

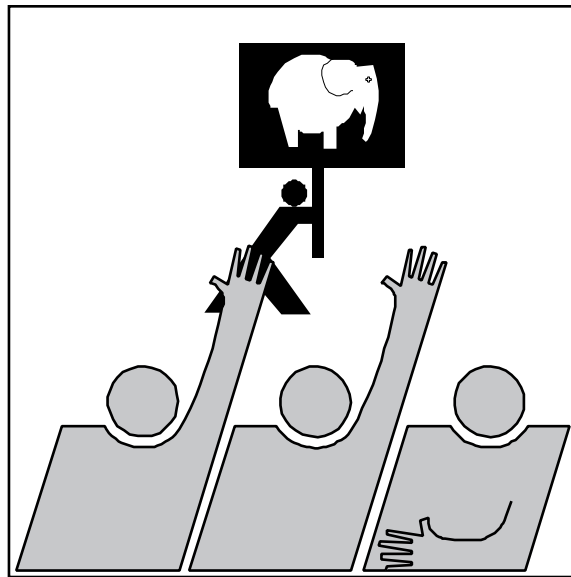
YOUNG REPUBLICANS ARE THERE ANY LEFT?

STEVEN R. PIGEON

After the 2006 Wisconsin gubernatorial election, Wisconsin Policy Research Institute's James Miller asked the simple question, "Who Chose Wisconsin's Governor?" Miller concluded that it was senior citizens who should be given the credit of reelecting Jim Doyle governor.¹

Though younger voters (those between the ages of 18-29) were heralded for a high turnout and passionate opposition to the Wisconsin constitutional amendment prohibiting homosexual marriage, ultimately it was the senior citizens that made the difference. This was despite the fact that 191,489 more young voters voted, compared to the 2002 Wisconsin gubernatorial election. This represented a 109% increase in the young voter turnout² and 40% of voters in that age bracket.³

Young voters appear to understand the limited impact that their demographic has had during previous elections. According to a June 2007 poll conducted by MTV, CBS News, and the *New York Times*, 45% of young voters believed that older generations will have more influence deciding who the next president will be. Only 36% of young voters believed that they would have the same amount of influence



over selecting the next president.⁴

Regardless of the actual impact that young voters have on elections, both the Republican and Democratic parties are battling for the loyalty of young voters. Though these efforts may not reap immediate rewards, they are investments in the party's future. Therefore attracting and appealing to young voters during their political forma-

tive years will have greater impacts in future elections.

Voting patterns of young voters

In the 2006 midterm elections, 60% of young voters voted for Democrats compared to 38% that voted for Republicans.⁵ In the 2004 presidential election, young voters voted for John Kerry over George Bush 54% to 45% meaning that young voters were the only age group not to favor President Bush.⁶ The erosion of support for the Republican Party is also displayed in the decrease in the number of individuals that identify with the Republican Party. In 1991 55% of 18-25 year olds identified with the Republican Party, in 2006 only 35% did. The percentage of Republicans between

Steven R. Pigeon is a Market Research Analyst and Free Lance Writer in Milwaukee.

the ages of 18-34 was 25% in 1997 compared to 17% today.⁷

Older voters might have turned away from the Republican Party in reaction to a combination of excess Congressional earmarks, expansion of government, corruption, and ineffective use of power. But this does not necessarily explain why young voters are abandoning the Republican Party.

Young voters and technology

John Connors, president of Marquette University's College Republican chapter, cites the failure of the Republican Party to keep up with technology as a primary reason why young voters are not able to identify with the Republican Party. Connors is not aware of a Republican candidate that is effectively using technology, such as Facebook, text messaging, or instant messaging. Connors believes that, going forward, television commercials will be deemed an ineffective way to reach young voters and will be replaced by messaging and internet tools like YouTube.⁸

Connor's feelings are echoed by young Democrats. Jason Rae, who at the age of 17 became the youngest person to be voted onto the Democratic National Committee, believes that online tools will continue to play a prominent role in local, state, and national elections.⁹ Irene Miller, president of the Young Democrats chapter at the University of Mississippi describes young voters in the following way: "It's hard to get kids to do something like write a letter to the editor. That's old school. That doesn't mean they're apathetic. They're out there; they're just online."¹⁰

Minnesota's Democrat Secretary of State Mark Ritchie successfully reached out to young voters, specifically college students during his 2006 campaign by teaming up with Minnesota's Youth Coordinated Campaign (YCC). Ritchie's success was featured in George Washington University's "Young Voter Mobilization Tactics" publication.

