



# Political Engagement in the Age of Facebook: Student Voices

► **Laura Donnelly-Smith**, associate editor and staff writer, Association of American Colleges and Universities

*In addition to our contributors' research and analysis about student political engagement, Peer Review sought out opinions directly from the source: current college students and recent graduates. Associate editor Laura Donnelly-Smith spoke to students from across the political spectrum about political engagement and their generation's attitudes toward politically active citizenship.*

**AARTI SHETH, junior**  
State University of New York-Stony Brook  
Political science major

## What factors influence you to get involved, do more research on an issue, or take action?

It depends a lot on whether I have strong beliefs on an issue. To take action, you have to have passion. Recently, I worked on my campus with NYPIRG (New York Public Interest Research Group) to do a textbook pricing survey, to find out what students were paying for their textbooks. We put together a report for the New York state legislature and possibly to go to Congress. The goal is to see new legislation to help students better afford their textbooks.

## Are students of your generation more or less politically engaged than those on campuses in the past?

I think there was a general shift from indifference to engagement this primary season. There are a lot more organizations now that are geared toward youth and getting students involved, so there are a lot more opportunities.

## How do you learn about politics?

Mostly, I learn through the broadcast news and the Internet, from reading online. I learn from my professors a lot, too—I definitely think my education is connected to my political engagement. One of my professors used to be in politics and told me a lot about her work, and I was very inspired by her.

## Are social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace useful for encouraging student political engagement?

I think Facebook and similar sites are great tools. You can find out who is interested in the same things as you are, and what political organizations they're involved with that you might also want to be

a part of. And YouTube is great for catching up on whatever you miss with candidates and debates.

## Are you hopeful your political participation will affect change?

I think students are just starting to realize we have the ability to make change. Having Barack Obama as [the democratic presidential] nominee is change in itself—just seeing that gets a lot of students excited.

**GABE BAROUH, sophomore**  
Montgomery College  
Sociology major

## How do you learn about politics?

I'd definitely say my father is a big influence. But so are friends, family, and friends' parents, just having everyday conversations. When I hear a name or idea, I look it up, usually on Wikipedia, even though that's probably bad. Lately, it's been a lot of me asking my friends' parents, "What is your opinion on X?" because they know so much about things, and I think we should take advantage of it.

## Are social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace useful for encouraging student political engagement?

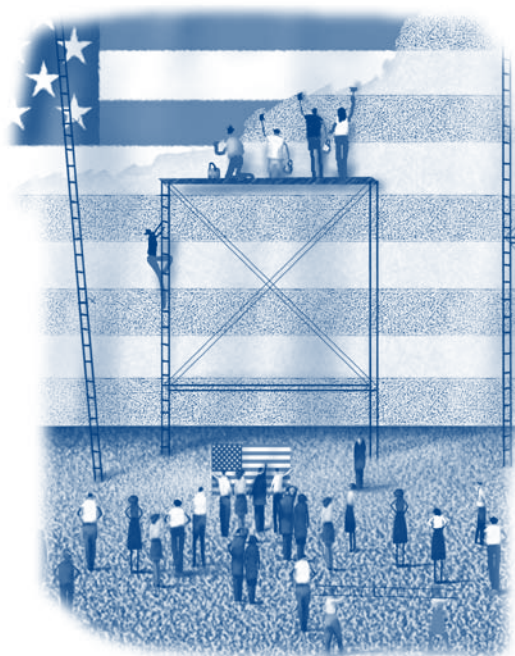
Sometimes it can be useful, I guess, but I don't take it seriously enough. If someone sends me a Facebook invite to a political event I might not go, but if someone invites me directly, I'm much more likely to go. Social networking sites do help everyone get on the same level, but I don't think people use [these sites] for a political purpose that much.

### Are you hopeful your participation in politics can bring about change?

I'm not really into Democrat/Republican. I'm interested more in options, what's available outside them. I think being stagnant is bad, and letting other people run things. I think maybe the problem with America is that people allow others to run things and don't get involved enough on their own.

### Are students of your generation more or less politically engaged than those on campuses in the past?

Compared to during my parents' youth, young people today are definitely not engaged. In the 1960s, politics was all around, and there were people who wanted to change the system. Our parents did pass the gene on to us, though, and now it's getting bigger again—being open-minded and questioning the government. Are we as involved, action-wise? I doubt it. But a lot of kids are smart and are reading up on things now.



