

RUNNING FROM OFFICE

Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics

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and

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#GovernmentSucks: How Young People Experience Contemporary Politics

In 1997, a former university administrator launched *collegepreptor.com*. The website's mission, as summarized on its home page, is to help students transition to college: "We believe the more you know about what to expect when you get to college, the better prepared you will be to deal with it." Accordingly, the site provides students with a list of items they should bring to college, definitions of "critical" college terms (including words like "faculty" and "syllabus"), and links to financial-aid information. In addition, it features the equivalent of a daily planner of four full-time college students. They all report, by the hour, how they spend a typical week. The students, who attend different schools and major in different fields, have a lot in common. They spend the bulk of their time taking classes, hanging out with their friends, working part-time jobs, and participating in extracurricular activities. They also share what appears to be absolutely no interest in staying abreast of what's going on in the world. None ever mentions following the news or having any sort of political conversation or discussion.²

A prospective student who visits the website might conclude that keeping up with current events is not something most college students worry about. And she'd be right. The *American Time Use Survey* more systematically accounts for how college students spend their time. On average, they spend nearly four hours a day playing sports or engaging in leisure activities, which is more than the 3-4 hours they devote to attending classes and studying, or the 2-7 hours they spend at work. College students round out their days with sleep (8.6 hours), travel to and from work and school (1.5 hours), food and drink (one hour), and personal grooming (45 minutes).³ And texting, of course; the average college-aged adult sends about 90 texts a day.⁴ Missing from this list are reading the newspaper, watching the news, or following politics. In fact, an annual study of college freshmen finds that only about one-third believe that keeping up with current events is even an important goal. This percentage is down from the roughly two-thirds of young people who felt this way in the 1960s.⁵

The story is much the same for high school students. Obviously, their time is a little more constrained by the uniformity of school schedules; the average high school student spends more than six hours a day at school. After school, they pass time by watching television (2.1 hours), socializing with friends (one hour), playing video games (45 minutes), and participating in sports (30 minutes).⁶ Throughout the day, they also manage to send about 80 text messages.⁷ More than half of today's high school students report doing no homework on an average day. And few devote any time whatsoever to following news, current events, or politics.

The high school and college students we surveyed and interviewed for this book reported similar patterns. They dedicate energy to school and extracurricular activities, participate

in sports, and spend time with their friends. Most are also glued to their digital devices. About 50 percent play video games every day, more than half spend at least a few hours sending texts and communicating via social media with their friends, and one-third watch at least two hours of television. In each of these realms, exposure to politics is infrequent and not prioritized (much like the family experiences described in chapter 3).

These patterns serve as the basis for our second explanation for low political ambition among young people: limited exposure to politics in their day-to-day lives. We begin this chapter by confirming what others have found to be true about today's high school and college students. Put simply, they do not lead politically connected lives. From their interactions in the classroom and with their teachers, to their relationships with their friends, to the media they consume, politics rarely surfaces. But we go beyond documenting young people's general political disengagement. The second part of the chapter demonstrates how the dysfunction and negativity that have come to characterize the current political environment lead many young people to avoid thinking about it, talking about it, or caring about it. Those who are politically engaged at school, or talk to their friends about current events, or access political information through the media are more politically ambitious than those who don't. But they are few and far between, in large part because contemporary politics has turned them off.

Far from 24/7: Young People's Daily Exposure to Politics

School experiences, friend and peer interactions, and media habits—like family—shape young people's political interest and attitudes. Classroom programs in high schools that include political activities or assignments, for instance, can increase students'

intentions to vote and elevate their sense of political empowerment.⁸ In college, when students major in social sciences that emphasize the development of civic skills, they are more likely to participate politically.⁹ Outside the classroom, young people's participation in extracurricular activities can also spur political interest and civic engagement later in life.¹⁰ Politically active adults are more likely than people who are not politically engaged to recount early involvement in political associations, campaigns, and community service projects. They are also more likely to have run for office in either a high school or college student body election. These activities are important not only because of their politically charged content, but also because conversations within social networks of peers and friends can influence people's attitudes toward, and participation in, politics.¹¹ And media—particularly internet and digital technologies—can reinforce the civic skills learned inside and outside the classroom, ultimately increasing young people's political interest and voter turnout.¹²

School experiences, relationships with friends and peers, and nearly unfettered access to a wide range of media offer many opportunities for young people to connect to news, politics, and current events. But how often is this potential realized? In order to shed light on that question, the following pages chronicle the daily lives of the young people we surveyed. We frame our analysis through the ordinary weekday schedule of Heidi, a 17-year-old high school honors student who plans to major in psychology when she heads to college. Although we found some differences in how young people lived—when they woke up, which classes they took, what extracurricular activities they pursued, how much time they spent with friends—Heidi's schedule represents that of the typical high school student we interviewed.¹³

7:12 AM—Wake Up, Check Facebook, Text Three Friends

7:55 AM—Head to School (Update Facebook Status along the Way)

8:15 AM—First Class of the Day (English Lit)

Given that political experiences at school exert a significant impact on young people's political engagement, it is vital to examine how much political exposure they receive in their classrooms and on their campuses. Some of this exposure is required by law. Thirty-nine states mandate that high school students take a government or civics class to graduate.¹⁴ The requirement is not as widespread in college, but many states, including California and Texas, require students enrolled in public colleges and universities to complete at least one government class that covers both national and state politics.