The YCC took new technologies to a new level. From Facebook and MySpace, they developed lists as 12 campuses of potential

student supporters based on their self-identified political views and activities listed on their profiles. The YCC then organized these lists by political views, location, and likelihood to vote, and targets these students to register and vote through a volunteer door-to-door program. They also used these lists to publicize campus events.¹¹

Though Secretary Ritchie and the Democratic Party have been the leaders in utilizing technology, specifically online communication techniques, similar tactics when used by Republicans have also been successful. Florida's Republican Governor Charlie Crist, in his 2006 gubernatorial campaign, was able to use online web tools in a swing state to receive 50% of votes cast by young voters. Crist's win among young voters was also highlighted by George Washington University.

The Crist campaign used online social networking sites to mobilize young supporters. Early unscientific polls on Facebook indicated success: Crist held 54 percent of the "Facebook vote" in mid-September and 64 percent by late October. The Crist campaign boasted eight different supportive Facebook groups, from "Charlie Crist for Governor" to "UT Students for Charlie Crist," as well as the campaign's own profile of Crist.¹²

Candidates of either party can no longer depend on traditional methods, television commercials, yard signs, phone banking, or canvassing to reach young voters. These techniques must be utilized in combination with messaging and online communications in order to reach and motivate young voters to act.

Young voters and social issues

If improving the techniques used to reach young voters is all that it will take to reach them, then the Republican Party would only have to adjust the marketing techniques they are using. However, attracting young voters is not this simple.

It might be some of the core Republican beliefs that young voters are rejecting. Democrats cite the intolerance of the

Republican Party as the factor that will have the greatest long-term impact on the Republicans.

The considerably greater tolerance of young people on social issues may create a more enduring cultural divide. On questions about gays, interracial dating, or immigration, surveys by the Pew Research Center and other organizations show young people are far more liberal and tolerant than older voters.

Many Republicans seem to reflect intolerance, and the face of the party is middle-aged and white, an image antithetical to young Americans.

This is the most diverse, multi-cultural generation ever; they embrace diversity, they think differences are cool” said Mr. Hans Riemer, national young director for the Democrat Barack Obama.

Republicans, he argues, are paying a huge price for visible hostility on some of these matters: “Young voters are turned off by anyone who is repulsed by differences.”¹³

The belief that Republican stances on social issues are alienating young voters is shared by Rae and Kaye Wierzbicki,¹⁴ an executive member of Marquette University’s College Democrats. Specifically Rae stated that the primary motivation for young voters to go to the polls in Wisconsin in 2006 was the referendum that would amend the state’s constitution to only allow marriage between a man and a woman. This issue generated a 40% turnout among young voters with 60% voting against the amendment.¹⁵

In a recent poll the Democracy Corps found that young voters disagreed with the Republican Party on all core issues.

Young people disagree sharply with the Republican Party and find very little of their own values or ideals reflected. We see broad, ideological movement away from the Republican Party among the larger electorate as well, but the depth of breadth of this population’s alienation from one of America’s two major parties is striking and previews a problem for the Republicans extending beyond the life of the current administration.¹⁶

It certainly would be inappropriate to over-characterize young voters as far left liberals who blindly vote Democratic. Young Republicans do exist, but they have changed. Today’s young Republicans cannot be characterized as country club

kids, wearing sweater vests and playing squash. Brian Anderson, a scholar at the Manhattan Institute, characterizes today’s young conservatives as being “South Park Conservatives.” In articles and books Anderson relates that the messages and feelings portrayed in Comedy Central’s offensive, vulgar, and tremendously popular show “South Park” mirrors those of today’s young

