Social networking sites and politics

Chatter in people's social networks about political issues prompts a share of disagreements among friends and the sites yield surprising revelations about people's views; 18% of users have shunned "friends" who have different ideas and 16% have found friends whose beliefs match their own.

Lee Rainie
Director, Pew Internet Project

Aaron Smith
Senior Research Specialist, Pew Internet Project

http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Social-networking-and-politics.aspx

Summary of findings

It turns out that birds of a feather don't always flock together on social networking sites when it comes to politics. There is evidence in a new survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project that on social networking sites (SNS):

- *Friends disagree with friends about political issues and usually let their disagreements pass without comment*. Among the SNS users whose friends post political content, 25% always agree or mostly agree with their friends' political postings; 73% of these SNS users "only sometimes" agree or never agree with their friends' political postings. When they disagree with others' posts, 66% of these SNS users say they usually ignore the posts; 28% said they usually respond with comments or posts of their own; and 5% said it depends on the circumstances.
- *Users can be surprised to learn the political leanings of their friends.* Some 38% of SNS users have discovered through a friend's posts that his/her political beliefs were different than the user thought they were.

As a rule, the most active and engaged *political* participants on SNS sit at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, yet their experiences around political material on SNS are quite similar. Very liberal users and very conservative users are often the most likely to have acted for and against others on SNS. They are also more likely than others to have been surprised by their friends' political views and to be in networks where they agree with what their friends post. Still, even with them, there is as much frequency of disagreement as there is of agreement.

In a survey completed in February 2012, the Pew Internet Project found that 80% of adults use the internet and 66% of those online Americans use social networking sites. Some 75% of SNS users say their friends post at least some content related to politics and 37% of SNS users post political material at least occasionally.

The survey suggests that those SNS users are like other Americans in that many are not particularly passionate about politics. It also shows that many friendships are not centered on political discussion and that many networks are not built with ideological compatibility as a core organizing principle.

The survey did find that a portion of SNS users have assessed some relationships based on political material that is posted on the sites. Some 18% of social networking site users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone for at least one of the following reasons:

- 10% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because that person posted too frequently about political subjects
- 9% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because they posted something about politics or issues that they disagreed with or found offensive
- 8% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because they argued about political issues on the site with the user or someone the user knows

- 5% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone because <u>they posted something about politics that the user worried would offend other friends</u>
- 4% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone <u>because they disagreed with something the user posted about politics</u>

When they shun others based on political content, it is most often a distant friend or acquaintance, rather than a close friend or family member. But roughly a third of those who have ended contact on SNS say a family member or close friend was involved.

At the other end of the scale, 16% of SNS users have friended or followed someone because that person shared the user's political views. In addition:

- 47% of SNS users have hit the "like" button in response to political comments or material posted by someone else.
- 38% have posted positive comments in response to a political post or status update from someone else.

About the survey

These are the findings from a survey conducted from January 20-February 19, 2012 among 2,253 adults age 18 and over, including 901 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Main Findings

Social networking sites have become places where political conversation, debate, and proselytizing occur, especially during campaign seasons. These new arenas of political discussion have drawn attention among political activists and have been a major focus of activity particularly since the campaign of Barack Obama aggressively embraced them in the 2008 presidential campaign. At the same time, some analysts have expressed concerns about the impact of social networking sites on the broad political culture. They have worried that on SNS users might customize their friendship networks by hanging out only with people who share and reinforce their political views.
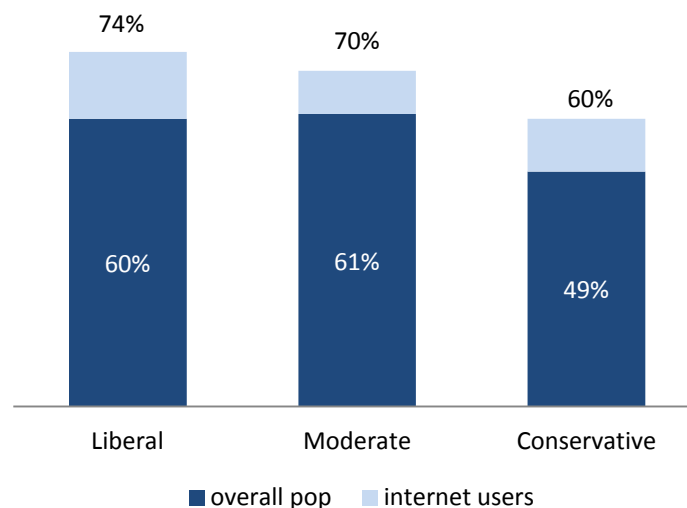
A new survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project posed a series of questions about people's general use of SNS for politics and about the ways in which they interact with friends on the sites over political material. One goal of the survey was to see if people are using the sites in a way that suggests they live in social network "echo chambers" of like-minded friends.

