



## **In our opinion: This election belongs to you, not to social media**

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Americans should not let online adversaries dictate an election that belongs to the people.

We're certain you can predict what social media will have to say between now and November's election. What's more important — even vital — is what you will say about it around the family dinner table.

Of course, there's no thing as a monolithic "social media"; rather, it's a collection of millions of Americans who have, to varying degrees, found the vacuum of cyberspace and the cloak of anonymity useful for publishing everything from cat videos to vile threats. It is a lot of things, but it is not the place where civic engagement shines.

It's not even the place that represents America. Shrewd algorithms feed users content they are likely to agree with, distorting what appears to be the normal discourse of the day. Less than a quarter of the country uses Twitter, and only 10% of those who are active on the site are responsible for 80% of its activity, according to [Pew Research Center](#). The platform tends to have more Democrats than Republicans, and many of the links that get shared don't even come from real people; about two-thirds are estimated to come from internet bots.

Not to mention some social media users deliberately spread misinformation and falsehoods. In short, the space is wholly unrepresentative of the country's people.

Social media also feeds on base emotions, hardly the type of reasoning that would win hearts and minds. No one changes their opinion if being shouted down. In fact, research shows responding to someone with animosity is more likely to cement them in their original ideas rather than open their views.

The conversations that will be most productive come Nov. 3 are the ones that happen offline. They are the ones that start with, "Help me understand ..." or, "What do you think about ...". They won't use labels or epithets, and they will emphasize participation rather than monologues.

They will also let people ardently disagree. As social scientist and Harvard professor Arthur Brooks is fond of saying, America doesn't need to disagree less, it needs to disagree better. It's in the competition of ideas that solutions are honed, not in the absence of conflict.

But too many people are feeling burned by explosive rhetoric. A recent study from the Cato Institute shows 62% of Americans hold political views they are afraid to share in public. Such “self-censorship” is on the rise, up from 58% three years ago.

Social media fosters the kind of angst, fear and frustration that stifles honest and authentic expression. It’s better at producing noise than reliable news and real dialogue.

It is time for real conversations about real issues.

An unexpected but welcome side effect of the pandemic is that couples have been more likely to discuss politics and the social issues of the day, according to the Deseret News’ annual American Family Survey. And among those who do engage the issues, two-thirds have had political conversations with their children.

That sort of discussion, supposing it’s respectful yet substantive, should spill into the community at large.

With three weeks to go until Election Day, let this be a period of recommitment to the art of conversation and persuasion. Don’t let thousands of online “friends” contort the issues into white-hot arguments and ad hominem attacks. Find a family member or neighbor with whom you disagree and respectfully engage in the work that will keep the election rooted in reality.