



## The Republicans of the future?

By: Todd Leopold – July 27, 2013

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Tyler Deaton stands by a doorway outside Fathoms, a hotel patio lounge in this coastal town in the Deep South.

Deaton, 27, is a strong believer in low taxes, fiscal responsibility and civic involvement. He attended a Christian liberal arts school. He is a Republican.

He's also gay.

He's been in a relationship for several years, having met his partner at Wheaton College, a Christian institution outside Chicago. Raised in Alabama, Deaton moved to New Hampshire because it approves of same-sex marriage and has no income tax or sales tax.

This evening, Deaton is helping host a reception to raise interest in same-sex marriage issues among Young Republicans, who are gathered in Mobile for their national convention. Deaton is campaign manager for the young conservatives' arm of Freedom to Marry, a national gay rights group.

On Deaton's side of the doorway, things are going well. Deaton and his colleagues have collected more than 50 e-mail addresses -- about a sixth of the total number of conventioners, he says.

But there aren't so many on the other side. All told, perhaps two dozen people made their way to the outdoor patio, munching on the abundant food and cashing in their drink tickets.

Even among the visitors there are those who do not seem completely comfortable; one man, after exclaiming how great the party is and his hopes for more approval of same-sex marriage, declined to give his name and hustled away at the sign of a reporter's notebook.

It hasn't been much different at the convention as a whole. Despite Freedom to Marry statistics that indicate most Republicans under 50 approve of same-sex marriage, the group hit some roadblocks with convention organizers.

Deaton's group wanted a panel discussion of LGBT issues on the official convention agenda. That request was turned down. It wanted to be a sponsor of the convention. That was also rejected. After deciding to have a reception and booking a slot, the scheduling ended up clashing with gatherings of various state groups.

It's OK, says Deaton, neatly dressed in suit and tie, in a voice that hints of his Southern upbringing.

"We're not in this to make enemies or to fight," he said. Progress, he admits, will take time. It's a lesson he hopes the GOP is learning.

"The GOP has become too much of a club that defines itself by who it's leaving out," he says. "And I think the GOP has to do a better job of defining itself by its ideas, and letting anybody who shares those ideas come in and be a part of it."

A 'get off my lawn' attitude

The Republican Party is in a race with the future.

Though it holds power in the House of Representatives and a majority of statehouses, its demographics, for now, are going the wrong direction.

The country is becoming more urban and diverse, two details that favor Democrats. In 2012, blacks and Hispanics overwhelmingly went for the president; Obama also got 55% of the women's vote, 60% of voters under 30 and almost 70% of the vote in cities with 500,000 people or more.

Worse than the numbers is the impression they make. In a recent study, another young GOP group, the College Republicans, put it bluntly: the GOP is seen as "closed-minded, racist, rigid, (and) old-fashioned."

The Young Republicans cut a somewhat different figure than today's national GOP. They're not just younger -- members range from college age to 40 -- but less doctrinaire as well, preferring to focus on economics and civic involvement.

The YR -- the full name is the Young Republican National Federation -- describes itself as "the premier Republican grassroots organization in the nation." Formerly an arm of the Republican National Committee, it's now an independent, all-volunteer group, though it still provides campaign support for conservative causes and Republican candidates.

A number of noted politicians, including current House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, R-California, and former Tennessee Gov. Don Sundquist, have come from its ranks. Volunteer executive director Soren Dayton estimates 70,000 people belong to YR chapters across the country.

Much of the group's work is in civic affairs. "It's not just social networking," says Dayton, who works as a media and public affairs consultant. "It's people who serve."

The group includes young professionals in their 20s and 30s and reflects a shift into more libertarian territory.

John Head, a Chicago-based business development consultant, is an example of the new breed. "Social issues should not be the main focus over fiscal issues," says Head, nattily dressed for the convention in a seersucker suit and brown-and-white saddle shoes. "We have a debt problem, we have a health care problem whether you agree or disagree with what's coming, and those are things we should focus on."

He sums it up succinctly: "I'm very involved on the fiscal side, and I'm 'get off my lawn' on the social side."

It's a small-government attitude shared by many youthful conservatives, says Arizona State University professor Donald Critchlow, a historian of the conservative movement.

"There's a very, very strong libertarian voice among the young," he says. "They're very liberal -- if you want to use that term -- on social issues: gay rights, abortion, marijuana and war, those kinds of social issues that would put them on the left side of the spectrum. But they're coming from a libertarian perspective."

These are folks who backed Ron Paul for president, or ended up voting for Obama because they disliked the GOP's stand on social issues, he says.

Republicans like Deaton stay because they want to help the party resolve that tension. "If you're going to be involved in something political, my goal has been to really be involved," he says. "It would be harder for me if I was a Republican and not doing something to change the Republican Party."

### Red meat and prayers

The main activities this weekend include electing new officers, renewing contacts and planning for the future. But there are bits of the boisterousness seen every four years at the parties' presidential nominating conventions. The delegations tried to outdo one another in highlighting their state's accomplishments at roll call (Head brought a blow-up Stanley Cup to showcase his Chicago Blackhawks' victory in the NHL playoffs). Some delegations hosted parties and social gatherings.

There was also plenty of classic conservative red meat to be chewed. Of the handful of vendors' tables, one was sponsored by former Sen. Rick Santorum's organization, Patriot Voices. Another featured flyers from the libertarian Cato Institute for an e-book called "Replacing Obamacare." One man hawked copies of his book, "A Time to Kill: The Myth of Christian Pacifism."

Large meetings opened with prayers, some of them in Jesus' name, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. In speeches, there were invocations of Obamacare and the 2009 bailouts, pointed mentions of the IRS, the use of "Democrat" (instead of "Democratic") as an adjective, and proud defenses of states' rights and tax cuts.