Overall, the new survey found that 80% of American adults use the internet and 66% of those online adults participate in social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google+. That amounts to more than half of the entire U.S. population who are SNS users. When it comes to SNS users, the internet users who describe their political ideology as moderate or liberal are more likely than conservatives to use social networking sites: 74% of internet users who describe themselves as liberal use SNS and 70% of internet users who are moderate are SNS users – that compares with 60% of conservative internet users who are SNS users. The chart below shows what proportion of the entire population – not just internet users – fall into these categories.

Who uses social networking sites

% of liberals, moderates, and conservatives who use SNS

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for overall survey = 2,253. N for internet users = 1,729. Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

We focused our questioning about politics with those SNS users and a subset of them who said they received political material from their friends on the sites.

38% of social networking site users have discovered through their friends' postings that their political beliefs were different than they thought

It turns out that SNS postings reveal surprises for many users when it comes to discovering the political views of their friends. We asked all the SNS users in our survey whether they have ever learned that someone's beliefs were different than they thought based on something they posted on the sites. Some 38% of SNS users said they had made that discovery and 60% said they had not.

Democrats, liberals, and people with very conservative views were more likely than others to say that they had been surprised about someone's views as they were expressed on SNS.

Social networking site users learned via someone's posts that a friend had different political views than they thought

% of social networking site users who say they learned someone's views were different (among Democrats, Republicans, Independents; very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal users)
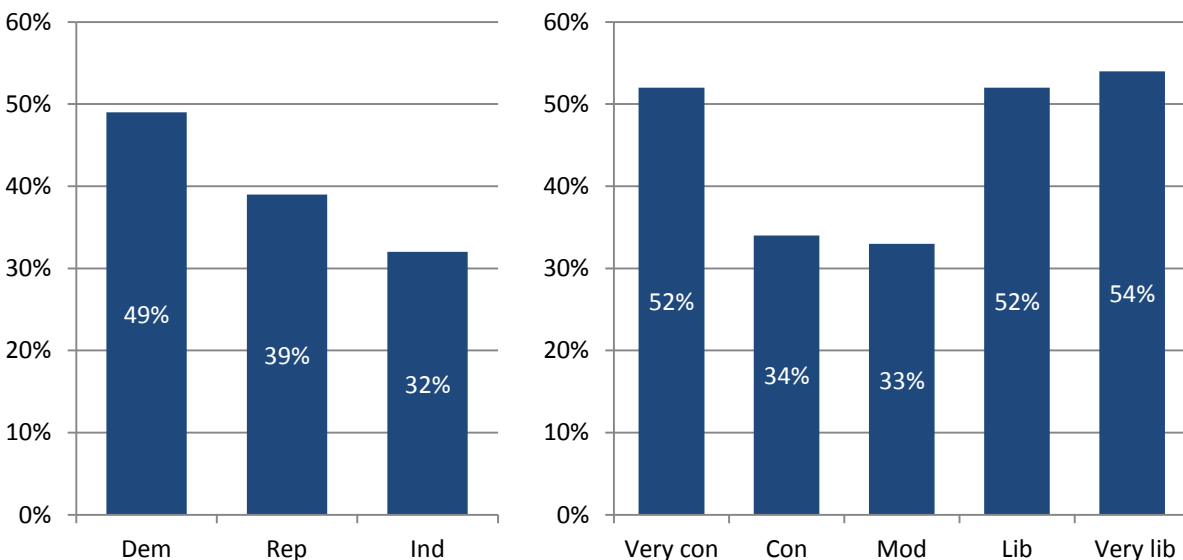
Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for social networking site users = 1,047. Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

