



Resisting the Pressure to Conform  
By Ayla Iqbal

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*Aren't you hot? Do you have hair under there? Can you hear with that thing on?*

Growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood, these are the usual questions I get when I go out wearing the hijab. Many cannot fathom why I make such a religious commitment and feel so obligated to my religion. However, I don't oppose these questions. Explaining the meaning of the hijab not only allows others to understand, it is also a reminder for me of why I believe what I do.

But nothing leaves me so disheartened, offended, and miserable than one particular question I received: *Why don't you just take it off? Maybe then you will be treated like an actual human being.*

It started as a regular day at high school. As I was sitting, bored, during first period listening to my science teacher drone on about renewable energy, when we were interrupted by an announcement:

*Attention students. After recent devastating events, this is a reminder to be kind and respectful to one another, regardless of race, gender, and religion. Remember our high school's core values: Respect, Integrity, and Kindness. Discrimination isn't one of them.*

What could that possibly have been about? I asked my friend sitting beside me.

*"Didn't you hear? There was a shooting at a Mosque yesterday—50 people were killed."*

With thirty seconds left to get to my next class, I rushed to my locker. As I was collecting my books, I got a tap on my shoulder.

*“Did you hear the news? Your people are getting killed. Taking that thing off is better for everyone’s safety, and maybe then you will be treated like an actual human.”*

My heart sank.

Thirty seconds. That’s all it takes for your confidence to completely crumble to the floor.

I felt furious and exasperated.

After collecting my thoughts and overcoming my disbelief, I smiled and responded: “You’ve got it all wrong.”

Many people are afraid to express themselves as a result of society’s constant pressure to conform. This is particularly prevalent in schools, where students are afraid to voice their own opinions and beliefs for fear of judgment from others. In a [recent survey from Next Generation Politics](#), 60% of students surveyed said they have felt they could not express opinions on a subject because they feared how other students, teachers, or the administration would respond.

A great example is how the pressure to conform plays out through clothing.

It feels like every season there is a new “it” item—if you do not purchase it, it will cause you to become a social outcast. High schoolers love the idea of having a “unique” persona, claiming that they do not care what others think, yet they tend to dress in the same toneless outfits. We forget our personal preferences because we are terrified of being ridiculed for our image.

Fortunately, many students like me are building our confidence to freely express ourselves online. With the rise of protests and activism on social media, we use social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to share our thoughts and feelings.

However, self-expression beyond widely accepted opinions on social media is very constrained. According to the survey findings from Next Generation Politics, 59% of high school students are uncomfortable expressing their views online, and only 9% of students report being very comfortable expressing an unpopular opinion via social media. This is worrisome, particularly given how vital social media has become during the pandemic, with so many of us at home using technological devices.

Self-expression is an undervalued commodity. It cannot be purchased, sold, or marketed—whether it be finding your voice, clothing style, or even the music you like to listen to. Hiding behind others to fit in shows no character and camouflages you.

Today, I still have barriers in connecting with others due to what I believe and how I dress. Even so, I’m determined not to allow society to hold me back from doing what I need to do in order to thrive. Although I may sometimes feel pressure to conform or remain silent, I choose to exercise the freedom to express myself.

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Jack Flanigan

## Freedom of Expression Essay

I wish I could begin this column with some alarmist, click-bait headline. 'YOUNG PEOPLE BESIEGE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN NAME OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS' would certainly increase my chances of getting this piece read, but it would be dishonest. On the other end of the spectrum, 'YOUNG PEOPLE DEFEND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION WITH CIVIC PRIDE AND GREAT RESPECT' would not only read like a miserably dumbed down pseudo-news report given to third graders, but it would also be untrue.

Like most things, the situation on the ground is grayer than a single sentence can convey. In general, young people today have too low a tolerance for uncomfortable or inappropriate speech, and our low tolerance makes us less supportive of free expression as a concept. That said, I don't believe that freedom of speech is being irreparably corroded by the youth. In my eyes, informed by both personal experience and now by new survey data, young people (especially progressive/leftist young people) **do** have an appreciation of freedom of expression, albeit one underdeveloped and vulnerable.