Among the high school students we surveyed, only about one-quarter had taken a government class. Most of the students had not yet reached 11th or 12th grade, when such courses are typically offered, so this finding is not surprising. But they also reported very little political content in their other classes. Nearly two-thirds said that they discuss politics in their classes less than once a week, and one-third said that political discussions in the classroom occurred "rarely" or "never." Just 9 percent of high school students considered their classmates "very interested" in politics and current events (see left-hand column of Table 4.1).

College students reported significantly more political exposure in the classroom. Nearly seven out of ten had taken at least one government or political science class, and they were substantially more likely than high school students to have attended a school event where a politician spoke, or to have completed an assignment that required contacting some sort of political leader. They were also twice as likely as the high school students to consider their classmates politically interested (see right-hand column

of Table 4.1). Even among the college students, though, weekly political discussions in the classroom were not the norm (32 percent reported having them), and only two out of ten described their classmates as very interested in politics and current events.

Table 4.1 Young People's Political Engagement at School

	High School Students	College Students
Political Exposure at School		
Took a government or political science class	27% *	69%
Attended an assembly or class with a politician as a guest speaker	19 *	29
Contacted a political leader as part of a class assignment	9 *	15
Political Discussion in Classes at School		
Never	6	8
Rarely	25	26
A few times a month	33	33
At least once a week	36	32
Classmates' Interest in Politics		
Not interested	19 *	9
A little interested	46 *	26
Interested	27 *	44
Very interested	9 *	21
N	2,163	2,117

Notes: Sample sizes vary slightly across questions because some respondents omitted answers to some questions. Levels of significance: * indicates that the difference between high school and college students is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

10:10 AM—Break from Classes, Check Facebook, Text Friends

10:20 AM—Back in the Classroom (Biology Lab)

In highlighting the political classroom experiences of most high school and college students, we are not suggesting that schools do not attempt to raise civic awareness through government and US history classes. Indeed, many young people mentioned voter registration drives at school, as well as school administrators and teachers who encouraged them to vote and to follow the 2012 presidential election. A few college students even reported that they had professors who canceled class on Election Day not only so that the students could be sure to cast a ballot, but also so that they could volunteer on a campaign if they were interested. But even with these broad attempts to infuse civic and political engagement into secondary and postsecondary education, politics is peripheral for most students throughout their high school and college years.

Consider the messages that young people receive—or don't receive—from their teachers and professors. One-third of high school and college students said that a teacher or professor served as an important mentor in helping them think about their future and what career they might pursue. Apart from parents, these are the most influential adults in young people's lives. Yet only 12 percent recount any sort of encouragement from these mentors to consider someday running for office.¹⁵ As with parents and other adult family members, the educators in young people's lives do not push them toward a future in politics. This is not surprising in light of the low regard most adults have for politicians (see Table 3.3). It may also explain the assessments offered in a 2013 MIT Center for Civic Media presentation, in which a group of scholars and activists concluded that teachers and educational reformers increased civic participation dramatically since the 1960s, but had not done the same for political engagement.¹⁶

- 12:20 PM—Lunch, Two Conversations via Text Message, Watch YouTube Video
- 1:05 PM—Final Class of the Day (Pre-Calculus)
- 2:25 PM—Soccer Practice

Young people's disengagement from politics at school transcends the classroom. We asked the students we surveyed whether they participated in 16 popular extra curricular activities. Most reported being active in several groups and clubs. Half participated in some sort of community service or volunteer organization, and many spent time in music/band, church or religious groups, and organized sports. The fact that volunteering and community service were the most popular on the list speaks to a recurring theme in this book (and one that we discussed in chapter 2): Young people want to improve the world and their communities, but they tend not to think of politics as an effective means to do so. Just look at the results in Table 4.2. Of the activities we listed, three could be considered political: student government, debate team/mock trial, and College Democrats or Republicans. Of these three, only one—student government—made it into the top half of the list (still with less than a 20 percent participation rate). Debate team/mock trial and College Democrats or Republicans placed 14th and 15th, respectively.

- 3:05 PM—Quick Break from Sports Practice, Text Friends about Getting Together
- 4:00 PM—Update Facebook Status, Yearbook Committee Meeting
- 4:30 PM—Head Home, Hang Out with Friends (Discuss Crushes and Weekend Plans)

The typical high school or college student spends quite a bit of time socializing with friends. Among the young people we

surveyed, 55 percent said that they had a regular group of friends and 39 percent reported spending time with multiple groups of friends. Only 7 percent did not spend time with a consistent group of people outside of school. Much like their school and extracurricular experiences, though, young people's friendships tend to be pretty devoid of political content.