How social networking site users have responded to political content they do not like

Politics can be a sensitive subject and a number of SNS users have decided to block, unfriend, or hide someone because of their politics or posting activities. In all, 18% of social networking site users have taken one of those steps by doing at least one of the following:

- 10% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on the site because that person posted too frequently about political subjects
- 9% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on the site because they posted something about politics or issues that they disagreed with or found offensive
- 8% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on the site because they argued about political issues on the site with the user or someone the user knows
- 5% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on the site because they posted something about politics that the user worried would offend other friends
- 4% of SNS users have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on the site because they disagreed with something the user posted about politics

Of course, that means that 82% of SNS users have not taken any steps to ignore or disconnect from someone whose views are different – or have not encountered any views that would prompt such a move.

Liberals are the most likely to have taken each of these steps to block, unfriend, or hide. In all, 28% of liberals have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on SNS because of one of these reasons, compared with 16% of conservatives and 14% of moderates.

Have you ever blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone on a SNS because they …?

% of SNS users who have done this
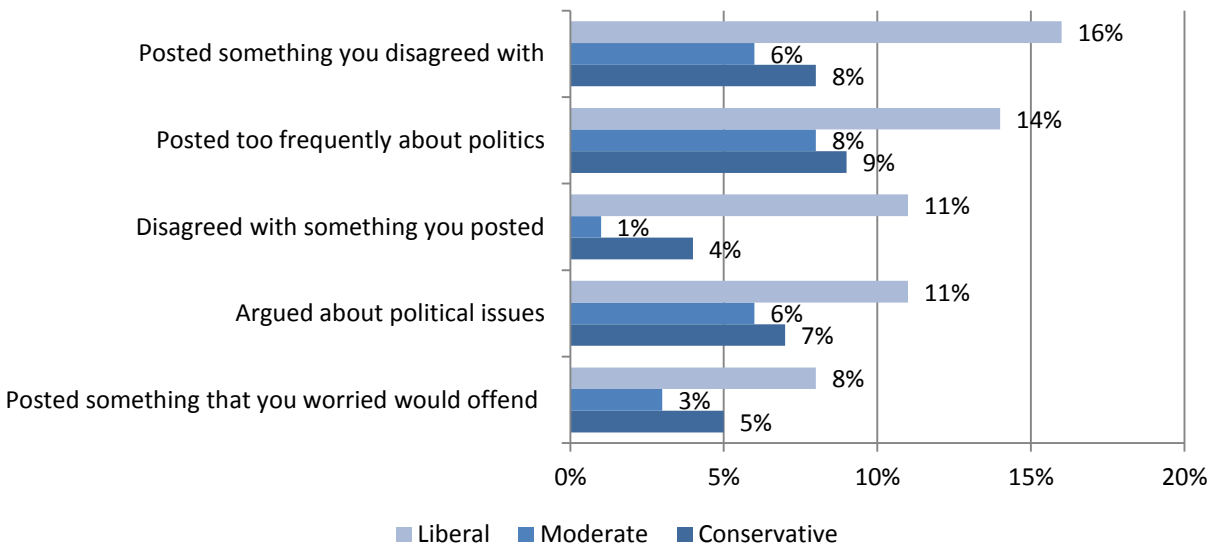
Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for social networking site users = 1,047. Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

Who gets dropped?

The 18% of SNS users who had dumped or shunned someone because of their political disagreements were asked a follow-up question about the people who were dropped. The majority were people who did not have deep connections to the user who dropped them:

- 67% of those who blocked, unfriended, or hid someone on a social networking site did it to a distant friend or acquaintance
- 31% of those who blocked, unfriended, or hid someone on a social networking site did it to someone they had never met in person
- 31% of those who blocked, unfriended, or hid someone on a social networking site did it to a close personal friend
- 21% of those who blocked, unfriended, or hid someone on a social networking site did it to a coworker
- 18% of those who blocked, unfriended, or hid someone on a social networking site did it to a member of their family

The cohort is so small that it is not possible to do a statistically reliable analysis of trends. But as a rule, there were no ideological differences among those who had dropped someone from their SNS world because of politics.