The main threat to freedom of expression is more ambiguous than speech codes or 'forbidden words.' It is instead a cultural limiting of speech among young people. (I should note that I see other threats to freedom of expression in actions taken by schools and universities, but those are outside of the scope of this article.) As a student at an academically rigorous high school and an involved member of the debate team and political club, I bump up against issues of free speech on the regular. In my experience, there are two forces complicit in fostering an atmosphere that rewards concurring with the dominant (more left leaning) narrative at my school.

Since race is perhaps our country's most discussed and hyper-charged topic today, I'll focus on how free expression plays out in relation to discussions of race and racism, noting that this is applicable to other issues like homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and others.

Usually, an objection is raised by an archetypical 'Social Justice Warrior'--you know, the kid who the right loves to paint as what the 'radical left' wants for your children. This person is the first to speak out, usually arguing that what was just said is problematic for such and such a reason. The 'offender' (in quotes because sometimes the objections are illegitimate) can then either attempt to defend her or himself, or accept the fate of being labeled as 'problematic' or 'racist,' apologize, and stew in the awkwardness that follows. Compounding this situation are bystanders: those who

almost never stand up for the 'offender,' even if they agree with what was said or find the objection unreasonable.

This leads to the corrosion of freedom of expression playing out today. It may seem like 'no big deal,' which it both is and isn't. It is not a huge issue in the sense that speech is still free, and you can still speak your mind as a young person. However, it **is** an issue in the sense that the social ostracism resulting from freely speaking your mind indeed stifles free discussion and debate. This arises from extreme fear of being labeled politically, and therefore socially, unacceptable. Indeed, once someone has called your idea or preferred policy "racist," you have no good options. You can either defend yourself, which is what a racist would do and which is often seen as a doubling down on your perceived/actual racism, or you can apologize, which is an implicit admission of racism. In today's extremely sensitive atmosphere around race and other identity-centered issues, neither of these is desirable, and often neither is acceptable. As such, many non-left leaning and moderate kids simply silence themselves or distort their feelings to fit the dominant narrative.

The degree to which young people feel speech is limited is substantiated by recent findings in a survey conducted by the non-profit [Next Generation Politics](#), which I helped design and distribute. The survey ranks students' comfort in sharing controversial opinions in common campus spaces as 2.95 on a scale of 1-4 (think of this as a GPA equivalent to a B-). This is not ideal, but as stated earlier, not a crisis level alarm. However, students ranked their comfort sharing a controversial take on social media significantly lower, at 2.17, or a low C. This is of greater concern to me, especially as social media becomes an ever bigger part of our lives.

So, how can we fix the culture that leads students to give a vote of low confidence to their ability to express themselves freely in-person and especially on social media? Here's the paradox: the right to react is perhaps the central pillar of free expression, so to attempt to regulate the reactions of teens would, in and of itself, be repressive and hypocritical. At the same time, though, we would be better off with an atmosphere which allowed for a fuller range of opinions and ideas to circulate--something that Next Generation Politics does fantastically through its civic fellowship programs and podcasts, both of which I participate in.

I am reminded of an observation one of my classmates made when we were maybe in the sixth grade: if you mentioned the word race, you were deemed a racist. While the system of color-blind racism that we operated under during those years has since given way to a newer anti-racist school of thought that encourages discussions of race, the central insight still holds: we ought not to simply label anything that isn't in the dominant narrative as 'racist.' Of course, legitimately racist thought *should* be addressed. But we would do so much better to consider more carefully what exactly we are labeling racist, and therefore unacceptable. While we still have a long way to go, I

sense that the pendulum may be swinging back to a more measured atmosphere—especially among my generation.