**CHRISTINE ANGSTMAN**, May 2008 graduate  
University of Utah,  
Business administration major with  
international business emphasis

### Did you have a defining moment that inspired you to become politically engaged?

In college, I was really involved in a sorority as the philanthropy chair, and that got me out in the community, organizing events and projects. You really learn firsthand how issues matter to people when you're connecting with them at the community level. That's definitely what's motivated me to want to stay involved after college.

### Are social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace useful for encouraging student political engagement?

I've never been a member of any social networking Web site. I've never done it because it's a very impersonal way to network and communicate with others. I think if you use it the right way, it can be useful for networking, but some of the stuff that ends up on those sites doesn't accurately portray people as they are.

### Are you hopeful your participation in politics can bring about change?

As pessimistic as it may sound, I do think politics settles into "business as usual." It's from lack of involvement and apathy from large numbers of people. The most effective role I can take is to be involved myself, and try to get others involved. That's how change happens.

### How do you learn about politics?

I learn about politics first through my family—dinner-table debates are not rare. I read the newspaper, and just being in Washington, DC for my internship has opened

up a lot of doors for me, for learning new sources of information. I'm seeing how people are passionate, and how they do research and learn about issues.

**NATALIE BROWN**, first-year  
American University  
International relations major

### How do you learn about politics?

When I was in high school, I had a teacher who suggested I try speech and debate. Participating in that really got me interested in current affairs, and I also did mock trial and student government. I'm always online, reading MSNBC every day and reading the newspaper.

### Are social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace useful for encouraging student political engagement?

We already spend so much time on the phone, texting, and on things like Facebook, and now they are becoming more "mainstream"—the *New York Times* is on MySpace now. It's much easier to learn about politics through sites we're already using. People who wouldn't normally educate themselves during an election year now do—it's easier, and more available in formats we are used to.

### What factors influence your decisions to get involved, do more research on an issue, or take action?

Just hearing people voice their concerns is the biggest factor. I was an intern at my senator's state office and answered the phones. When people call and say that they are really concerned they're going to freeze this winter in Maine if [heating oil] prices don't go down, that makes me interested in the issue. I want to go online to find out what's happening, both on the Senate floor and at the global level.

### Do you think your civic involvement is connected to your education?

I think my college education is going to



help me link everything together, all my interests in politics, international issues, speech, and debate. I think college will also be a good push for me to accomplish more in other subjects that aren't my main interests, so I can see all the connections.

**KELSON MOSIER, Senior**  
Brigham Young University,  
Geography major with geospatial  
intelligence and Farsi emphasis

**How do you learn about politics?**

I would say through my parents and grandparents, who are really politically active. I think a lot of people my age are less involved than our parents' generation was. I've learned a lot in the classroom, too.

**What factors influence your decisions to get involved, do more research on an issue, or take action?**

The most important factors are my background and my personal interests. I served in the ROTC and Air Force Reserves for a year and a half, so the Iraq War and veterans' issues are really important to me. I

know firsthand why it's important and why we need to take care of these issues. The other thing is that I feel I'm really personally moderate, and I look around and see only one or two extremes. I feel an inevitable need to participate, and if I see something that isn't right, I have a moral responsibility to do something about it.

**Did you have a defining moment that inspired you to become politically engaged?**

I did a [church] mission in Brazil for two years. It really broadened my horizon about how people outside the United States perceive what we're doing. It opened my eyes that we really need to take into consideration of other's perspectives—it makes us be more open and a little more tolerant.

**Are you hopeful your participation in politics can bring about change?**

I think we should bring about change in politics, and can do that by learning from people who came before our generation. We have a dilution of what people a few generations ago got in terms of civic, social, and political stances on things. We're so

far off the foundation that we're forgetting why we do stuff—we just go through the motions. I think it's our responsibility to learn more.

**Are social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace useful for encouraging student political engagement?**

I think Facebook and things like it are vital—not only because it's made a difference in campaigning, but because we've got groups all over the Internet that people join because it's an amazing forum for political opinion that couldn't exist elsewhere—it's a fourth dimension. You have your television media, newspapers, your interpersonal communications, and then you have the Internet. I think it might even eclipse all the others as an outlet of political opinion. ■

*Invite your students to contribute their thoughts about political engagement to our online forum. Visit [www.aacu.org/peerreview/online\\_forum/forum.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/online_forum/forum.cfm).*

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