one* thing we care about when it comes to politics. There are lots. And sometimes we face trade-offs between them. So, for example, almost everybody thinks that fostering economic growth is a genuine political value. But many people also think that protecting the natural environment is, too. Or promoting some degree of social equality.

This means that often, when two people disagree about the morality of some particular policy, the problem isn't that they believe in radically different values. They might believe in precisely the same list of values, but *prioritize* those values differently in this particular case.

You think that our economy is doing well enough that we can afford to sacrifice some growth for the sake of preserving natural ecosystems. I think you're underestimating the way in which further economic growth matters for the well-being of the world's poor.

Neither of us is evil. Neither of us is stupid. Neither of us even disagrees with the other about what kinds of things ultimately matter. We simply disagree about how to choose between two genuine, mutually acknowledged values. And, in a dispute like that, it's rarely going to be *obvious* which one of us is right.

2) Many of our moral disagreement are ultimately rooted in complicated empirical questions.

Are minimum wage laws a bad idea? Should we boycott goods produced by sweatshop labor?

You *might* think we can resolve these questions without knowing how minimum wage laws or boycotts actually work. But most people's moral views are more sensitive to the actual consequences of their actions than that.

Suppose you think sweatshops are bad because they mistreat and underpay their workers. If so, you should almost certainly think that it's a *relevant question* whether boycotting sweatshops would actually improve things for workers, or whether it actually might make them even *worse* off.

But, here's the thing—answering that question turns out to be very, very difficult. Even the simplest public policy decisions turn on empirical questions that are profoundly difficult to resolve. There are too many confounding variables; the social science is complicated and contentious; and most of us don't have the time or expertise to engage that science in any kind of serious way.

Smart, reasonable people can disagree about empirical questions like this, and those empirical disagreements will lead us to *moral* disagreements, even when we agree about the underlying importance and priority of the moral values at stake.

Because of these two considerations, thinking about issues of political morality is extremely difficult, even when we're reasoning in the best way we can. When we add to those considerations the fact that we often *don't* reason in the best way we can, the problem is even worse!

We're all human beings, and that means that we often engage in biased, **motivated reasoning**. **Especially when it comes to politics**. We see what we want to see—the facts that confirm our strongly held political convictions—and disregard evidence that tends to undermine those views. Of course, we all recognize this phenomenon—when *other* people do it. But bearing in mind that *we* almost certainly engage in it too should perhaps inspire us to be a little more humble about our beliefs.

The bottom line is this. Political morality is supremely important. It's a serious issue, and it's important to try to seek the truth as best we can, and to purge ourselves and others of errors whenever possible. But political morality is also extremely complicated and *hard*. And

that means that the strong feelings we have about politics are often way out of proportion with the degree of confidence we should have in the underlying empirical and normative beliefs.

So be humble—don't be so confident that the beliefs you've formed are the single correct way of thinking about political morality. And be tolerant. Recognize that people who disagree with you might have good reasons for doing so.

Of course, *I* think that being tolerant of reasonable disagreement means that we should be reluctant to impose our moral views on others by force, or to ask the state to do so on our behalf.

But then again, I'm a libertarian, so I *would* think that, wouldn't I?

Fight for a More Civilized Bigotry

TJ Brown

Over the past few years, the demand for social justice, privilege checking, tolerance and diversity in the west has skyrocketed. The progressive left (as represented in media, Hollywood, corporate business, social activism, academia, and government) has made clear that its primary political concern is fighting bigotry and hate. In America particularly, I would argue that our social and cultural climate has rapidly devolved into a state of warfare. I wish I was exaggerating, but from political clashes such as the ones in Berkeley to mass Facebook unfriending, political animosity seems to be growing.

With more and more people substituting screams for discussion, intolerance of both sides has strengthened.

A large part of that animosity stems from a militant opposition to bigotry. On face value, I don't see anything wrong with opposing bigotry. Being a millennial, I'm part of the most culturally diverse and socially connected generation in history. But lately, I've noticed the tactics used by many in this effort have been increasingly unproductive. In fact, that's too gracious. They've been outright counterproductive.