*Jack Flanigan is a high school junior studying in Manhattan, New York. He is a podcaster with Next Generation Politics, and part of the Civic Fellow Program. He is also a member of his school's debate team and is passionate about raising awareness of under-addressed issues, especially the treatment and perception of mental illness and the state of the developing world.*

## What Happens When Expression Isn't Free in High Schools?

By Jack Flanigan, Malcolm Furman, Ayla Iqbal, and Madeline Mayes of [Next Generation Politics](#)

We are Civic Fellows in [Next Generation Politics](#), a cross-partisan nonprofit founded in the spring of 2017 in response to a very divisive national election and in recognition that dialogue, particularly dialogue across political, socioeconomic, racial, religious, gender or sexual identity divides, is critical to strengthening our country's fraying social fabric. Next Gen Politics brings teens like us from high schools across New York and around the country together to grapple with complex civic issues in the hopes of creating inclusive civic solutions and cultivating generational change. We focus on perspective-taking, critical thinking, and civil discourse, striving to build a movement of young people committed to building bridges across various divides through deliberative dialogue. To avoid perpetuating the paralyzing levels of polarization playing out among adults today, we must be in dialogue with peers whose points of view we might not otherwise interact with. This enables us to listen deeply, learn vigorously, and argue constructively with one another.

Through monthly [Civic Forums](#), a robust by GenZ, for GenZ [blog](#), and a weekly podcast called [The Round Table](#), participating teens commit to creating and maintaining "safe and courageous space," to challenging norms, and to representing all kinds of diversity and heterodoxy, especially of perspective and ideas.

Each spring, Civic Fellows have the opportunity to work in small cross-school groups to craft [Civic Action Projects \(CAPs\)](#) through which to deepen our understanding of an issue in conjunction with a community partner. The four of us, along with four other Fellows, were interested in Freedom of Expression and were fortunate to partner with [The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\)](#). We developed and administered a survey about free speech for high schoolers, based on one FIRE has administered with college students.

We distributed the survey broadly, running into more than a few challenges from school administrators who were not keen on free expression being surveyed—an irony that was not lost on us. We ultimately collected responses from over 250 teens from a broad range of public and private high schools in New York.

The results were alarming--you can check them out [here](#). Beyond the quantitative data we amassed and analyzed are our qualitative experiences. Below are some of our visceral responses to how freedom of expression is and isn't playing out in our high schools today.

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Identity politics and freedom of expression are two cornerstone challenges that I have found myself struggling with over my sixteen seemingly-long years of living. I am a Jewish, biracial, Hispanic, public high school attending girl who has a strong sense of self but who refuses to identify on the political spectrum. I do not identify as Democrat or Republican. I have found that my own personal views on individual issues tend to be wide ranging, often moderately liberal and sometimes even conservative.

I didn't even know that the word "conservative" existed as a political term until I took a workshop called, "The Right Side of the Aisle: What's Up with Conservatism?" through Next Generation Politics' [YVote](#) initiative during my freshman year. In middle school, I had no need to worry about how my political beliefs aligned, or didn't align, with my peers because nobody talked about politics. When I entered my high school-- a very large public school of just under 5,000 students located in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn-- political discussion remained just as hush-hush. It wasn't until the pandemic hit in March 2020 that my high school peers seemed to instantly become as civically engaged as I had been all this time, but in a very limited way.

Practically every single high schooler I knew who had social media was suddenly hopping onto the trendiest political movements and shunning those who were not in favor of these trends. Whether it be the Black Lives Matter movement or posting Anti-Israel and anti-semitic sentiments, my peers all had their cameras off throughout almost a year and a half of remote learning, seemingly so they could scroll on social media during class, and suddenly barely discussed anything that **wasn't** politics online. But only a narrow ban of perspectives were being addressed.

Why? A survey that I co-conducted on behalf of [Next Generation Politics](#) (NGP) last spring found that about 59% of the 250 New York City high school students that we surveyed said they were uncomfortable with sharing their political views on social media. This underscores a set of concerns we should all have: Why are high schoolers posting strongly opinionated content online if they are uncomfortable doing so? The teen voice online is disproportionately liberal, but is it a facade? Are all of these teens really so left wing, or has liberalism become just another new trend? Where are conservative teens, and why are they seemingly hiding?

And this is the moment where my call to action became tangible. I suddenly began to empathize with all of my peers who fear to express their voices, whether they be conservative or liberal, republican or democrat--because nothing good comes from voices being silenced.