Table 4.2 Young People's Participation in Extracurricular Activities

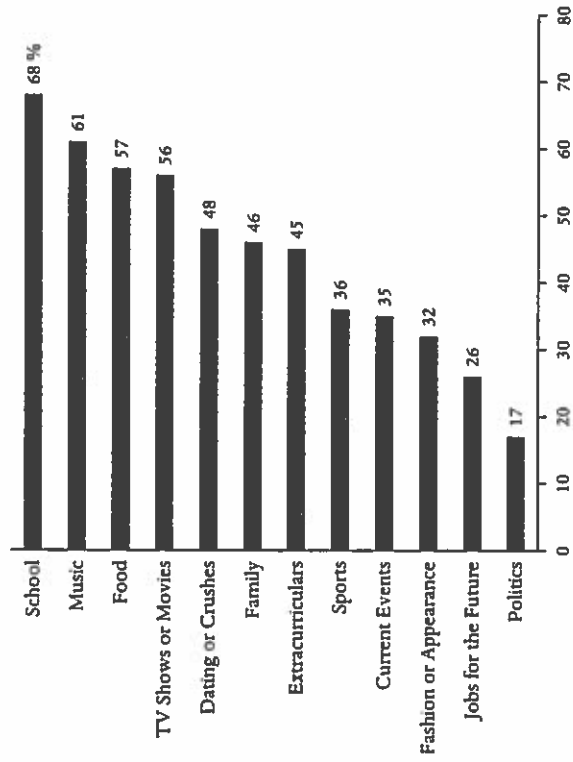
	50%
Community service or volunteering club	40
Music / Band	40
Church or religious group	35
Organized sports outside of school	32
Varsity or junior varsity sport	29
Honor society	24
Drama / Theater club	18
Student government	15
Fraternity or sorority	15
Yearbook club or committee	14
School newspaper	13
Pep squad, cheerleading, drill team	12
Intramural sport	12
Debate team / Mock Trial	12
College Democrats or Republicans	12
Academic club (math, writing, etc.)	9
N	4,280

Notes: Entries indicate the percentage of respondents who have participated in each activity. Data for fraternity or sorority participation, as well as for College Democrats or Republicans, are restricted to the 2,117 college students in the sample, since these are not activities available to high school students.

We asked the students what subjects they discussed with their friends, and how often they talked about each topic. Figure 4.1 presents the percentage of people who discuss each topic with their friends at least every week. School was the most popular

topic of conversation, followed by music, food, and movies and television. Current events, in general, ranked toward the bottom of the list, behind dating, family, and sports. And, by today's standards, talking about current events does not connote a discussion of world politics or public affairs. It was clear in our interviews that for today's young people, "current events" often include the latest Kardashian marriage, the release of a new Taylor Swift song, or whether it's going to rain on Friday. Politics came in dead last as a topic of conversation, with less than 20 percent of young people reporting that they had even one recent political discussion with their friends.

Figure 4.1 Topics Young People Discuss with their Friends



Notes: N = 4,208. Bars indicate the percentage of respondents who discuss each topic with their friends weekly.

These findings are consistent with the annual UCLA higher education survey conducted with incoming first-year students.

In recent years, roughly 20 percent of college students report frequently discussing politics with their friends.¹⁷ Our results also exemplify a shift from previous generations. More than one-quarter (27 percent) of the young people we surveyed said that they never talk about politics with their friends. This is almost double the percentage from the 1970s.¹⁸ The low levels of political discussion we uncovered are even more striking given that we carried out the survey in October of a presidential election year, a time when it is often difficult to avoid news and conversations about politics, campaigns, and elections.

We saw the same pattern in our interviews when we asked young people about how frequently they discuss politics or current events with their friends. Although a few of the high school and college students said they talked about politics regularly, the vast majority (94 out of 115) did not. As Charlotte, a high school junior who "hangs out with friends, like, every day after school," put it, "Politics is just not what we're interested in. We're into music and what's happening at school, and also activities after school, stuff like that. That's what's interesting." Jake, also a high school junior, doesn't discuss politics with his friends either. Instead, he and his friends "talk about movies, sports, you know, things that are fun and interesting." Tracy, an aspiring artist at a college in New England, commented, "My friends just aren't crazy into politics. They know more than I do, but even for them, it's not their focus. We are more into talking about art, music, life." It is quite easy to assemble from the interview transcripts a list of similar comments:

Do my friends care about what's going on in the world? I don't know . . . No they probably really don't. (Amber, high school freshman)

Most of my friends are apathetic and don't know what is going on. (Anna, high school junior)

Politics is boring. And we are in high school, so we really can't do anything about it. (Gabriel, high school senior)

Most of my friends are big-time texters. They don't care about things outside the texting world. They're just doing that. But that's what younger people do. We just don't care about politics. We focus on other things. (Rebecca, high school sophomore)

We don't care at all about current events and politics. . . . This era is full of people who don't care about anyone else. (Derek, high school junior)

I just don't talk about politics too much. It doesn't ever come up. It doesn't interest my friends. Maybe when we get older, it will be interesting. (Megan, college sophomore)

For many young people, asking if they talk with their friends about politics was a little like asking if they ever talk about lawn bowling or traveling to Antarctica. The topic is utterly obscure.

When we turned specifically to the 2012 presidential election, young people were more likely to acknowledge the importance of keeping up with politics and discussing it with their friends. But they still demonstrated a deep ambivalence or disinterest that often kept them from having political conversations. Julian, for example, is a literature major at a university in Kentucky. Most of his friends are English majors, too. He explained that, in general, they "just didn't care about the election." He did feel guilty about it, though: "We know it's important, but it is just so hard to force yourself to watch news about politics. There's so much else that's more fun and interesting. I guess we should all be ashamed." Alyssa, a criminal justice major from Arkansas, wished that she and her friends cared about politics more: "This was the first time

we could vote, so I wish we wanted to follow the news more. But most of us don't pay attention a lot. We are torn because we know we should care, but it's really hard to see why." Caesar, a high school senior from Georgia, was a little less circumspect in his comments: "No one I talk to cares about politics. It's boring and really removed from our lives."

