

4/7/2018

## College Students' Perspectives on Politics, Bipartisanship

By: Mady Johnston

As the November midterm elections draw closer and political divisions continue to guide Americans' conversations and news feeds, there is both a desire for bipartisanship and a sense of exhaustion. In times like these, the often-ignored voices of young voters can provide a fresh perspective on the overwhelming influence of politics on everyday lives.

Arelis Colon, 22, is a senior Communications major at Alvernia University. A long-time resident in the City of Reading, Colon knows first-hand how the economic standing of one's community can influence the political activity of its citizens. "When you're to the point where you have to hustle to survive, you don't have the time to worry about 'What's going to benefit me more?' or 'Who should I vote for?'" Colon said.

The political atmosphere at Alvernia is similar. As a liberal arts college, Alvernia University encourages its students to engage in civil discord. However, students may not feel that discussing politics is an efficient use of time. According to Colon, "There's more room for [political dialogue] at Alvernia, but students tend to avoid it, partially because we're so busy."

However, college students, like Colon, understand that political divides have become a key influence in their everyday lives.

"We see close friends become no longer friends," Colon said. "I've never stopped being friends with people because of differences in politics, but I have tried to tread lightly because of stuff that some people have said or done [that are politically driven.]"

She's not alone. According to a 2016 Pew Research poll, most Americans don't enjoy engaging in political dialogue. 46% of total individuals polled said that they found talking with people they disagree with is "stressful and frustrating", and 61% of people found that they had less in common when discussing politics with someone across the aisle. As a result, most people would be reluctant to engage in politics with their peers for fear of cutting ties.

James Wyatt III, 22, a senior Criminal Justice major at Alvernia, and a self-identified conservative, is aware of how politics can divide people, citing the strain on his relationship with his girlfriend after Donald Trump was elected president and the fear of losing key friendships.

"I also found a decent number of Republican friends, including myself, don't post a lot of political stuff online, because we don't want that to get in the way of our friendships," Wyatt said. As a result, students may not have a positive outlook on the possibility of bipartisanship in American society. "If it is possible, it's not going to happen in our lifetime," Wyatt said. According to Colon, "If politics [achieves bipartisanship], then society and celebrities will do it to."

Ironically, the very institution causing such a stir is also filled with people working to achieve bipartisan discourse. U.S. congressmen and senators are joining bipartisan movements, such as the Problem Solvers Caucus and Climate Solutions Caucus, in the hopes of promoting bipartisan legislation on many issues. On the state level, Sen. Judy Schwank (D) and Rep. Mark Gillen (R) are pushing for bipartisanship in the state government by maintaining strong relationships with their constituents from both parties and working together to push fair legislation that will benefit the Commonwealth.

4/7/2018

The exhaustion of partisan politics for young people is not lost on these representatives. In a written statement, Rep. Mark Gillen said he has faith in the influence of young voters. “I believe that if these young adults felt more involved with the system, understood how their choices could significantly influence society, and felt connected to the individual(s) running for office, they would become more excited about the incredible opportunity that informed voting offers.”

Furthermore, Sen. Schwank has said that she is working with Republican and Democratic constituents to pass Pennsylvania SB. 501, a bipartisan bill that is passed would take away and deny guns for individuals who have threatened partners or have Protection from Abuse Orders. “You have to continue to try [to achieve bipartisanship],” Sen. Schwank said. “You have to have emotional maturity to want to see someone else’s perspective. It’s a civic duty.”

Despite discomfort talking about politics, college students do have a few things in common. When asked what political issues matter most to them, interviewees overwhelmingly cited gun and mental health reform. On gun reform, some believe in strengthening background checks while others want a change in the culture and dialogue surrounding guns. However, most everyone agreed on changing the stigma around mental health and services.

The issue causing the greatest division among people from all backgrounds, however, is a question that has gone viral recently: is a hotdog a sandwich? Individuals tend to be split down the middle, but Alex Harris, 22, a Computer Science major at Penn State Berks, has a solution. “It’s a meat jacket... it’s a fashionable piece of meat.”