--Madeline Mayes

The main threat to freedom of expression is more ambiguous than speech codes or 'forbidden words.' It is instead a cultural limiting of speech among young people. As a student at an academically rigorous high school and an involved member of the debate team and political club, I bump up against issues of free speech on the regular.

The corrosion of freedom of expression playing out today may seem like 'no big deal,' which it both is and isn't. It is not a huge issue in the sense that speech is still free, and you can still speak your mind as a young person. However, it **is** an issue in the sense that the social ostracism resulting from freely speaking your mind stifles free discussion and debate. This arises from extreme fear of being labeled politically, and therefore socially, unacceptable. Let's face it, once someone has called your idea or preferred policy "racist," you have no good options. You can either defend yourself, which is what a racist would do and which will likely be seen as a doubling down on your perceived/actual racism, or you can apologize, which is an implicit admission of racism. In today's extremely sensitive atmosphere around race and other identity-centered issues, neither of these is desirable, and often neither is acceptable. As such, many non-left leaning and moderate kids simply silence themselves or distort their feelings to fit the dominant narrative.

--Jack Flanigan

Many people are afraid to express themselves as a result of the constant conformity standards society pushes. This is prevalent in schools, as students are afraid to voice their own opinions and beliefs in fear of judgement from others. This is substantiated by findings from [a recent Next Generation Politics survey](#), in which 60% of students surveyed said they have felt they could not express opinions on a subject because of how they fear other students, teachers, or the administration would respond.

Theoretically, social media could provide a vehicle for students like me to freely express our thoughts and feelings on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. However, currently self-expression beyond mainstream sentiments on social media is very constrained. According to our NGP survey findings, 59% of high school students are uncomfortable expressing their views online and only 9% of students report being very comfortable expressing an unpopular opinion via social media. This is worrisome, particularly given how vital social media has become during the pandemic with so many of us at home using technological devices.

Self expression is an underestimated commodity. It cannot be purchased, sold, or marketed. Whether it be finding your voice, clothing, or music, hiding behind others to fit in shows no character and camouflages you. Today, though I still have barriers in connecting with others, I do not let my shortcomings hold me back from achieving what I desire in order to thrive, because I always have the ability to express myself.

--Ayla Iqbal

Data from our Next Gen Politics survey shows that concerns and constraints around expression are caused, in part, by an unwillingness to seek out different viewpoints from one's own. For instance, almost three-quarters (71%) of students surveyed believe Americans do a poor or very poor job of seeking out and listening to viewpoints different from their own. This strongly contrasts with students' perceptions of themselves: almost the same percentage of people (72%) believe they do a good or very good job of seeking out different viewpoints.

High school students need to face up to the fact that we may be part of the issue. Freedom of expression in schools deteriorates when students hold an "I'm not part of the problem" mindset. It requires courage from students and teachers alike to be supportive of viewpoints that are different from what's expected.

As a result, schools must put more time and energy into ensuring freedom of expression is protected so that students feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and teachers are accepting of diverse opinions. For example, in Next Generation Politics, we set [community agreements](#) that specifically encourage people to freely express their opinions, knowing that their opinions will be respected.

In discussions about events or topics surrounding controversial issues, nuanced viewpoints should be respected and encouraged, even if different from the viewpoint of the majority of students and teachers. Engagement in and exposure to diversity of opinion is fundamental to an authentic learning experience. I am disheartened by the results of our survey and my fellow students should feel the same way.

Despite the ever-polarizing political climate of today, I hope more high school students, teachers, and administrators will embrace unfamiliar viewpoints, expand their political exposure, and meaningfully engage in civic discourse: a robust culture of freedom of expression depends on it.

--Malcolm Furman

Flanigan, Furman, Iqbal, and Mayes are high school students from different backgrounds and communities in New York and Civic Fellows with [Next Generation Politics](#). To read each of their full articles, visit the [Next Gen Politics blog](#).