5:45 PM—Homework

6:30 PM—Dinner with Family (and Not Talking about Politics)

8:00 PM—Chilling with a Favorite Device (Watching Pretty Little Liars, Texting Friends about It)

The Internet and social media are more than just a mode of communication and source of information for young people. According to a 2012 Aspen Institute poll, 59 percent of young adults believe that the Internet greatly influences their sense of right and wrong.¹⁰ Despite the importance young people accord to digital technology, or how easy it makes it for them to access information about current events and politics, today's young people tend not to encounter much news through these devices. We asked whether, in the last few days, they got news from to different sources. The most popular source of information remains television; almost half of the people surveyed reported watching a traditional news broadcast—such as those on ABC, CBS, or NBC—at least once in the last few days (see Table 4.3). Facebook and Twitter came in second, confirming that young people rely on social media for news. As far as other media are concerned—online newspapers, political websites, and political blogs, all of which have proliferated in the last few years—most high school and college students do not visit them at all.¹¹ Nor do they tune into *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*.

These political satire programs might be amusing and influential for the 13 percent of young people who watch them on a regular basis. But they have limited power over the 87 percent who rarely or never do.²¹

Table 4.3 Young People's News and Media Habits

In the last few days, did you get news from . . .	
Broadcast television (such as ABC, NBC, or CBS)	45%
Facebook or Twitter	37
Cable television (such as Fox News Channel, CNN, or MSNBC)	33
News browser (such as Yahoo, MSN, AOL, or Google)	30
Radio	22
YouTube videos	21
Online newspaper or political website	18
Hard copy newspaper	16
<i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i> or <i>The Colbert Report</i>	13
Political blog	7
N	4,280

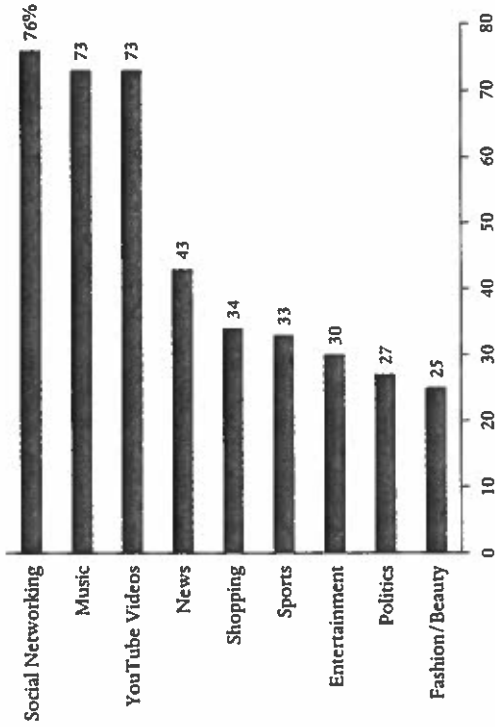
Notes: Entries indicate the percentage of respondents who report accessing news through each source.

Our survey results are similar to a 2012 Pew study that uncovered major generational differences in the amount of news people consumed, regardless of the source. The "Silent Generation," which includes people over the age of 65, spent, on average, 84 minutes watching, reading, or listening to the news the previous day. Baby boomers (people between the ages of 48 and 65) consumed a little less, but not much: 77 minutes' worth. Generation X-ers absorbed about 10 minutes less news each day than their parents. But the real drop off was among millennials. On average, they consumed only 46 minutes of news the previous day. The "truly troubling trend for the media," according to Pew, is that

there is no reason to believe that news consumption increases as people get older. The trends for each generation were flat; people in 2012 consumed approximately the same amount of news they did eight years earlier.²²

The story is much the same when we focus specifically on the types of websites young people visit at least a few times a week. More than three-quarters regularly use the Internet for social networking, listening to music, and watching YouTube videos. But less than half visit news websites on a regular basis, and only about one-quarter scan political websites consistently. Shopping, sports, entertainment, and celebrities are just more interesting and appealing (see Figure 4.2). Again, these low numbers for politics are probably higher than usual given that we conducted the survey in the weeks leading up to the 2012 presidential election.

Figure 4.2 Types of Websites Young People Visit



Notes: N = 4,222. Bars indicate the percentage of respondents who visit each type of website "a few times a week" or "every day."

