



# Getting Involved and Making a Difference

From the staff members of local government officials to presidents in the Oval Office — everyone involved in the political process has a story about how he or she first decided to become involved in government.

Former President Bill Clinton points to when he traveled to Washington as a teenager as part of a youth leadership conference and had a chance to meet President John F. Kennedy.

President Ronald Reagan first became involved in politics as the president of the Screen Actors Guild, a labor union for the entertainment industry. A well-known actor, Reagan campaigned actively for Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. California Republicans were so impressed with his ability to speak on their behalf that they nominated him to be the state's governor.



College students hand out tickets for their candidate's campaign event in Madison, Wisconsin. © AP Images

Presidential campaign volunteers enter data at a call center in Virginia. © AP Images

However, it's not only future presidents who get involved. Eric Walker, 25, an avid campaign worker and congressional staffer, remembers a moment in the 2004 presidential race, when the Democratic candidates John Kerry and John Edwards spoke about middle-class workers who had lost their jobs when their companies moved overseas. "That's what happened to my

dad," Walker said. "So I heard that and I thought, 'Wow, they're talking about me.' It all started in 2004 when I heard that message."

The desire to get out the word about issues he felt were important led Walker to study political communication, and since college he's worked on congressional campaigns for several candidates throughout New York state and is currently communications



director for Representative Louise Slaughter, a Democrat from New York's 28th congressional district.

Two-thirds of college graduates go into some field other than the one they studied, according to Walker. "I'm one of the lucky ones. I wake up every morning and say, 'There's a lot of stuff to do, and I'm excited to go do it.'"

Kathleen Schermund, 27, a graduate student who has worked for a congressman, followed the lead of her mother, who was politically active in their hometown of Gambrills, Maryland. "I remember going around handing out lawn signs and helping out with voter registration even when I was in elementary school," Schermund said. Her early involvement in the election process led her to study political science and journalism in college. In 2004, she was an intern for Florida Republican Tom Feeney, answering phone calls and mail from constituents. "While some of the work wasn't the sexiest, I felt it was really exciting and important."

In 2008, following college, she worked on the congressional reelection campaign of Pennsylvania Republican Phil English. "I spent the last couple of weeks in Pennsylvania going around helping with community town halls and handing out lawn signs," Schermund said. "The last week there was a lot of door knocking. That was a really cool experience: explaining what the congressman stood for and hoping they would vote for his reelection."



Two young volunteers in Virginia make phone calls on behalf of their preferred candidate for president. © AP Images

Although Schermund's candidate narrowly lost his bid for reelection, her experience led her to a position as legislative assistant, then senior legislative assistant, to Republican Leonard Lance of New Jersey. Schermund has recently begun a graduate program in international development at Georgetown University. "I'm very interested in democracy promotion abroad," she said.

Schermund believes young people working in government — even those working for different political parties — have a similar quality. "I have friends from both sides of the aisle. What they have in

common is that they're all incredibly passionate about issues and incredibly well informed. People who know staffers see that common bond they have — it's a dedication to service."

Years after the presidential election that motivated the young Walker to go into politics, he's never been more certain of the importance of democratic politics. "Elections really matter," he said. "If you're in a situation where your government is doing something you don't agree with, the best way to fix it is to get involved in the process because the decisions are made by the people who *show up*."