Republicans. Anderson uses the following example to make his point:

Mr. Garrison (the main characters’ homosexual elementary school teacher) decides to get a sex change. The procedure is shown, graphically, to be a horrific self-mutilation, which is already a brave bit of truth-telling in an era of “transgender rights”. But you’ve never seen anything on television like what follows:

Mr. Garrison, now a “woman”, mistakenly thinks he’s pregnant- and that make him very happy because he can rush off to get an abortion, *and so prove that he’s a real woman*. Here’s the key exchange, at a Planned Parenthood center.

*In a recent poll the
Democracy Corps found
that young voters
disagreed with the
Republican Party on all
core issues.*

Garrison: Hello, doctor. Looks like I need an abortion

Doctor: An abortion?

Garrison: Yeah, I've got one growing inside me. Now are you gonna scramble its brains or just vacuum it out?¹⁷

If reading this vulgar scene made you uncomfortable, you are not a "South Park" Republican. While this scene highlights the traditional conservative view that abortion is murder and not just a medical procedure that is constitutionally protected, it is done in the language of the young.

In his book Anderson quotes one college student describing what being a "South Park" Republican means to him.

The label is really about rejecting the image of conservatives as uptight squares—crusty old men or nerdy kids in blue blazers. We might have long hair, smoke cigarettes, get drunk on weekend, have sex before marriage, watch R-rated movies, cuss like sailors—and also happen to be conservative, or at least libertarian.¹⁸

Many young conservatives have difficulty relating to the evangelical Christians who are currently a dominating influence on the Republican Party. Young conservatives see fewer and fewer Republican Party topics with which they can identify. This may in part be why nontraditional Republicans such as Arnold Schwarzenegger have found success in places where, historically, Republicans have struggled. "South Park" conservatives are able to relate more to a pop culture icon like Governor Schwarzenegger than to a traditional, Christian conservative, like President Bush.

Republican recruitment

Both young activists, John Connors, the Republican, and Jason Rae, the Democrat, agree that in the past the Republican Party at one point was very successful in recruiting young people, especially during President Reagan's presidential tenure. The primary reason for this was the strength and strong organization of the National College Republicans during that time. The deliberate efforts to recruit young voters in the 1980s helped the

Republican Party win elections and formed a solid base for the party's takeover of Congress in 1994 with the Party's "Contract with America".

John Connors recalls an invitation he received during high school to attend a local Republican Party meeting. That was the point that he got involved in politics, specifically Republican Party politics. That simple invitation was the first step on a path that led Connors to become President of Marquette University's Young Republicans and an organizer for "Americans For Prosperity."

My personal experience is quite different and highlights the reluctance of the Wisconsin Republican Party to recruit young individuals to become more active in the party. From August 2006 to September 2007 I wrote approximately 25 columns in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the majority of which contained a clear conservative message. I have also written a handful of online postings for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and an essay that appeared in last winter's *Wisconsin Interest* journal.

Through this I have been contacted and had conversations with Milwaukee's Mayor Tom Barrett and individuals at the Heritage Foundation. I received an invitation from Grassroots Northshore to debate former Milwaukee County District Attorney E. Michael McCann. In addition I have received e-mails from over a hundred Milwaukeeans.

However, even though I identified myself as a young conservative with an interest in politics, no member of the Republican Party personally contacted me, either to attend one of their parties events or to become involved in some other way. This simple example shows that few in the Republican Party, at the local level, have the ability, willingness, or foresight to pursue young voters who, like myself, are essentially "low hanging fruit" for recruitment purposes.

This is another reason why young voters across the country are unable to identify with the Republican Party. I wonder if the Republican Party is even trying to pursue young voters.

