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When Your Friends Don't Share Your Politics

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**Next Avenue**, CONTRIBUTOR

By Stephen Antczak, [Next Avenue Contributor](#)

During an [election year](#), especially one as blistering as this, you may be finding it difficult to maintain friendships crossing party lines. That's, sadly, a not uncommon problem.

A study by political scientists Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University and Sean J. Westwood of Princeton University ([Fear and Loathing Against Party Lines](#)) found that people are perfectly willing to openly decry, and actually discriminate against, those who identify with the party opposing their own (the paper's authors call this "outparty animus").

So what can you do to prevent strong political disagreements from coming between you and your friends? I spoke with a few experts — including famed political adviser rivals and spouses James Carville (Democrat) and Mary Matalin (Republican) — for their advice.

Easiest Way to Stay Friends

The simplest way to stay civil, according to the pros, is to just avoid bringing up politics when you get together with pals.

Just don't talk about it — especially when you're with someone who gets feisty about the candidates and issues.

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But shouldn't reasonably intelligent adults be able to discuss politics without the conversation turning acrimonious? Yes.

A Tip From Bernie Sanders

Regardless of your political affiliation, it might be a wise to take a cue from Democratic presidential candidate [Sen. Bernie Sanders](#). Here's what he said when he gave a speech to Liberty University audience that disagreed with his views (the school was founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell):

"Let me start off by acknowledging what I think all of you already know," Sanders said, going on to acknowledge that a number of his positions were "very, very different" from those of the crowd. Getting some of your political differences out of the way with a friend may help the two of you find common ground on other issues, especially when the subject is approached from a place of mutual respect.

Belittling or making fun of your friend's political opinions is probably not the best approach to maintaining a bond with someone who holds dear ideas about the election and the issues that are opposite to yours.

(More: Boomer Questions for the Presidential Candidates)

Iyengar suggested that, "When you encounter agreement on a particular issue," perhaps, then, "you explore other issues. Research shows that Americans often express inconsistent views — liberal on one, conservative on another — on the issues. You might disagree on abortion, only to discover that you agree on Obamacare."

Even so, the Stanford professor says he anticipates that, based on the tenor of politics for the last eight years, "matters will become more acrimonious in the immediate future. I think polarized politics is here to stay."

What Mary Matalin and James Carville Advise

Political opposites Matalin and Carville (she helped George H. W. Bush win the White House; he did the same for Bill Clinton) have famously maintained a successful marriage since 1993, as recounted in their memoir, *Love and War: Twenty Years, Three Presidents, Two Daughters and One Louisiana Home*.

I wondered what people should do if they find themselves

surprised by a friend's sudden outburst insulting their political sensibilities. So I posed the following to them: "Let's say you're meeting your friend at a sports bar and a political ad comes on. Your friend says, 'Hillary Clinton should go to prison,' or 'Jeb Bush is a crook.' You vehemently disagree, but don't want to get into a back-and-forth and you also don't want to back down. What should you do?"

Carville said he would respond with, "That's not the first time I've heard that, but I hope it's the last time."

Matalin countered: "Among the many reasons I love my husband is this certainty. Neither of us would hang out with such cretins, (nor) would we feel compelled to respond. (If this) is this is a problem for people out there, they need to change their friends. There is more to life than politics. And idiots."

Failing that, experts say, you could point out to your friend that such comments make you feel unwelcome. That could work.

What Makes for a Good Friendship

A 2011 Boston College study (*Can Friendships Be Partisan?*) found that both "liberals and conservatives were comfortable with some level of bipartisanship among their friends."

While people tend to seek out others with similar political views, the researchers noted, other factors mattered more to the success of a friendship: trustworthiness, dependability and an easygoing manner.

The study pointed out that there's real value in "bipartisan friendships", too.

Not only does having friends with different outlooks on life enrich *you*, but it adds value to society as a whole. Promoting friendships between liberals and conservatives, the authors noted, benefits society by increasing "intergroup interactions" which can help people find common ground, rather than simply bleat their positions from opposite corners.

That's one reason why I'll maintain the relationships I have with my conservative friends; not because I believe I can change them, but because we provide each other with an alternative portal through which to view certain issues.

Also, and this is the main reason, because they're my *friends*, and I value their company. True friendship should, er, trump politics every time.