



Subject: Making a Difference, Not a Statement:
College Students and Politics, Volunteering, and an Agenda for America

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From February 24 to March 2, Hart Research surveyed a national representative sample of 809 students in four-year colleges and universities; this research, conducted on behalf of the Panetta Institute, gauges students' views of and involvement in civics and politics. This report summarizes our key findings. The margin of error is $\pm 3.5\%$ for the overall sample and higher for specific subgroups.

Forty years ago, something began to stir on the nation's campuses. In March 1961, President John F. Kennedy, sensing the potential idealism of the nation's youth, signed an executive order creating the Peace Corps, and a few months later, the first cohort of Peace Corps volunteers embarked for Africa. That same year, college students traveled south to join the Freedom Rides, risking life and limb for the civil rights cause. It was the beginning of a youth movement that ultimately changed the face of America, as it touched everything from race relations to women's rights to war and peace.

Four decades later, could students once again provide the energy and idealism that drive social and political change? The results of our national survey among college students suggest that the potential is indeed there. Indeed, the civil rights and women's movements are now a source of inspiration. And if this potential is realized, this generation is clearly poised to move the country in a progressive direction. In their issue preferences and political leanings, the youth of Generation Y embrace a progressive agenda while rejecting the anti-government cynicism of their Generation X forerunners.

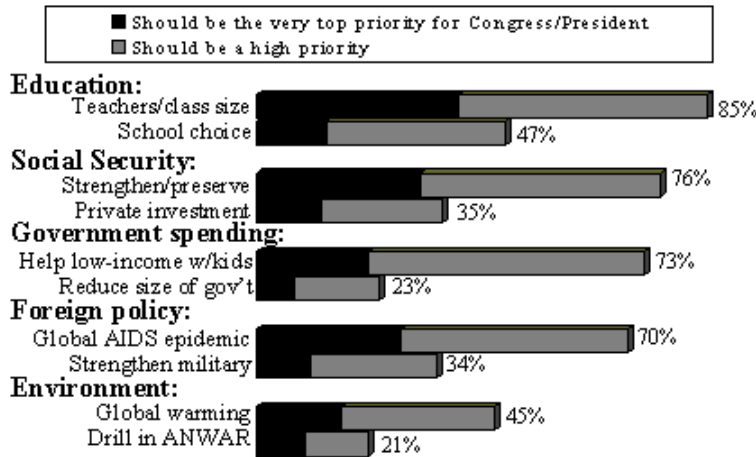
Yet, only a fraction of this great potential has been realized so far. Unlike their predecessors four decades ago, today's college students enjoy the legal right to vote, but only a small minority of Americans age 18 to 21 exercised that right in 2000. These young people care about the issues of the day, yet few believe that working on a political campaign or contacting their congressional representative, for example, can help make society better. They say they want to contribute to their society and make a difference, but most spurn government service as a career option. Their values and priorities seem disconnected from their level of political engagement. Certainly, neither presidential candidate managed to connect with this generation. Today's students are simultaneously progressive and apolitical; they embrace many government solutions, but evince little interest in government itself.

Nevertheless, the survey results indicate that it is possible to get college students involved in the nation's political life. Indeed, today's generation of students is like tinder awaiting a spark. New political leadership, making the right kind of appeal and challenging young people to get involved as President Kennedy did in 1961, could once again awaken a powerful response on the nation's campuses.