*Photo by Mateo Portelli. Context: White Pine County Republicans and supporters of President Trump rally in Ely, NV (population 3,924) at the White Pine County Courthouse in August 2020 to protest the passage of Nevada Assembly Bill 4, which was an omnibus bill that made it easier for people to vote without physically going to a polling place and created more flexible procedures for accepting mail-in ballots, including the collection, or “harvesting,” of ballots for drop-off. Mateo organized the rally.*

## It’s Cold in Las Vegas: Freedom of Expression and Young Republicans in Nevada

By Mateo Portelli

When I was a Field Organizer for the Nevada Republican Party in 2020, I was fascinated by the opportunity to work in politics at eighteen years old. My volunteers and I made over 46,000 face-to-face engagements with voters, called tens of thousands of homes, and registered dozens of new voters in my own

district. I'm very proud of my team who earnestly mobilized Nevadans of all political affiliations to vote.

I'm less proud of some reactions I received when people discovered I, a first-generation, low-income student and latino immigrant, worked as a Republican. I'm less proud of the experiences I and other young conservatives regularly have with our neighbors here in Las Vegas. Contrary to those who know Vegas to be in a desert in a valley, it's often cold for the political right-wing.

In Spring 2021, students who participated in the Freedom of Expression Civic Action Project of [Next Generation Politics](#) partnered with the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) to survey high schoolers on their views on free expression within their classes. Over 48% of respondents said that the right to freedom of speech is "threatened" or "very threatened" in their schools. This is a staggering statistic, one indicative of a chilling effect instantiated throughout our culture, focused more on "understanding" oppression and systems of inequality and who is propagating them, than free exchange of ideas.

Once a group is viewed as "evil," those who associate with the group become evil; worse, if you don't actively oppose that group, you are complicit in evil. As Hillary Clinton said in 2018, "You cannot be civil with a political party that wants to destroy what you stand for." Since my party seemingly "wants to destroy" whatever it is she and her supporters stand for, why would I be entitled to civility?

Of course, not all teenagers think the GOP or conservative organizations are evil. However, there is an emergent effort to curtail right-leaning groups and any discussion of the merits of conservative ideas or approaches. It might not be conspiratorial or coordinated among school districts, but it doesn't seem accidental.

For students interested in learning about conservatism, *hace frío en las vegas*. Outside of structured debate forums where decorum is enforced, students struggle to find a place where they can discuss ideas about their society with their peers without being subject to scorn. I've seen students criticized for *not* sharing the "correct" thoughts. Remember when Instagram had its Blackout Day, wherein Black Lives Matter supporters would post a picture of an all-black photo and boycott businesses to call attention to instances of police brutality? I saw many stories criticizing those who would not post in solidarity or support those who did. Silence now approaches violence, it seems.

Because students are new to the political arena, they don't have the experience with which to competently argue. So, it's often too exhausting or dangerous for a

right-leaning student to express her thoughts. Why put up the fight against a peer who is emboldened by infographics and minimalist Instagram posts, and risk being canceled in the process? Better to bite your tongue and focus on passing on your next social studies test. Why even bother arguing; what do you, a teenager, know?

But I reject this. Apathy is the biggest danger to my generation. A whole wave of young conservatives, those who might be interested in taking up causes for limited government, capitalism, and personal responsibility, are being stifled from talking about such ideas in a culture of hyper-partisanship and cancellation. A whole wing of our politics has become frozen because there are few platforms on which young Republicans can challenge their views of their communities and Nation. You'd also struggle to find conservative opportunities for internship, fellowship, or work-study that won't land you, at best, side-eyes and, at worst, alienation by your peers.

This chilling effect on free discourse in our classrooms is, as Patrick Henry might have put it, nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery -- slavery to fear of the loud collective. If we cannot agree on the preeminence of the ideas within the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, and if we lose a common appreciation for these American ideals, we might as well hand over the Star-Spangled Banner to the enemy.

Government is a continual act whose only legitimacy rests in the consent of the governed. Young Nevadans, with the rights and responsibilities conferred upon us by our citizenship, have a perpetual duty to ask, "Are we free?" Our Republic operates upon checks and balances, not just in our government, but also within our culture; political monopolies thrive in atmospheres of apathy. I implore you to, when in the minority, be the faithful opposition: if you have something on your mind, if you believe in pursuing the public good, then engage honestly, respectfully -- but above all, speak.