How social networking site users have responded to political content they like

Are social networking sites hotbeds of political affirmation and reinforcement for users? There are a variety of ways that people can express their support on social networking sites like Facebook and a portion of users have used various means to add their support to political activity on SNS. The most fervid ideological believers are the most likely to have done all of the activities on SNS that we queried (see charts below). At the same time, most users do not engage in supporting political content on the sites.

- 47% of SNS users have hit the "like" button in response to political comments or material posted by someone else.
- 38% of SNS users have posted positive comments in response to a political post or status update from someone else. Democratic users of SNS (48%) are much more likely to have done this than Republicans (33%) and Independents (37%).
- 16% have friended or followed someone because that person shared the user's political views.

Overall, these figures suggest that the majority are not actively seeking out friends based on political affiliation or views.

What SNS users do about political content on the sites that they appreciate

% of SNS users who respond in different ways
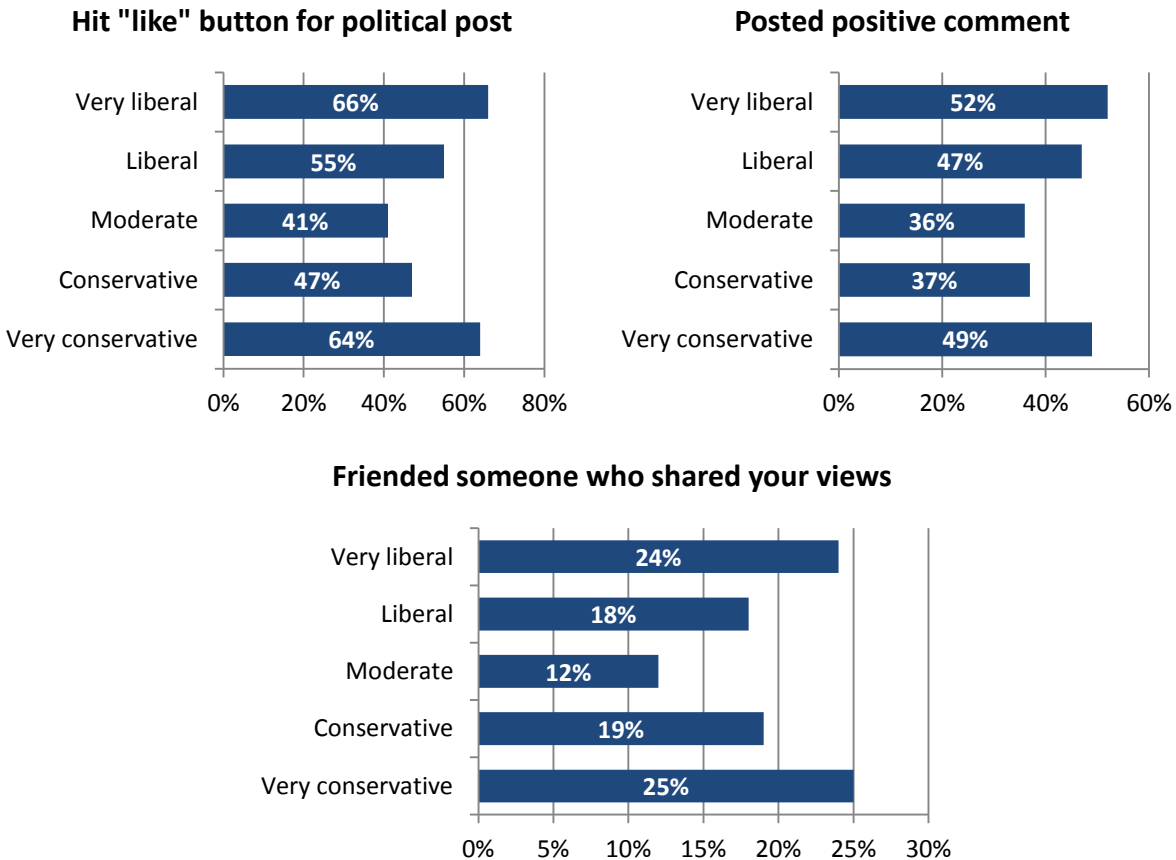
Hit "like" button for political post