I. College Students' Current Outlook

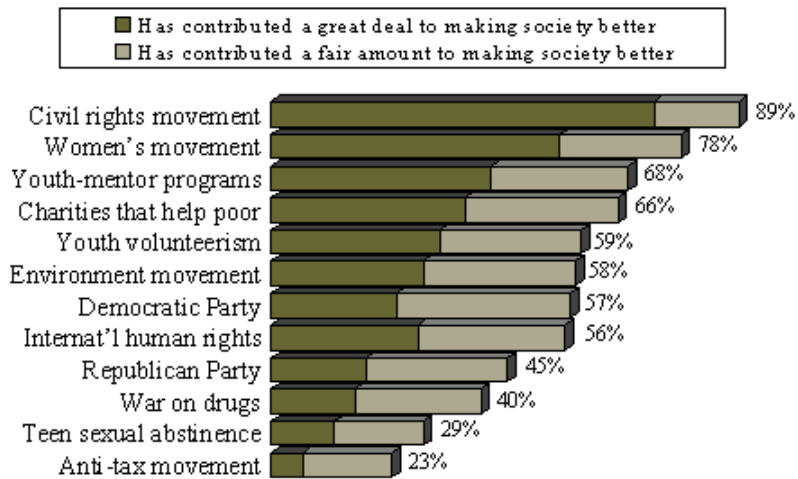
1. Today's college students are progressive in their views. College students' agenda for the nation is strongly progressive. Among all the policy priorities tested in the survey, the top three are improving schools by hiring teachers and reducing class size (85% very top or high priority), strengthening and preserving Social Security (76%), and providing assistance to low-income families (73%). The three lowest priorities are strengthening the military (34%), reducing the size of government (23%), and allowing oil exploration in the Alaskan Arctic Wildlife Refuge (21%).

Today's College Students Are Progressive



Looking back at our history, today's college students identify with progressive social movements. Overwhelming majorities feel that the civil rights (89%) and women's rights (78%) movements did a great deal or quite a bit to make American society better. Smaller majorities say the same about the environmental movement (58%), human rights organizations (56%), and the Democratic Party (57%). In contrast, far fewer believe that the Republican Party (45%), the war on drugs (40%), the campaign for teen abstinence (29%), or the anti-tax movement (23%) has changed things for the better.

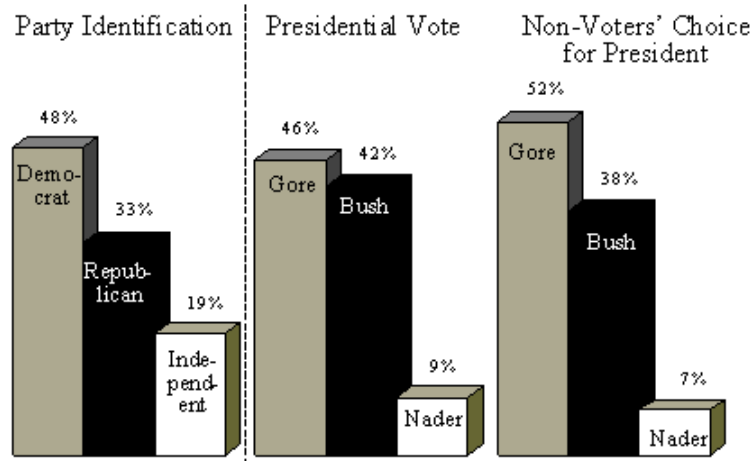
Students Admire Progressive Movements of the Past



In anticipating the future, many college students look far afield and point to progressive solutions to both international and domestic problems. A majority (59%) believe that most problems facing their generation will be domestic in nature (e.g., Social Security), but a significant proportion, 37%, think that most will be international in scope. This outlook is reflected in the majorities of students who believe that the following global issues should be either the top priority or a high priority for Congress and President Bush to address: dealing with the worldwide AIDS epidemic (70%), promoting human rights abroad (64%), and cracking down on imported goods made in sweatshops or with child labor (59%).