The fact that students do not access much politics online is reinforced by the messages they receive about how they should use their mobile devices. A *Buzzfeed* list of "18 Apps Every College Student Should Download Right Now," for instance, does not include any mention of news or current events. Rather, college students are encouraged to download Clear, which helps them sync their to-do lists from multiple devices; WaterIn, which helps them track how much water they should drink based on the amount of alcohol they've consumed; SleepCycle, which tracks REM cycles; and 7 Minute Workout, so as to avoid the "Freshman 15."²³ *Mashable's* "List of 25 Apps You'll Need to Survive College" also lacks any mention of a source for news or current events.²⁴ As does its list of "10 Must Have Apps for Successful High School Students."²⁵

11:00 PM—*Final Facebook Status Update, Last Text Message Conversations for the Night*

7:12 AM—*Wake Up, Check Facebook, Text Three Friends*

How Contemporary Politics Leads Young People to Avoid It

Today's young people are not politically engaged. To be sure, some of this detachment results from the fact that they think news, current events, and world affairs are boring and irrelevant. As the results in this chapter have already made clear, some segment of high school and college students today have almost no opinions about politics or politicians because they have never actually contemplated these topics. Overall, this group constitutes about one-quarter of the young people we surveyed and interviewed. But much of the political disengagement we uncovered is far more deliberate. Through our interviews, we learned that many young

people—roughly 60 percent of them—avoid politics on purpose. They have opinions about politics, most of which are decidedly negative. Accordingly, they rationalize their political disengagement because what they know about politics (even when it's often very little) is so unappealing and frustrating that they shut it out of their lives.

And who can blame them? We live in a time where almost all national news about politics is negative and combative in tone. It is almost as though there is no longer any place for thoughtful journalism or positive news coverage of politics. When it comes to measured and fact-based news, political scientist and media scholar Thomas Patterson concludes, "Journalists are failing to deliver it."²⁶ Instead, contemporary politics in the United States is presented as a constant stream of scandal, conflict, and failure. When *Time* magazine identified the top ten overall news stories of 2013, for example, five were political, and they all painted the US government in a very negative light: the IRS and Benghazi scandals, the government's failure to secure gun-control legislation, the government shutdown, the troubled launch of the Affordable Care Act, and the travails of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.²⁷ CNN and NBC deemed the 16-day government shutdown and the flawed rollout of Obamacare the top two political stories of the year.²⁸ And when media outlets are not highlighting Washington's inability to get the job done, they are featuring political coverage that often amounts to partisans from both sides of the aisle predictably condemning one another. In early 2014, for example, the Fox News Channel regularly treated its audience to a hyperbolic presentation of stories about Democrat Barack Obama's "failed policies," whereas its liberal counterpart, MSNBC, gleefully aired an endless series of stories lambasting the Republican-controlled House of Representatives for its inaction and obstructionist tactics.

It's not only television news that presents politics as ineffective. Late-night comedians reinforce these messages by pointing out the many ways that Washington is broken. On a nightly basis, anyone flipping through the channels can hear about the latest political failure. Consider the way Jon Stewart described Congress in a July 2011 episode of *The Daily Show*: "I'm not saying this Congress is bad at its job. I'm just saying that this Congress is equivalent to a skunk with its head in a jar of Skippy peanut butter." When House Republicans held their 33rd vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act, then-*Late Night* host Jimmy Fallon, in July 2012, joked, "It was mostly a symbolic vote that accomplished nothing—or as Congress calls that, a vote." President Obama's push for Congress to raise the minimum wage in February 2013 led Jay Leno to tell his *Tonight Show* viewers, "Believe me, when it comes to doing the minimum for their wage, Congress knows what it's talking about." These characterizations are by no means atypical. On any given night, a viewer can enjoy a wide range of political humor that condemns Washington:

Today the Senate swore in a record 20 female Senators. Yep, the women said they're very excited, and look forward to proving they can accomplish just as little as male Senators. (Jimmy Fallon, January 2013)

A top geneticist at Stanford says human intelligence is declining. You know what that means? We are seeing Congress at its smartest and most effective right now. (Jay Leno, February 2013)

Tomorrow President Obama gives his annual State of the Union address. If you're not familiar, the State of the Union is where the president faces Congress and asks them to work together and fix America's problems and Congress says, "No." (Jimmy Fallon, February 2013)

A petition to have Justin Bieber deported got over 100,000 signatures, which means the White House now has to legally rule on it. So finally a chance for Obama to issue an executive order that both Republicans and Democrats can agree on. (Jay Leno, January 2014)

Last night of course was the State of the Union address. President Obama promised to focus on economic growth, education, and healthcare. Or as people tuning in put it, "Oh crap, it's a rerun." (Jimmy Fallon, January 2014)

And the list goes on and on.

The laughable, tragic, and upsetting way that the mass media portray politics was reflected in two broad themes that came across in our interviews. Because young people perceive government, current affairs, and the political system as (1) confrontational, and (2) ineffective, they choose to sidestep conversations about it and minimize its presence in their day-to-day lives. This behavior is particularly acute among the younger generations. National surveys find that, whereas 58 percent of people who are 48 and older report that they enjoy following the news a lot, only 29 percent of millennials do.³⁹

Why Would I Want to Argue with My Friends?

When young people today look at Washington, DC, they are confronted with a partisan, conflict-ridden environment. And as we discussed in chapter 1, national politics is the lens most people use to evaluate the political system. So, as news and political information have become more partisan, so has the discourse used by many of the adults in young people's lives. Today's high school and college students infer, therefore, that any and all political discussion is contentious and ugly. Thoughtful debates over important

issues of the day and calm conversations regarding campaigns and elections are alien propositions. When they are with their friends, young people don't want to argue; they'd rather get along and have fun.