Very liberal	66%
Liberal	55%
Moderate	41%
Conservative	47%
Very conservative	64%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

Posted positive comment

Very liberal	52%
Liberal	47%
Moderate	36%
Conservative	37%
Very conservative	49%

0% 20% 40% 60%

Friended someone who shared your views

Very liberal	24%
Liberal	18%
Moderate	12%
Conservative	19%
Very conservative	25%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30%

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for social networking site users = 1,047. (Note: N for very conservative SNS users is 56.) Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

A fifth of social networking site users have avoided making political comments on the sites for fear of offending others

For some users politics is an off-limits subject. Some 22% of SNS users say they have decided not to post political comments or links to political material because they were worried it might upset or offend someone. Some 77% of SNS users said they never acted this way.
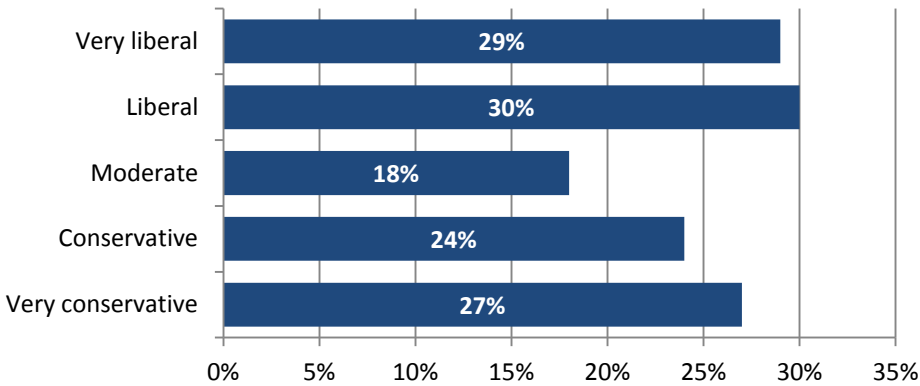
Liberals and conservatives are more likely than political moderates to have self-censored their posts.

Those who have not made SNS posts about politics for fear of offending others

% of SNS users

Category	Percentage
Very liberal	29%
Liberal	30%
Moderate	18%
Conservative	24%
Very conservative	27%

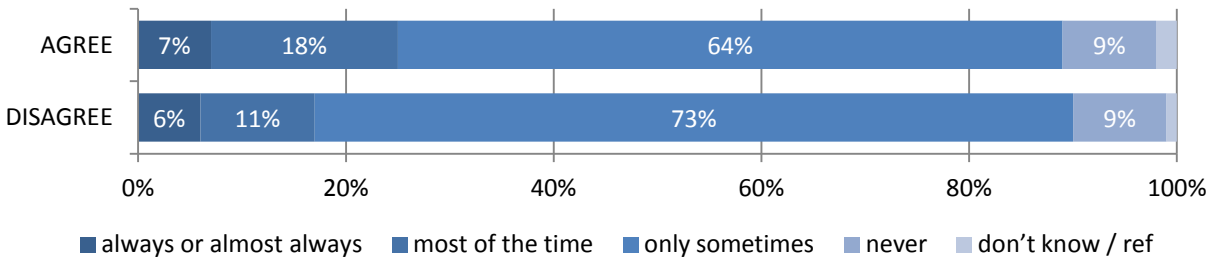## Inside social networking sites, friends sometimes agree and sometimes disagree

Three-quarters of those SNS users – 75% – say their friends post at least some content related to politics on the sites from time to time. They amount to 40% of the entire adult population.