College students' political affiliations provide further evidence of the progressive environment on most campuses; by a considerable 48%-to-33% margin, students identify more with the Democratic Party than with the GOP. To a lesser extent, this progressive viewpoint is evident in their vote—Gore edged out Bush by 46% to 42% among those who reported voting (another 9% supported Nader). And had they voted, non-voters with a preference among the candidates would have supported Gore by an even larger margin: Half (52%) would have voted for him over Bush (38%); 7% would have voted for Nader. Nevertheless, their votes make clear that neither of the major party candidates managed to connect with these younger voters. Gore, in particular, had the most to gain from the political disposition of the majority students and the issues they believe are important. Yet, while Democrats enjoy a 15-percentage-point advantage over Republicans on campuses nationwide, Gore held only a 4-point lead over Bush in the college vote.

Students Favor Democrats, But Gore Victory Narrow



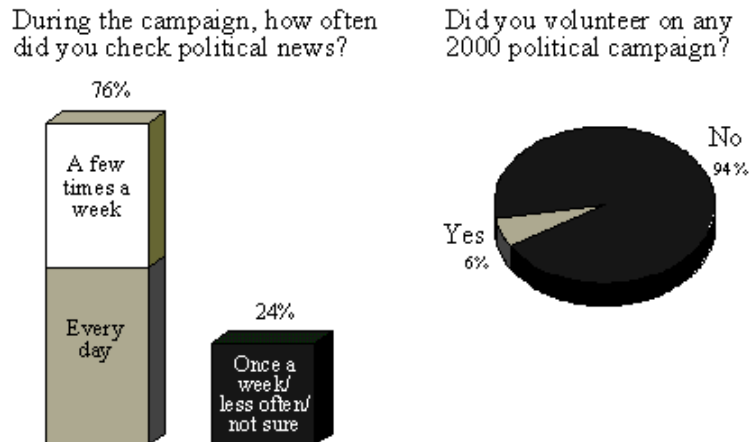
2. Students do not see politics as a primary means of bringing about positive change. Young people are political voyeurs—they watch, but they don't participate. Students clearly question the efficacy of getting more deeply involved in the political process. Only 12% believe that volunteering on a campaign is a way to bring about a lot of change (40% say some change). Only half that proportion, 6%, actually participated in a federal, state, or local political campaign during the 2000 election cycle.

Students also question the effectiveness of other forms of political action. Only 17% say that attending a demonstration can bring about a lot of change (46% say some change). And as far as contacting an elected official about an issue, only 13% to 17% (depending on whether they are e-mailing or writing) say that this is a way to bring about a lot of change.

Because students are not sure that their individual involvement will make much of a difference, most students choose not to get involved other than in the easiest, most convenient ways. Although 56% tell us that they have signed a petition, only 19% have participated in a demonstration, and only 18% have written to a member of Congress.

3. The 2000 presidential election may have sparked an interest in politics and an appreciation of the importance of voting. If the election had a single legacy, it would be arousing this generation's interest in the political process. Students took an active interest in last year's presidential election: The vast majority (88%) reports checking the latest news at least once a week during the election. Two in five (42%) say they kept up on the news every day, whereas only 6% say they checked the news no more than once a month.

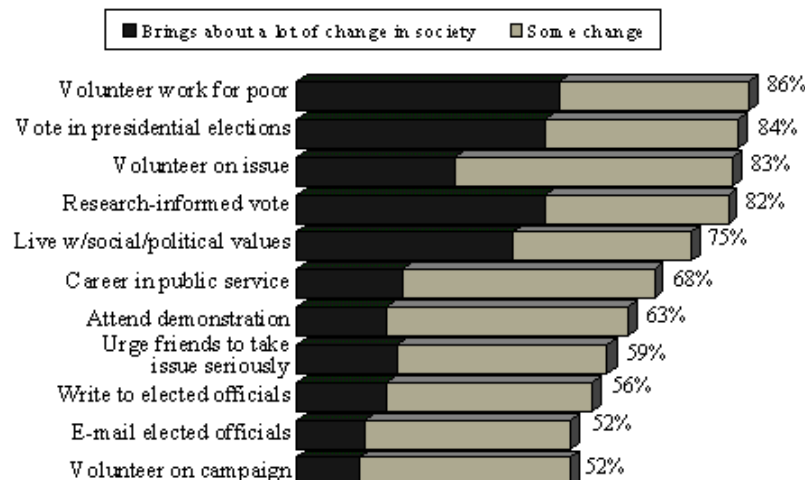
Students Followed Election But Didn't Participate