What can be done

We have to make sure that the Republican Party avoids Charlie Smith's fear that today's younger generation might be lost forever. Smith, the chairman of the College Republican National Committee, believes that the young generation could be lost. "After years of scandalous behavior in our nation's capital and suffering under what the liberal media has termed an 'unwinnable' war led by Republicans, our generation has moved away from the center-right and towards the liberal left,"¹⁹ Smith has said.

To avoid losing a generation, the Republican Party needs to strengthen the organization that is charged with recruiting young voters to the party. These efforts should start with Republican leaders matching the Democratic resources allocated to the courtship of young voters. Specifically, Republicans should match and outdo Speaker Pelosi's appointment of a youth outreach leader.²⁰

The method and content of the party's message needs to be adjusted for a generation that is socially accepting of nearly everyone. This can be accomplished through crafting Republican fiscal messages on appropriate websites and blogs visited by young voters. Republicans also need to develop the capability of conveying a conservative and convincing message via video snippets that are entertaining to the masses. These entertainment pieces, with a message, could then be e-mailed to Young Republicans, who will likely place them on personal profiles, blogs, and other often visited sites on the internet.

The simplest, and likely most effective, way that the Republican Party can attract young activists is through grassroots efforts. The recruitment efforts of college Republican

organizations as well as the efforts of local Republican Party chapters are what will bring young voters back to the Republican Party. These grassroots efforts should not appeal to a young voters' civic responsibility but instead to what is in it for them when voting for members of the Republican Party.

The Republican Party needs to provide reasons for a young person to join beyond social ones. These reasons need to be customized to young voters and delivered through the technological media that young voters use. If this is not done, the Republican Party will only grow older with little youth following today's party members to advance the party's message, mission and values.

To avoid losing a generation, the Republican Party needs to strengthen the organization that is charged with recruiting young voters to the party.

Notes

1. Miller, James "Who Elected Jim Doyle? And Preserved Conservative Constitutional Ideas" *Wisconsin Interest*: Winter 2007.
2. George Washington University "Young Voter Mobilization Tactics: Volume II Lessons from 2006 House and Statewide Campaigns."
3. Hugo, Mark *et al* "Young Voter Turnout Increases in 2006" The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement: June 2007.
4. The State of the Youth Nation: 2007 CBS News/MTV/New York Times Poll: June 15-23, 2007.
5. Calmes, Jackie "Republican Forecast: Cloudy—Party's Woes Go Beyond Bush as it Bleeds Support Among Key Groups" *The Wall Street Journal*: September 5, 2007.
6. Schmidt, Kathrine "GOP is losing out with young voter."
7. "Under the weather-The American right" *The Economist*. August 11, 2007.
8. Conner's, John In-Person Interview: October 2007.
9. Rae, Jason In-Person Interview: November 2007.
10. Rupp, Leah "Web tool of choice for new generation" *Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, MS): November 5, 2007.

11. The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management "Young Voter Mobilization Tactics" Lessons from 2006 House and Statewide Campaigns.
12. The George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management "Young Voter Mobilization Tactics" Lessons from 2006 House and Statewide Campaigns.
13. Hunt, Albert "Young ones hold a party's fate: Voters aged 18-29 are deserting the Republicans" *TODAY* (Singapore): September 29, 2007.
14. Wierzbicki, Kaye In-Person Interview: October 2007.
15. Miller, James "Who Elected Jim Doyle? And Preserved Conservative Constitutional Ideas" *Wisconsin Interest* : Winter 2007.
16. Democracy Corpr/Greensberg Quinlan Rosner "Youth Survey: Republican Collapse Among Young Americans" July, 2007.
17. Anderson, Brian "South Park Republicans" *The Dallas Morning News*: April 17th, 2005.
18. Purple, Matt "GOP Faces Looming Disaster Among Young Voters" CNNNews.com August 2, 2007
19. Purple, Matt "GOP Faces Looming Disaster Among Young Voters" CNNNews.com August 2, 2007
20. Adler, Ben "Parties Search for Fountain of Youth" Politico.com: October 26th, 2007.