From the defense of ethnic minorities to LGBT rights, many on the left have created a hostile relationship between social liberalism and the general public. The obsessive rampage of millennials trying to exterminate bigotry has made people more divisive and ideologically isolated than ever. And I think, rather than millennials doubling down on their rampage to smash bigotry, they should instead consider fighting for a more civilized bigotry.

What is Civilized Bigotry

When I think of civilized bigotry, I envision a system or social order that allows for peaceful and productive cooperation between the more bigoted members of society, and the more individualist members of society. Not to say one can't be both.

The purpose of civilized bigotry is to minimize conflict by maximizing understanding. Too often we promote our moral virtues with the assumption that others will adopt them without resistance. With more and more people substituting discussion for screams of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, etc., the intolerance of both sides has only strengthened.

Encouraging civilized bigotry is a good alternative to reversed despotism.

The strategy for many social justice advocates has long been to silence the bigoted views that they hold in contempt, in an effort to shape a more tolerant society. This has led to certain ideas being met with attempts to get people fired from work, criminal punishment, and even physical assault.

One of the most notable examples involves Richard Spencer, an Alt Right media figure who was questioned about his affiliation with Nazism and subsequently sucker punched by a random protester.

As a black man, I'm not very sympathetic to the ideas of white nationalism. But the public reaction to his assault was irrational, illiberal, and most of all uncivil, [articles](#) questioning whether it's ok to punch political opponents, chants of "make Nazis afraid again" on college campuses. Encouraging civilized bigotry is a good alternative to this reversed despotism. And before you dismiss this proposal in favor of unapologetically bashing bigots, you should know that I used to be one.

Bashing Didn't Cure My Bigotry

You heard me right, I used to be a bigot. Not that long ago, in fact, about 3 years ago I was pretty transphobic. I wouldn't say I held any

feelings of hate or fear towards trans people, I just simply lacked respect for their identity. One day I decided to post some questions I had about transgenderism on social media, looking for a civil discussion to expand my understanding.

Admittedly, some of the questions might have been unintentionally ignorant, but I entered into this venture in good faith. But instead of discussion, I was greeted with hostility and disgust. The people I engaged with abhorred my lack of immediate conformity to their demands for respect, not in terms of general civility because I'm not by nature a jerk, but things like using proper pronouns, acknowledging "cisgender privilege," etc.

My bigoted positions weren't going to be swayed by fear of being labeled transphobic.

Now maybe I'm old school, but I believe respect is something that is earned, not demanded. When I contested their demand for my arbitrary acceptance of transgender norms, I was stunned by the response. Instead of continuing to discuss ideas, I was basically expelled from their social circle and branded an intolerant hateful bigot. This baffled me because I didn't hate them. I had an ignorant understanding of their identity, and because of that I wasn't able to properly formulate respect for them. But I didn't hold any ill will towards them. I was a bigot, not a monster.