One of the most compelling findings from this research is the respect that students say they have for the vote, which perhaps is a result of the historically close election and the equally historic controversy surrounding the Florida recount. A strong majority (84%) believe that voting in a presidential election is a way to make a difference: 47% say that it can bring about a lot of change, and 37% say that it can effect some change. For most students, voting is far more effective in bringing about change than is volunteering on an election campaign, as only 12% say that the latter can bring about a lot of change.

The power of one's vote is recognized particularly among freshmen (88% a lot/some change), women (87%), and students affiliated with one of the major parties (84% Democrats, 85% Republicans).

How to Bring about Change

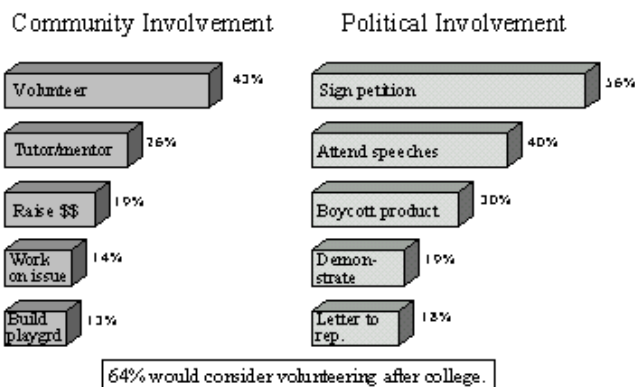


4. Students believe in and prefer the direct benefits of volunteering. What's the alternative to politics? An overwhelming majority (86%) of students tell us that doing volunteer work for groups that help the needy is a way to bring about needed change (50% a lot of change, 36% some change). Most students believe that volunteer programs—more so than the two political parties—have made society better. Solid majorities say that youth-mentoring programs, such as Big Brother/Big Sister (68%); private charities (66%); and groups like AmeriCorps (59%) make a great deal or fair amount of difference toward the betterment of society.

Because they believe that getting involved in volunteer programs is a way to help their local communities, most students volunteer during their time in college. A large majority (68%) say that they have been involved in volunteer or other types of charitable activities. Sixty-three percent have volunteered at a local school, hospital, or neighborhood center; 38% have been tutors or mentors; and 27% have helped raise funds for a local cause.

Students' Personal Involvement

Which of these have you done while in college?



Volunteering has become part of the college experience. Among students who have gotten involved in their communities, two in five (39%) have volunteered through a program offered by their college or university. Alternatively, they have worked with an organization (13%) or a religious group (12%) with which they are affiliated.

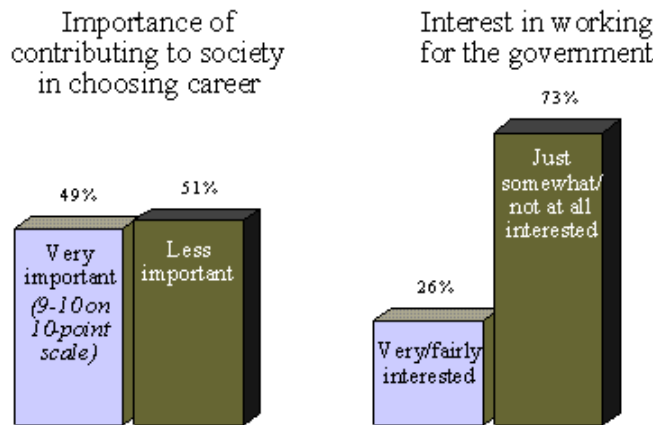
The value that students find in volunteerism is evident in their willingness to consider a longer-term commitment to an organization. Nearly three in four (73%) students would consider volunteering for either Habitat for Humanity (42%), the Peace Corps (21%), AmeriCorps (7%), or VISTA (3%) after they finish college or during a break.