For some of the people we interviewed, the tendency to avoid politics was a lesson learned from previous experience. Stephanie, a high school senior who wants to major in business, is interested in politics. After some "heated discussions" about the 2012 presidential election, though, she started to avoid political conversations with her friends:

We talked about the presidential election at the beginning and it became pretty obvious that my friends and I did not agree on who we wanted to win. When we realized that we had drastically different ideas, we decided that it would be best not to talk about it anymore. There's no reason to fight.

Gavin, a high school senior, recounted a similar course of events. He told us that he and two of his closest friends used to talk about politics from time to time. But it became clear that they had "lots of opposing views." Although Gavin acknowledged that "sometimes, it's fun to have some debates," he concluded that "it's not very good to disagree so much." It got to the point that talking about politics was "just not pleasant." Justin's experiences were much the same. The high school junior noted that he and his friends would "occasionally" talk about politics and current events. But they found themselves disagreeing and arguing so much that they decided it would be best "to enjoy the time [they] spend together and talk about fun stuff."

Most of the young people we interviewed, though, never actually had political conversations with their friends. Many anticipated that it would not go well, that they might disagree, so they

avoided the topic altogether. Aaron, a high school senior who plans to major in math when he gets to college, considers himself "very interested in politics." But when he is with his friends, he tries to "stay away from politics," because "talking about it is a really easy way to get into a fight and lose friends." Keith, a college freshman, agreed:

I don't know why I'd want to talk about politics with my friends. It can change friendships. You know, I don't want it to get too heated. So, maybe we can sometimes talk about current events, but I'll never talk to my friends about the parties and that sort of stuff. I think I have an idea of what side my friends are on, but I'm not sure. And I try not to let them know my views.

The potential consequences also keep Nicole from talking about politics with her friends. According to the 21-year-old communications major, "Talking about politics would mean having disputes. What friends want to do that? We try to avoid those. With friends, you try not to be confrontational, not stir the pot." Ashley, a college senior from Los Angeles, elaborated on the ramifications of raising political issues with her friends:

If I bring up anything more specific than a simple political fact—like, hey, Obama won the election—my friends are like, 'I don't follow.' And then that makes me want to tell them that this is our country and that they should care. But then they'll think I'm being antagonistic, so I don't do it.

For Catherine, a high school senior who took a government class last year, talking about politics "leads to too much drama." She described her friends as "very opinionated. They punish people with different views." Julian summarized this line of reasoning best when he said bluntly: "Nope, we never bring it up. Politics kills the mood."

I'd Like to Care, but It's Just So Broken

Beyond wanting to avoid confrontation, high school and college students perceive the political system as so broken that they are not interested in following it closely. In fact, their general impressions do not sound that different from those offered by evening news anchors or late-night comedians. Lizbeth, a geography major, told us that when she thinks of Congress, "the word *stuck* comes to mind." Erin, a high school senior, felt the same way: "At the highest levels of politics, everything is just gridlocked. It's so bad and it feels like there is nothing anyone can do to fix it." Mary, an education major who hopes one day to teach history, offered a similar evaluation: "The government is not effective, no one can agree on anything, so nothing of any significance gets passed. It's depressing to follow. So, I don't." Kelly, a physical education major, agreed:

I don't like the system. It doesn't work. You have all of these people in politics who have to vote along a party line. . . . But you should be able to vote differently if you want to. Otherwise, you can't get anything done if the parties are split. I'd like to care, but I just can't. I can't watch it. It's ridiculous. It's broken.

Many young people perceived politics as a series of pointless conflicts and stubborn refusals to cooperate. Shauna, an 11th grader, recalled a class project that required her to track a piece of legislation as it tried to make its way through Congress. The assignment led her to conclude that Congress is ineffective: "Ugh . . . there are lots of times when Congress just doesn't want the president to have anything good on his record, so they stall or won't do anything. And that's really frustrating because it's not what they're supposed to do." Calvin, a high school sophomore, also thought that partisanship resulted in nothing but problems for

the government: "People in Congress argue all the time. They support policies that are really inefficient, but they can't agree on anything big or important." He said that what they are able to accomplish "just isn't that important," so he tends "not to follow it that much." The "constant fighting," coupled with the fact that "the system is so corrupt," has led Joshua, a business major in his first year of college, "to turn it off completely. I'm not interested in politics anymore." Bryce, a biochemistry major who hopes to pursue a career in the health-care field, might have summed up best how the political system functions—or doesn't: "The government is run by children. They are little kids. They always bicker and nothing substantial seems to get accomplished."

From the perspective of the young people we interviewed, the perceived ineffectiveness in Washington is not the only reason they turn away from politics. Many are also disgusted with the electoral process, explaining that modern-day campaigns are "horrible," "dumb," and "almost impossible to watch." As Dylan, a nursing major, commented, "Elections are about mudslinging and people bring up irrelevant issues that should not matter." Emma, a criminal justice major, articulated a similar view:

Elections are just too nasty and they touch on subjects that we probably should not discuss. Like when Obama was running and they brought up things about his past and Donald Trump said that he'll donate money if Obama shows his birth certificate. C'mon. I used to like watching scandal stuff sometimes, but this has just become so stupid.

Mikayla, a double major in visual arts and public health, explained that she does not like the invasiveness of modern campaigns:

The loss of privacy if you are running for office is just terrible. I don't like how they bring things up from your past and put

them into the public. . . . These things don't matter for whether you're fit to be in office. They're really stupid things to bring up. I'm not going to spend time on that.

