

# Book Review: Friendship Reconsidered: What it Means and How It Matters to Politics by P.E. Digeser

Linda Quest

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Quest, Linda () "Book Review: Friendship Reconsidered: What it Means and How It Matters to Politics by P.E. Digeser," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol94/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

**Digester, P. E. *Friendship Reconsidered: What it Means and How It Matters to Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xxi + 361 pages. Hardcover, \$65.00.**

This book is captivating reading. It appeared in print while a respected legislator was being prosecuted for corruption. Basically, he and a friend had chosen different careers, succeeded, and remained friends. One career yielded wealth, one led to contacts and influence. P. E. Digester is a political scientist, and the book is a broadly comparative work in value-normative political analysis. Digester could not have known about the legislator's predicament when she wrote *Friendship Reconsidered*, but I was hoping for fresh understanding from the book. In providing that, regardless of the eventual court decision, Digester succeeded in her purpose—"if, at best, this work has increased our understanding of friendship it will have also increased a sense of what we do not fully understand" (p. xxi). Her stated goal was to "carve out a position between whole-hearted endorsement and complete rejection of friendship as a political concern" (p. xiii). She did that.

Here is how she did those things and simultaneously made a significant contribution to social-science scholarship:

Digester dissects the well-known classics and extensively augments them with more recent publications, chiefly but not exclusively Western and all authentically scholarly. They all define their terms and adhere to their respective definitions. Collectively, they generate, in Digester's words, *kaleidoscopic diversity and mutability* apropos friendship. The classics yielded ambivalence on friendship. Given that classics were by men and about men—excluding women, slaves, and most foreigners—it improves the database that abundant women authors and other up-to-date political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers are found among Digester's sources. She goes far beyond the classics on friendship and how friendship might matter to politics. Does this thereby produce more precision in defining friendship or detailing how friendship matters to politics than the formulations that left Socrates unsatisfied? No. It keeps confirming *kaleidoscopic diversity and mutability*. Collaterally, it shows that friendship and politics are similar up to the point where politics can legally involve state power to punish.

Emphatically, the book itself satisfies. It is masterfully crafted. The who, what, where, when, and how are comprehensive, keenly analyzed, and usefully arranged. Digester's comparative technique tallies friendship vis-à-vis politics helpfully for pedagogy: *Favorability to politics*—firstly, settling disagreements nonviolently, without rancor; secondly, being attentive to one another's interests; thirdly, being open to frank speech; and further, forbearing strategic thinking; finally, acting in the spirit of generosity. *Corrosiveness to politics*—first, social media alienate users from each other, and mass-society renders passers-by anonymous; second, cronyism, faction, preferential treatment erode impartiality and proportionality; further, friends are privileged and strangers are left out; and finally, flexibility is inhibited to respond to change and to negotiate worthwhile political agendas. The Notes are a treasure in themselves. The Index entries are skillfully chosen.

The centerpiece is “Friendship During Dark Times” (Chapter Six). It focuses on friendship in the subtitle *What It Means and How It Matters to Politics*. Are we “puzzled by how one could be friends with someone who holds diametrically opposed positions on the central and most heated issues of the day” (p. 143)? Do we ask “is something wrong with a regime that is threatened by friendship” (p. 144)? *Dark times*—despotism, civil strife, anarchic situations, delegitimated political systems, collapsed public space, irreconcilable ideological divisions, dangerous ultimatums, thuggery, turmoil, instability, tyranny—undermine daily life anywhere people are beset by violence, whether in neighborhoods, cities or states, or international relations. According to the proverbial Chinese curse, they are living in “interesting times.” Friendship even in such environments cannot be forbidden.

Naturally gregarious beings such as humans do things together casually, voluntarily, or optionally. Elements of play tend to be present. Political animals by nature live in groups, never completely agreeing, and conflicts arise. Human beings tend to institutionalize contestation of their disagreements in jousts or courts. Rules-making, laws, feuds, and war-making become involved: “With me or against me?” Everywhere, humans are inherently both gregarious and political. Curiosity, too, is natural, prompting investigation of what differentiates friendship and politics. Is friendship apprenticeship for citizenship and *ta politika*? That is arguable.

Digester reconsiders in Notes her introductory assertion that friendship had been “exiled from political theory for centuries” and now “friendship is making a comeback ... either as a model or a touchstone for rethinking politics” (pp. xii, 283-325). Perhaps laws against corruption, conspiracy, and racketeering provoked the comeback by criminalizing friendships through malicious litigation and savage prosecutions. What redeeming, salutary features of friendships does *Friendship Reconsidered* expose for political theory and praxis?

Friendship ameliorates human behavior and relationships.

Friendship facilitates willingness of political opponents to continue to cooperate.

Friendship cuts across deep political differences and works against the impulse that “you are either with us or against us.”

Friendship is infra-political, carrying along covert politics via custom, informality, and extralegality on the current of human gregariousness.

Friendship in dark times prevents collapse and annihilation of people and positions from alienation and atomization.

Friendship keeps opposition alive.

In sum, Digester’s book is comparative, prudential political theory. Friendship emerges as a phenomenon that defies time and challenges oppression or degradation of politics. It supports, and is supported by, individuality. Friendships can be manipulated and stymied by laws and policies but cannot be prevented or easily coopted by political and legal institutions. Avoid ruining friendship by legally protecting it (like a “minority”) or demonizing it (like “the usual suspects” or “business as usual”). Friendship might handicap politics, but it is an important part of the puzzle of politics. As Digester says, “It becomes difficult to think of a

nobler way for connecting politically unrelated, diverse, and occasionally pig-headed people” (pp. xii, 280). How valuable is the *kaleidoscopic diversity and mutability* of friendship? Where would family, city, and international life be without it?

Linda Quest, Ph.D.  
Professor of Political Science  
Pace University  
New York, New York