The vast majority (83%) of students also says that working for an issue organization is an effective way to make a difference. Most students admire progressive issue organizations for their contributions to society: 59% believe that Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and other groups promoting alcohol awareness have made a great deal or fair amount of difference; 56% say the same of international human rights' groups such as Amnesty International.

5. Young people are committed to making a difference, but not through government service. Half (49%) of all college students say that in choosing a career, it is very important (a "9" or "10" on a 10-point scale) that it contribute to society. Yet, only about half as many (26%) tell us that they are very or fairly interested in government service; two in five (42%) say that they have no interest whatsoever in working for the government.

In part, students question the government's ability to make changes for the better. While 50% believe that doing volunteer work to assist the needy can bring about a lot of change, only 20% say the same about choosing a career in government. As a result, even those who put a premium on a career's potential for making a difference are unwilling to consider government service; among this group, only 26% say that they would be interested in working for the government.

Few Students Considering Government Service

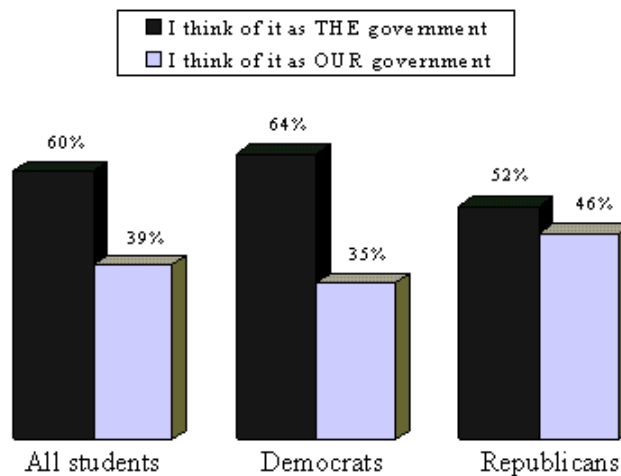


Sixty-four percent of students say that providing financial aid or forgiving student loans might be an incentive to participate in public service. Three in ten say that it might help to have a parent or professor encourage them to participate.

6. Today's students don't hate the government, but they feel disconnected from it. Generation Y is not hostile toward government. Only 23% say that smaller government should be a top or high priority for the nation; 68% say that they are satisfied with the country's political leadership; and only 38% feel that a candidate's working to "change the way things are done in Washington" is a very important quality. If anything, Generation Y would like to see more from government: 85% say that hiring more teachers and reducing class sizes should be a top or high priority for Congress and President Bush; 76% believe that government should be strengthening and preserving Social Security; 73% want government to assist low-income families with children; and 69% say that the President and Congress should put prescription-drug coverage for seniors on the national agenda.

Students don't know what to make of government. When asked whether they think about government as "the government" or "our government," 60% say "the government" and 39% say "our government." Of course, the degree to which students (and presumably most Americans) feel any ownership of government may depend on who is in power—47% of Bush voters and 46% of Republicans say "our government," compared with only 36% of Gore voters and 35% of Democrats.