Hadleigh noted that she is not interested in following the news because "the system right now has all of these people who really focus on pushing projects for their specific area so they can win their elections. They're always focused on the wrong things." It's for much the same reason that Holly, a college junior, "doesn't think much about politics." The education major explained that politicians "will do whatever it takes to get re-elected, and that means that they're not interested in anything other than votes. That's not interesting to me. It makes me angry actually."

These negative attitudes about campaigns and elections came through in dozens of the interviews, indicating that young people find the electoral process so distasteful that turning away feels like the only sensible reaction:

I think the mudslinging has gotten worse over the years. I guess it is because society changes and that's what works. I'm not going to watch it, though. (Gavin, high school senior)

Elections are too nasty. They're basically a gladiator match. It's pointless to watch. (Latrell, high school senior)

Campaigns are so awful. I get so frustrated with the way they go back and forth, and I can't tell who is telling the truth. Everyone just supports their own party. Sometimes it's, like, what is the point in following this? (Aliza, high school senior)

In a campaign, you make a little mistake and it gets blown up. The commercials blow up everything. Things that aren't even mistakes get blown up and words are always misconstrued. Or they cut things in an incorrect manner. It's not true

usually. So, what's the point of following the election? (Anna, high school junior)

I don't like following elections. I don't trust politics. And when you don't trust people or like what they do, it is hard to want to know about it. (George, college junior)

Shauna, the high school student who had to track the piece of legislation for a school project, put it most colorfully when she concluded, "I hate that elections are usually about choosing the shiniest of two turds."

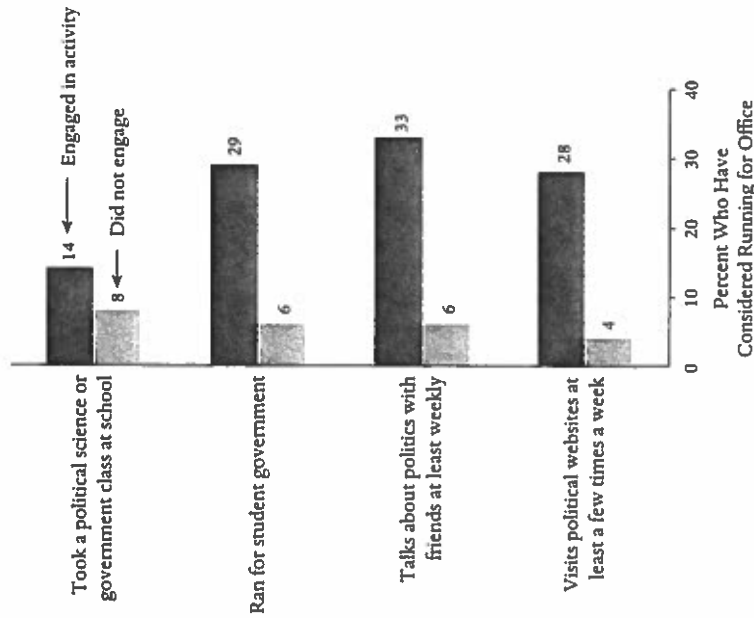
The Consequences of Limited Political Exposure

Young people's limited exposure to politics and current events does more than tell us that they are not fully aware of what's going on in the world around them. It also affects their political ambition. High school and college students who do not know about or care about politics do not aspire to hold office in the future. On the other hand, when young people's daily lives include at least some exposure to politics—even though the political environment is extraordinarily negative—they are far more likely to consider running for office.

The data presented in Figure 4.3, along with our interviews, make this clear. The figure provides examples of how the different ways that politics makes it into young people's daily lives can influence their interest in running for office. For instance, a young person who takes a political science course in college or a government class in high school is almost twice as likely as one who doesn't to express interest in running for office (14 percent compared to 8 percent). As Aaron, a high school senior, explained, "I really got into politics this year with one of the government classes I took." Through the class, he learned that running for

office could be “an interesting way to change the community.” Aaron’s teacher also played a vital role: “My teacher got me thinking about it. He was really inspiring and a really cool guy. His devotion to the class and the way he explained things, that really helped me think about what I might want to do later.”³⁰

Figure 4-3 School, Peers, Media Habits, and Young People’s Political Ambition



Notes: N = 4,277. Black bars indicate the percentage of respondents who have considered running for office and engaged in the activity. Gray bars indicate the percentage of respondents who have considered running for office, but have not engaged in the activity. The ambition gap is statistically significant at $p < .05$ in all comparisons, with respondents who have engaged in each activity more likely to exhibit political ambition than those who have not.

High school and college students who participate in political extracurricular activities are also far more open to running for office later in life. Those who ran for a student government position, for example, are five times more likely than those who did not to express interest in a future candidacy. Indeed, for Tony, the decision to run for class representative in ninth grade opened his eyes to the world of politics: “I was not the most active kid in school, but when my friends and teachers encouraged me to run for class rep, I did it and I won.” Now a senior in college, Tony plans to go to law school and believes running for office someday “just might be in the cards.” Jason, a college senior majoring in business, first became interested in running for office when he was in junior high. His school ran a mock presidential election in 2004, and he “loved it.” Soon after, Jason started telling friends that his initials “stood for the branches of government: judicial, executive, and legislative.” Since then, he has “always thought” that he’d ultimately run for office.