*Mateo Portelli is a 19-year-old FGLI student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) studying Political Science. He has worked with civic engagement and education organizations since 2017 and is the Founder of [UNLV Young Republicans](#). He also works as the Political Director for [Sigal Chattah for Nevada Attorney General](#). Nothing in this article should be construed to be an official position of any person or group except Mateo Portelli; all opinions and experiences contained herein are solely those of the author. Follow him on Twitter [@MateoPortelli](#).*

By Madeline Mayes

Community building and amplifying. Those are the aims I typically express when I open the weekly podcast that I co-host, [The Round Table: A Next Generation Politics Podcast](#).

Community building and amplifying--on the surface level, these don't seem like strenuous goals. With the recent increase of young people being involved in politics, Millennials and Gen Zers alike are assuming the role of community organizers and activists. But my type of community building and amplifying really has nothing to do with politics, despite my strong passions for current events, government inner workings, and American history.

My type of community building and amplifying are deeply interconnected to identity politics and freedom of expression, which are two continuous challenges that I have found myself struggling with in my sixteen seemingly long years of living. My desire for community building is a response to the struggles of being a Jewish, biracial, Hispanic, public high school attending girl who has a strong sense of self but who has yet to have "found herself." And by that, I mean that I refuse to identify on the political spectrum. I do not identify as democrat or republican. I have found that my own personal views on individual issues tend to be wide ranging, often moderately liberal and sometimes even conservative.

I didn't even know that the word "conservative" existed as a political term until I took a workshop called "The Right Side of the Aisle: What's Up with Conservatism?" through Next Generation Politics' [YVote](#) initiative during my freshman year. In middle school, I had no need to worry about how my political beliefs aligned, or didn't align, with my peers because there weren't any political discussions.. And when I entered my high school-- a very large public school of just under 5,000 students located in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn-- political discussion remained just as hush-hush. It wasn't until the pandemic hit in March that my high school peers seemed to become as civically engaged as I had been all this time.

Practically every single high schooler I knew who had social media was suddenly hopping onto the trendiest political movements and shunning those who were not in favor of these trends. Whether it be the Black Lives Matter movement or posting Anti-Israel and anti-semitic sentiments, my peers (who, throughout almost a year and a half of remote learning, all had their cameras off so they could scroll on social media during class) barely discussed anything that **wasn't** politics online. Perhaps they had a sudden change of heart to be considerate for the battles that our nation has been fighting for centuries? Or maybe they all suddenly became thoroughly interested in civic engagement, but why via social media only?

A survey that I co-conducted on behalf of [Next Generation Politics](#) last spring found that **about 59% of the 250 New York City high school students that we surveyed said they were uncomfortable with sharing their political views on social media. This underscores a set of concerns we should all have:** Why are high schoolers posting strongly opinionated content online if they are uncomfortable doing so? The teen voice online is disproportionately liberal, but is it a facade? Are all of these teens really so left wing, or has liberalism become just another new trend? Where are conservative teens, and why are they seemingly hiding?

And this is the moment where my call to action became tangible. I suddenly began to empathize with all of my peers who fear to express their voices, whether they be conservative or liberal, republican or democrat--because nothing good comes from voices being silenced. Community building and amplifying is about putting labels aside, as I have done for myself, and seeing each other as humans who are born with the right to speak and have all our voices heard. It's about human decency and respect. 59% of teens in our survey reported that they are scared to share the emotions that they have and are forced between one of two options: either comply or be silenced or shunned. And while Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers seemingly have pride in how Gen Z is the most vocal generation, they should be concerned about its implications: not everything that is spoken with volume is spoken with truth. But more than concerned, they should lead by example, because otherwise a generation of silenced thoughts and shaking voices will be taking the steering wheel.

*Madeline Mayes is a junior at Fort Hamilton High School, where she is both an honors and leadership student who sits on the Student Government Executive Board. Beyond school, she is an active participant in YVote and Next Generation Politics, and believes that freedom of expression is the most valuable right guaranteed to Americans. Madeline is also a student reporter for PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs. In her free time, she is a tennis player, an avid reader, a calligraphist, and an aspiring musician and linguist.*