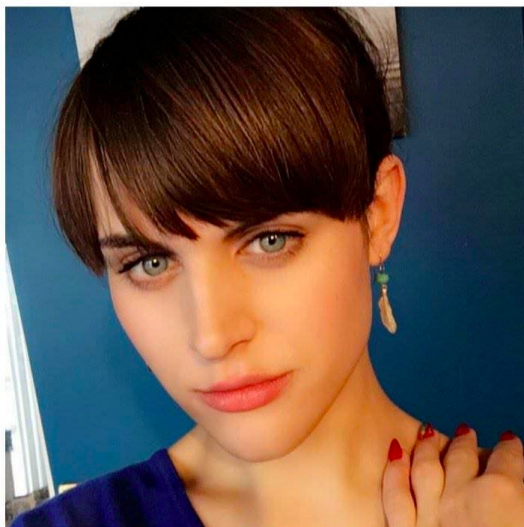
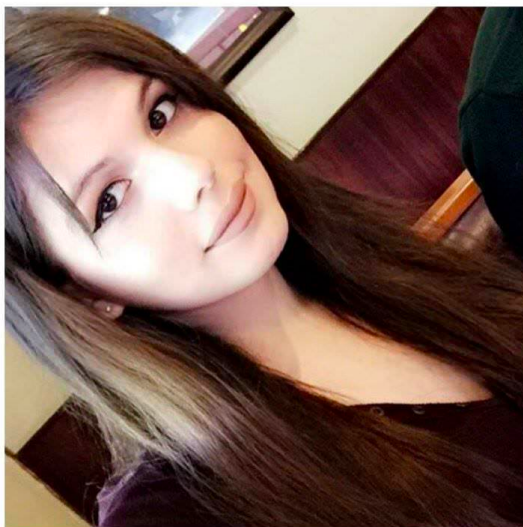
This dictatorial attitude of "listen and believe" has plagued the market of social justice advocacy for years, aggressive thought policing in an effort to reform one's beliefs, not through persuasion, but through intimidation. My experience was unfortunate because I really wanted to build a bridge between myself and the transgender community, but my bigoted positions weren't going to be swayed by fear of being labeled transphobic. That method was completely ineffective and if that had been the only tactic used on me, I would likely still be transphobic to this day. Thankfully, that was not the case.

My Transphobic Reformation

After my disheartening experience with intersectional progressives, I voiced my frustration on social media in what I would describe as a pretty blunt [reaction video](#). And to my surprise, it went viral.

I expected a general response similar to that which I received from the progressives I formerly engaged with, you know, claims of bigotry, transphobia, hate speech and all the hysterical screeching associated. But to my surprise again, the video was instead met with an onslaught of support. Not only from the general public but by hundreds of transgender people. All of which were incredibly supportive and eager to engage with me.

Following that video, I had multiple discussions with members of the trans community. I even made a [playlist](#) of some of my favorite video responses from trans people and trans allies. Later, I came into contact with other popular transgender personalities like [Blaire White](#) and [Theryn Meyer](#) who today I consider personal friends. As my friendship with these two amazing women continued to grow, I realized something amazing. I had grown to respect transgenderism.



Upon realizing this, I first assumed this respect rose from an increased understanding of transgenderism as a concept, a result of “educating myself.” But, my opinions largely hadn’t changed.

Granted my position on transgenderism was more refined and definitely more informed than it previously had been, but I still had personal contentions with the notion of gender being a social construct. I still struggled to embrace related concepts like non-binary or genderqueer. And I damn sure didn't check my **cishet** black male privilege. In fact, according to most progressive standards, I'd still be just as bigoted now as I was prior to this experience. So what was it that made me change?

Befriending a Bigot

The real motivating factor that allowed me to find respect for a class of people I previously didn't have respect for was friendship. It was the compassion and interaction with transgender people that cultivated my respect for their identity. I have no problem referring to my trans friends (or any trans person really) by their preferred pronouns. Not because I feel socially obligated. Not even because I respect their beliefs, but because I respect them as individuals.



This statement I put out on twitter a few weeks ago wasn't intended to be bold, but I do hope it resonates with others who may be flirting with the mainstream notion that bigotry is only to be met with vitriol and disassociation. Yes, I can be friends with a bigot. I am in fact friends

with bigots. Some of whom are racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, islamophobic. My friendship with bigots does not serve as an endorsement of their views. It's not meant to encourage intolerance. It's meant to do the exact opposite in fact. It's meant to infiltrate their social bubble, provide a positive influence that will hopefully change their attitudes toward particular cultural phenomena, and through that hopefully find a way to cooperate and coexist.

The fight against bigotry has long been centered around ideological transformation, but we shouldn't have to change minds in order to find peace. We don't need to hold the same opinions in order to be civil to one another. What's the point in fighting bigotry if it only leads to more division? What's the point in preaching tolerance if it's only given to those who think the same as you?

FEE's mission is to inspire, educate, and connect future leaders with the economic, ethical, and legal principles of a free society.

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