Describing their friends on social networking sites, liberal SNS users are more likely to have friends who regularly discuss politics on SNS than either conservatives or moderates. Some 38% of liberal SNS users say their friends share and post material related to politics on the sites at least some of the time. That is a higher figure than the one for conservatives: 26% of conservative SNS users say their friends post material on politics at least some of the time on SNS. And 31% of moderate SNS users say their friends post material on politics at least some of the time.

Asked how often they agree and disagree with their friends' postings and shared material on SNS, those who receive political material tend to agree with their friends' posts "only sometimes." A quarter of those who receive political information on SNS – 25% – say they always agree or mostly agree and 64% say they only agree sometimes. On the other end of the spectrum, 9% of this group of SNS users say they never disagree and the rest have disagreements at least some of the time.

How often do you agree/disagree with the political opinions or political content your friends post on social networking sites?

% of SNS users whose friends post political information who agree and disagree with friends' political postings

	always or almost always	most of the time	only sometimes	never	don't know / ref
AGREE	7%	18%	64%		9%
DISAGREE	6%	11%	73%		9%

always or almost always ■ **most of the time** ■ **only sometimes** ■ **never** ■ **don't know / ref**
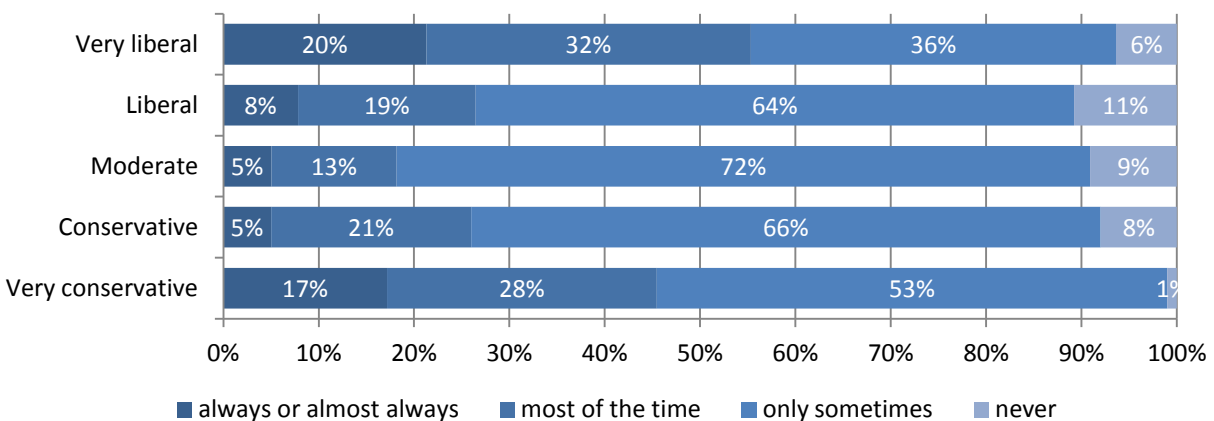
Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for SNS users whose friends post political content on social networking sites = 763. Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

Those at either end of the political spectrum – those who are very conservative or very liberal – are more likely than others to say they agree with their friends' comments most of the time or always. Some 51% of very liberal SNS users whose friends post political content say they agree most of the time or always with their friends' SNS offerings and 45% of very conservative users say that. But it is still noteworthy that the majority say they only sometimes agree with their friends' postings on the sites.

The most ideological are the most likely to agree most often on social networking sites

*Asked of SNS users whose friends post political content: How often do you **agree** with the political opinions or political content your friends post on social networking sites?*

	always or almost always	most of the time	only sometimes	never
Very liberal	20%	32%	36%	6%
Liberal	8%	19%	64%	11%
Moderate	5%	13%	72%	9%
Conservative	5%	21%	66%	8%
Very conservative	17%	28%	53%	1%

always or almost always ■ **most of the time** ■ **only sometimes** ■ **never**

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project January 20-February 19, 2012 tracking survey. N for SNS users whose friends post political content on social networking sites = 763. (Note: N for very conservative SNS users is 47.) Survey was conducted on landline and cell phones and in English and Spanish.

