

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Social Networking

Facebook forums shouldn't sway government, young Canadians say

But politicians should watch what's happening on social media outlets: poll

Michael Valpy

From Thursday's Globe and Mail Published on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010 3:00AM EST Last updated on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010 8:02AM EST

They're as familiar with Facebook as flossing their teeth but only a small minority of young Canadian adults think social networking forums should sway government, according to a new poll.

The survey by Ottawa-based Nanos Research offers insight into what weight politicians should give to Facebook sites like Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament (CAPP), which in a matter of days in early January attracted a quarter of a million members.

Not much, in pollster Nik Nanos's assessment.

Canadians in the 18-to-29 cohort – who use Facebook the most – were little different from Canadians of other age groups in their thoughts about Facebook groups influencing government: They weren't keen on it.

“They see it as an enabler of political discussion, and a kind of low-entry political transaction,” said Mr. Nanos.

“But that shouldn't be confused with [the political intentions of] the broader population and whether a government should change or modify its policy just because of something that's on the Internet.

“We should delineate between Facebook as a mobilizing force in politics and Facebook as having political heft in the ballot box.”

Mr. Nanos says the broader question about social media sites like Facebook is how effective they are as platforms of political mobilization and whether they're showing signs of replacing political parties.

“Because it's probably easier to mobilize a Facebook group than to call your local riding association and get people to show up to do something.”

The university students who put CAPP together used it as an instrument to organize public protests against Prime Minister Stephen Harper's unpopular decision to shut down Parliament.

Mr. Nanos said the Prime Minister didn't have to pay attention to the numbers who joined CAPP “as if it's a massive political shock to the system.”

But he said Mr. Harper does have to watch what's happening on CAPP and other social media forums in the context of “opposition forces having a platform to mobilize people very cost effectively and very quickly.

“We should properly put into context what these Facebook groups are:

“They're very easy, low entry-level facilitators of the public mood.”

But, he added, “we still haven't come to grips with what they really mean.”