And young people who regularly visit political websites or spend time with friends who discuss politics are dramatically more politically ambitious than those who do not. Russell is one of these high school students. He told us that hanging out with his friends sustains his interest in politics:

My friends and I are kind of the geeks at school, always walking around talking about the death penalty or global warming or who is going to be president. It makes me follow the news a lot so I can keep up. We’re always online finding out the latest. It kind of makes me want to maybe be in politics someday.

Louise, a college sophomore, also attributed her political ambition to her friends: “They made me think about running someday. After they told me I should, I kept thinking about it. It’s

nice to know that my friends think I have good ideas and know what I'm talking about. That just inspires me to want to be a leader."

The importance of regular exposure to politics is even clearer when we consider the joint effects of different types of exposure. Consider the four examples we provide in Figure 4.3: taking a political science or government class, running for student government, talking to friends about politics at least weekly, and visiting political websites on a weekly basis. The young people we surveyed had anywhere from zero to four of these experiences. Only 2 percent of those who "scored" a zero ever considered running for office. Among high school and college students who scored a two—let's say, they took a government class and regularly discussed politics with their friends—17 percent considered running for office. At the other end of the spectrum, 60 percent of the young people who scored a four were open to running for office. The problem, of course, is that only 2 percent of the students we surveyed scored a four.

The patterns are similar when we look at high school and college students separately. The main difference, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, is that high school students are less likely than college students to be exposed to politics. Among the college students, 4 percent reported experiences consistent with all four activities included in Figure 4.3. Only 1 percent of high school students did. But the magnitude of the relationship between political exposure and political ambition is the same for both groups of students.

Importantly, even among the small group of young people who were open to running for office someday, decidedly negative views of the political system prevailed. Shauna, an 11th grader who could "certainly imagine" serving in Congress someday, characterized contemporary politics this way:

It all seems so corrupt in Congress. . . . I wish they would be more direct. . . . And the political parties? Oh my God. I hear fights about it on television between the parties all the time. And we discuss it in my house. I'll never understand them. They separate our country too much.

Maddie, a college junior, was also enthusiastic about the prospects of running office someday. Although she thinks it would be "amazing to be an elected official in Congress or something like that," she "wouldn't want it to be like the way politics is today. They don't get anything done and fight all the time. I see that everywhere. But it would be a great thing to do." Those people who can stomach the negativity and dysfunction are more politically ambitious as their exposure grows. The problem is that most young people shy away from that exposure, in large part because of the negativity and dysfunction.

Conclusion

When Georgetown University students enroll in classes each semester, they have an opportunity to take "Women in American Politics," a course taught by Donna Brazile. The adjunct instructor managed Al Gore's presidential campaign in 2000 and serves as the vice chair of Voter Registration and Participation at the Democratic National Committee. But every Wednesday, she leaves behind Washington politics, enters the classroom, and teaches about the "history of women in the political process and the hard-fought battles they've had to wage over many decades." According to Ms. Brazile, teaching is "one of the most important things" she does every week.³¹

Since she began teaching 20 years ago, Ms. Brazile has mentored countless students. Beyond helping them master the course

material and secure internships and jobs on political campaigns, she thinks it is her responsibility to encourage students to become politically active and engaged, especially female students: "Women in politics need to become more visible in the political landscape to encourage the next generation of female leaders. Visibility is viability. Young girls need to see female leaders, to be able to envision themselves in those positions."³² She believes that teaching provides her with "another platform to reach the next generation waiting in the wings."³³

The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates the power that direct mentorship and encouragement in an educational setting—much like Ms. Brazile provides—can have on young people. But our survey results and interviews reveal that, for most young people, day-to-day exposure to politics is limited. Although school provides the opportunity for students to focus on politics and world affairs, they don't. This holds true whether we are talking about curriculum and substantive content, classroom discussions, or the messages transmitted by most teachers and professors. Young people tend only to encounter politics when they enroll in a government or political science class; for most students, this is only one class in one semester of either high school or college. When they move from the classroom to their afterschool activities or to the couch in front of the TV, most high school and college students continue to experience politics only peripherally. We live in an information age that facilitates the transmission of data and ideas, but the next generation is not interested in using these resources to learn about politics or keep up with the world around them.

In examining the reasons for young people's political disinterest and disengagement, the state of contemporary politics plays a substantial role. Young people navigate a culture in which national politics—their primary lens for evaluating the political

system—is portrayed in the news almost universally as ineffective, hyperpartisan, gridlocked, and conflict-ridden. And where the news leaves off, political satirists like Jon Stewart and John Oliver, and late-night comedians such as Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, and Conan O'Brien, pick up with jokes about political ineptitude and incompetence. Is it really a surprise that most of the high school and college students we interviewed who had something to say about politics said something very negative? More surprising would be if they didn't.

The irony, of course, is that when young people are exposed to politics—even the negative, disconcerting aspects of it—they are much more open to a political future. When their friends are interested in politics, when they take government classes they like, when they use the media to stay informed about news and current events, they are more ambitious to rise up and become political leaders. When young people are deeply immersed in politics, they push through their initial revulsion and see a way to contribute. The current political system is just so off-putting that very few young people expose themselves to politics in the first place.