When the issue is the frequency of disagreement, a kind of mirror story emerges. Most SNS users whose friends post political content "only sometimes" disagree with material posted by their friends. Very conservative and very liberal SNS users are more likely than others to say they never disagree with their friends' political contributions on social networking sites. Only 15% of very conservative and 12% of very liberal SNS users say they never disagree with what their friends post about politics on the sites.

How SNS users respond when their friends post political material with which they disagree

We asked those whose friends post political material what they do when they disagree. Some 66% of these SNS users said they usually ignore the material they objected to and 28% said they usually respond with a comment or post of their own. And 5% said it depends on the circumstances.

Interestingly enough, there were no differences in these responses among party partisans or different ideological groups. All were equally likely to say they usually ignore the posts or respond to them.

Negative reactions to users' posts

Some 37% of SNS users who exchange material about politics on the sites have gotten strong negative reactions when they posted political material and 63% said they have never experienced such reactions. Interestingly enough, there is no notable variance across the political spectrum on this question: Republicans, Democrats, liberals, and conservatives among SNS users have experienced the same level of challenge from their SNS friends.

Survey Questions

Q22   How about the people you are friends with on social networking sites? How much of what THEY SHARE AND POST is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections? [READ 1-5]
Based on SNS users [N=1,047]

	current	
%	3	All or almost all of it
	6	Most
	30	Some
	36	Just a little
	23	None at all
	2	(DO NOT READ) Don't know
	*	(DO NOT READ) Refused

Q23   How often do you [INSERT ITEMS IN ORDER] with the political opinions or political content your friends post on social networking sites? Would you say always or almost always, most of the time, only sometimes or never?
Based on those whose friends post political content on SNS [N=763]

	always or almost always	most of the time	only sometimes	never	don't know	refused
AGREE	7	18	64	9	1	1
DISAGREE	6	11	73	9	1	*

Q24   When one of your friends posts something about POLITICS on a social networking site that you DISAGREE with, how do you USUALLY respond? Do you usually...[READ AND ROTATE 1-2]
Based on those whose friends post political content that they disagree with on SNS [N=684]

	current	
%	66	Ignore the post you disagree with (OR)
	28	Respond to it by posting a comment or posting something of your own (OR)
	5	(DO NOT READ) It depends
	1	(DO NOT READ) Neither/Something else
	0	(DO NOT READ) Don't know

      *   (DO NOT READ) Refused

Q25 Have you ever learned that someone's political beliefs were DIFFERENT than you thought they were, based on something they posted on a social networking site, or has this never happened to you?
Based on SNS users [N=1,047]

	current	
%	38	Yes
	60	No
	1	Don't know
	*	Refused

Q26 When you yourself have posted something political on a social networking site, have you ever gotten a strong NEGATIVE reaction from a friend or someone who follows you – or has this never happened?
Based on SNS users who post political content on SNS [N=378]

	current	
%	37	Yes, have ever gotten a strong negative reaction
	63	No, has never happened
	*	Don't know
	0	Refused

Q27 When using social networking sites, have you ever blocked, UNfriended or hidden someone because they...[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]? Have you ever blocked, UNfriended or hidden someone on a social networking site because they... [INSERT NEXT ITEM]?
Based on SNS users [N=1,047]

	yES, HAVE DONE THIS	NO, HAVE NOT DONE THIS	don't know	refused
Posted TOO FREQUENTLY about politics or political issues	10	90	*	*
Posted something about politics or political issues that you DISAGREED with or found OFFENSIVE	9	90	*	*
ARGUED about political issues on the site with you or someone you know	8	92	*	*
Disagreed with something YOU posted about politics or political issues	4	95	*	*
Posted something related to politics or political issues that you worried would OFFEND your other friends or people who follow you	5	94	*	*

Q28 Thinking about all the times you have blocked, hidden or unfriended someone on a social networking site BECAUSE OF POLITICS OR POLITICAL ISSUES... Were any of those people...[INSERT ITEMS IN ORDER], or not?
Based on SNS users who have ever blocked, hidden or unfriended someone on SNS [N=177]