Students Reluctant to Claim Ownership of Government

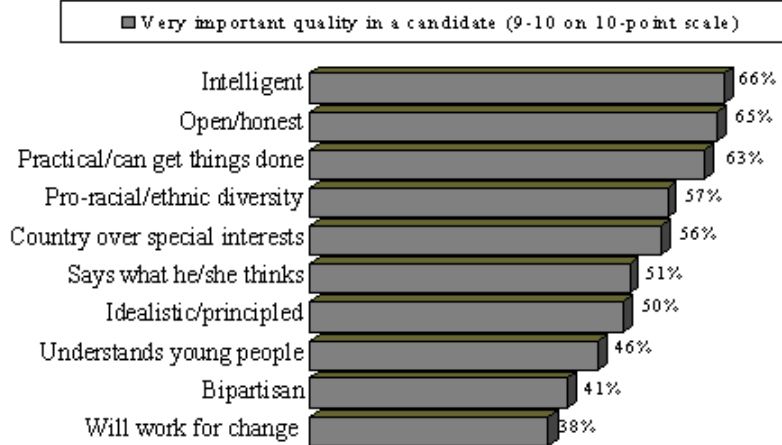


II. How Can We Engage Young Adults in Politics?

tudents' concern about and willingness to help the vulnerable and disadvantaged demonstrate that they *can* be engaged. But this is not the 1960s—they are concerned more with the impact they will have and less with the ideal they will serve. If candidates, political parties, and social-change organizations hope to involve young people, they should understand the following:

- 1. Young people want to make a difference, not just a statement.** While today's generation is drawn to ideals, whether in voting or volunteering, it also wants tangible results. Asked what they would most like to see in a political candidate, half (50%) of college students say that it is very important that they be idealistic and stand up for principles, but more (63%) say that it is very important that candidates be practical and realistic. This pragmatic orientation is reflected in the 50% who believe that volunteering in one's community can bring about a lot of change; only 17% say the same about participating in demonstrations. Three in four students say that people can make a difference just by living their lives in a way that is consistent with their social and political values. Thus, to inspire college students, political leaders must offer a vision and back it up with concrete action.
- 2. Students are looking for honest leaders who understand young people's concerns.** This generation has tremendous respect for the gains made by the civil rights and women's movements. Hence, today's students want candidates who can address similar challenges as well as be forthright in face of great adversity. They want candidates who are honest (65% say this quality is very important) and who say what they think, even if their positions are unpopular (51%). Nearly half (46%) of students feel that a candidate's understanding of their values is very important.

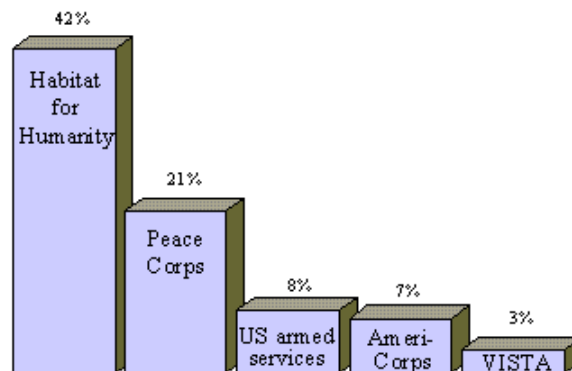
What Students Want in a Candidate



- 3. Provide avenues for individual empowerment and celebrate the power of voting.** Today's students are empowered by volunteering because they believe their individual efforts contribute to a larger cause that makes a difference. Students do not feel the same way about volunteering for a political campaign, however. But the 2000 election left a legacy, a legacy whose effects may be felt for quite some time to come: Students now believe strongly that their individual votes truly count. We must build on this belief by giving young people ways to participate in the political process (e.g., aggressive voter registration and GOTV).
- 4. Build a bridge between direct service, and politics and public service.** Many have already volunteered in their communities, and even more are open to working with Habitat for Humanity or the Peace Corps after graduation. Cultivate their willingness to act on their beliefs, not as an alternative to political engagement, but as an additional reason to either participate in the political process or make a career of public service. The challenge for political leaders and parties is to show young people who are willing to help Jimmy Carter build affordable housing, for example, that public policy and government can accomplish even more, or show Peace Corps volunteers that only the world's governments have the resources to tackle global problems such as AIDS or exploitative child labor. The potential is already there—students want a government that does more, whether it is hiring more teachers and reducing class sizes or providing assistance to low-income families.