	Yes	No	don't know	refused
A member of your family	18	81	1	0
A close personal friend	31	69	0	0
A coworker	21	78	1	0
A more distant friend or acquaintance	67	32	1	0
Someone you have never met in person	31	68	1	1

Q29 Have you ever done any of the following on a social networking site? (First/Next), have you ever...[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE], or have you not done this?
Based on SNS users [N=1,047]

	yES, HAVE DONE THIS	NO, HAVE NOT DONE THIS	don't know	refused
Friended or followed someone because they SHARE YOUR POLITICAL VIEWS	16	84	*	0
Clicked the "like" button in response to POLITICAL comments or material posted by someone else	47	52	1	*
Posted a positive comment in response to a POLITICAL post or status update from someone else	38	61	1	0

Q30 Have you ever decided NOT to post a political comment or link on a social networking site because you were worried it might upset or offend someone?
Based on SNS users [N=1,047]

	current	
%	22	Yes
	77	No
	*	Don't know
	*	Refused

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International from January 20 to February 19, 2012, among a sample of 2,253 adults, age 18 and older. Telephone interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by landline (1,352) and cell phone (901, including 440 without a landline phone). For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. For results based Internet users (n=1,729), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were selected with probabilities in proportion to their share of listed telephone households from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings. The cellular sample was not list-assisted, but was drawn through a systematic sampling from dedicated wireless 100-blocks and shared service 100-blocks with no directory-listed landline numbers.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. The sample was released in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger population. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. At least seven attempts were made to complete an interview at a sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Each number received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone available. For the landline sample, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male or female currently at home based on a random rotation. If no male/female was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult of the other gender. For the cellular sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone. Interviewers verified that the person was an adult and in a safe place before administering the survey. Cellular sample respondents were offered a post-paid cash incentive for their participation. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day.

Weighting is generally used in survey analysis to compensate for sample designs and patterns of non-response that might bias results. A two-stage weighting procedure was used to weight this dual-frame sample. The first-stage corrected for different probabilities of selection associated with the number of adults in each household and each respondent's telephone usage patterns.[1] This weighting also adjusts for the overlapping landline and cell sample frames and the relative sizes of each frame and each sample.

The second stage of weighting balances sample demographics to population parameters. The sample is balanced to match national population parameters for sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, region (U.S. Census definitions), population density, and telephone usage. The Hispanic origin was split out based on nativity; U.S born and non-U.S. born. The White, non-Hispanic subgroup is also balanced on age, education and region. The basic weighting parameters came from a special analysis of the Census Bureau's 2011 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) that included all households in the United States. The population density parameter was derived from Census 2000 data. The cell phone usage parameter came from an analysis of the July-December 2010 National Health Interview Survey.[2]

Following is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

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[1] i.e., whether respondents have only a landline telephone, only a cell phone, or both kinds of telephone.
[2] Blumberg SJ, Luke JV. Wireless substitution: Early release of estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, July-December, 2010. National Center for Health Statistics. June 2011.

Sample Disposition

Landline	Cell	
33,732	22,499	Total Numbers Dialed
1,396	274	Non-residential
1,483	47	Computer/Fax
8	----	Cell phone
14,936	8,237	Other not working
3,094	467	Additional projected not working
12,815	13,474	Working numbers
38.0%	59.9%	Working Rate
1,031	156	No Answer / Busy
4,290	5,288	Voice Mail
40	16	Other Non-Contact
7,454	8,014	Contacted numbers
58.2%	59.5%	Contact Rate
513	1,256	Callback
5,491	5,273	Refusal
1,450	1,485	Cooperating numbers
19.5%	18.5%	Cooperation Rate
67	41	Language Barrier
----	524	Child's cell phone
1,383	920	Eligible numbers
95.4%	62.0%	Eligibility Rate
31	19	Break-off
1,352	901	Completes
97.8%	97.9%	Completion Rate
11.1%	10.8%	Response Rate

The disposition reports all of the sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from the original telephone number samples. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:

- Contact rate – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made
- Cooperation rate – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- Completion rate – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus the response rate for the landline sample was 11 percent. The response rate for the cellular sample was 11 percent.