Most Would Consider Longer-term Commitment

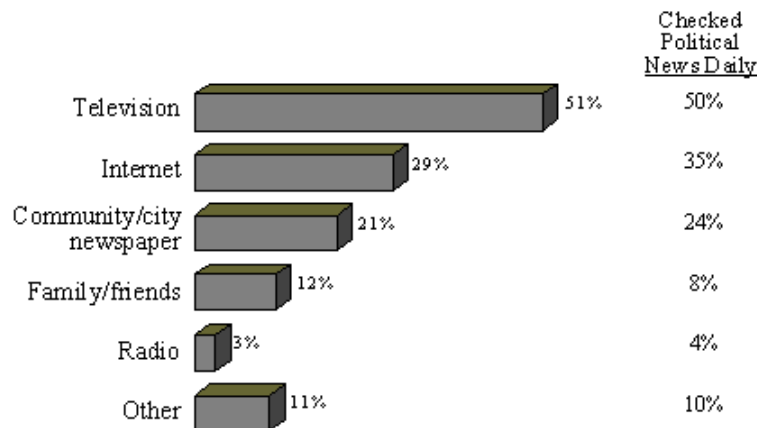
When I finish college or as a break, I would consider volunteering in the following organizations:



- Support and encourage young women.** Female students (59%) are much more likely than male students (39%) to say that making a difference is a key consideration in choosing a career, and they are more likely than male students to believe that volunteering for a campaign can make a big difference (59% vs. 43%). Moreover, female students already are more involved than their male counterparts—by 35% to 23%, women are more likely to have boycotted a product because of a manufacturer’s wrongdoing, and by 72% to 64%, women are more likely to have volunteered in their community. Yet, women are much less likely than men to say that they would seek elected office: Only 24% of women, compared with 39% of men, report any interest in running for a federal office, and just 24%, versus 43% of men, are interested in running on the state or local level. And while 31% of men say that they are very or fairly interested in a government career, the same can be said of only 21% of women. Young women’s commitment and idealism is there, but it has not yet been linked to politics or public service. They need role models and support.
- To reach this generation, go on-line.** The attention that many students paid to the election may have been facilitated by the Internet. While television was almost certainly their chief news source about the election (51% say they get most of their political information from TV) a significant proportion also looked to the Internet. Three in ten (29%) say they follow the latest news about politics and civic affairs on-line. Of those students who followed the presidential election each day, 35% say they rely on the Internet for their news. Of those who checked the news once a week or less during the election, only 23% say that most of their news comes from an on-line source. In fact, *the Internet has surpassed the newspaper as a chief news source on most college campuses*—just one in five (21%) students say that they get most of their news from a city or national newspaper.

Sources of Information

Where do you get most of your info about politics?



7. **Parents must lay the groundwork.** Ideally, college is a place where young people are on their own for the first time; it's a place where they can begin to express themselves politically or choose whether to volunteer in their community. On many if not most campuses, students will have the opportunity to see speakers or authors address political issues; they will be asked to sign petitions for a range of causes; they will witness or even participate in demonstrations; or they may become a volunteer through a program offered by their school or an on-campus organization. Whether students take advantage of these new freedoms depends in large part on their parents. When children grow up discussing politics with their parents, they grow up to be far more interested and involved, both in the political process and in their community. Half of all students say that while they were growing up, they discussed politics with their parents very or fairly often; 39% indicate that they rarely did so; and 11% say that they never discussed politics at home. Of those college students who regularly discussed politics with their parents, 50% report checking the latest political news every day during the 2000 election, compared with only 34% of those who grew up in households where politics was not a topic of conversation; 10% of those reared on politics have volunteered on a political campaign, compared with only 2% of students from apolitical households. In addition, young people raised on politics are more likely to believe that a career in government or public service leads to change (24% major change, 47% some change); among students in non-political households, only 16% believe it would make a major change, and 50% say it would bring about some change.

Parents Play an Important Role

50% of students say they have grown up discussing politics very or fairly often with their parents.