For many, the convention was also an opportunity to talk about ways of moving the party forward after the losses of the 2012 election campaign.

The lack of diversity was obvious at the convention's general gatherings. The majority of the 300-plus attendees were men; just a handful were Hispanic or African-American.

The YR's outreach committee has been trying to find ways of expanding the tent. At a discussion, the group suggested appealing to minorities by stressing the GOP's economic message of entrepreneurship and fiscal responsibility.

Outgoing YR Chair Lisa Stikkan, an attorney and former prosecutor from Cleveland, believes this is a winning strategy.

"I think there's this misconception that younger people are only looking at social issues," Stikkan said. "You have a lot of people graduating college who are in serious debt and are having trouble finding a job, and if you asked them about social issues, they would say, 'I'm having trouble surviving here.'"

Stickan, 35, talks with the friendly demeanor and flattened vowels of her native Midwest. She's been active with the party since law school and identified with it before then. But hers is a Main Street, grass-roots Republicanism, focused on civic involvement and fiscal rectitude. She serves on the city council of Highland Heights, a Cleveland suburb.

"I enjoy that because it's not a partisan role," she says. "I'm there in the capacity of good-government services and working with the public."

Though it's important to mention the Obama administration's faults, she says, she believes the Republicans are ill-served by Washington mudslinging. She wants the party to "step in, in a positive manner," and listen to voters.

"I am from a swing state, so I talk to a lot of people who are in the middle, (but) that's not what they want to hear about," she says. "You have a serious situation where people cannot get food on the table, cannot bring a paycheck home. That's a problem."

'You're not alone'

Indeed, Stickan adds, the GOP has to keep up with the times. That means using Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to stay in touch with voters. The Democrats have been making good use of online media since at least the Howard Dean days; the Republicans are doing better but need to do more, she says.

"The social media, particularly for some low-information voters or younger voters, is important, just to keep up with the trends," Stickan says.

Angel Garcia, a Chicago attorney, shrewdly used the technology to help build his moribund local YR chapter from a handful of people to several hundred.

The first step, Garcia said, was getting noticed.

"There was nothing here, so we had to take advantage of some natural strengths," said Garcia, 39. That meant working the media, tapping into wealthy donors and getting the word out to transplants from elsewhere in the Midwest.

So the club did a marketing campaign, posting ads on mass transit, billboards, even in bar restrooms. During the 2012 presidential campaign, the group made a YouTube video -- a parody of "Call Me Maybe" -- that received more than 150,000 views and earned the club a mention on the Huffington Post. It has maintained aggressive Twitter and Flickr accounts. The club now has a mailing list of thousands.

"We literally said, 'You're not alone,'" Garcia says. "That was really the turning point."

The publicity was nothing new for Garcia, who likes the exposure. When the GOP needed a face to talk about Latino issues in Chicago, Garcia became the go-to guy. With his cleanly shaved head, nimble patter and ever-present cell phone, Garcia fits comfortably into a white-collar demographic; he's an MBA who spent several years at the Chicago Board of Trade before deciding to practice law.

But he has a classic immigrant story: His parents moved to the United States from Mexico in the early '70s for work in the steel mills along Lake Michigan, and his father later started an auto repair business. It was small-business issues that helped turn Garcia into a Republican, he says.

He entered the law partly because he saw a niche for a Spanish-speaking attorney. He characterizes himself as a "neighborhood lawyer."

'An anti-, anti-, anti- image'

Many of the Latino Young Republicans -- a small but notable group at the convention -- talk about their membership with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they believe in the party's small-government, faith-and-family principles. On the other, they bristle at some of the anti-immigrant talk within the party.

Texas YR official Chris Carmona made the point explicitly at one breakout session. Thanks to party members' harsh words, Republicans are thought of in the Hispanic community as anti-immigrant, anti-family and anti-religious, he observes. "We have an anti-, anti-, anti- image of everything possible in the Hispanic community."

Texas delegate Artemio Muniz expands on that point. Muniz, a 32-year-old from Houston, is the son of illegal immigrants. His family was on welfare, sold chips at the ballpark and took items from trash bins to sell.

"We started at the bottom," he says. "We know what bootstrapping means." His parents were given amnesty as part of a 1986 immigration reform bill signed by Ronald Reagan.

He grimaces when he thinks about how some Republicans treat Latinos.

"I've been at Tea Party meetings where the lady is saying, 'Let's deport them all,' and the lady that's serving her is an illegal immigrant bringing her nacho chips."

But he became a Republican, he says, because the party represents promise. The Mexican community has pride, he says, and its beliefs fit with the conservatism of the Republican Party and its leaders.

"Reagan was a legit guy that understood the heart," he says. "(George W.) Bush as well. He understood. He had credibility. He was authentic. He knew the experience of being a Texan."

But the GOP has to recognize the problems of the working class, he says.

"It's like any other blue-collar neighborhood," he says. "It's not a Hispanic thing necessarily. Your guy that's living paycheck to paycheck can be any race, and here's a party saying we're going to cut programs. They want to know, what are you going to do to help the family? It's more of being in touch with hard-working people."

His YR colleague Garcia has mixed feelings about the congressional stalemate over the immigration reform bill, which was passed by the Senate in late June but is being held up in the House. He'd like to see a narrower bill, one that could get more Republican support. "Democrats moving the goalposts makes that less likely," he says.

But, he admits, Republicans still look bad.

"At the end of the day I'm a pragmatist, and I understand politics," he says. "And I think we've done a poor job framing the issue."

The 'Akin effect'

The communications problems also apply to women.

Christina Goodlander of the D.C. delegation summed up the issue in two words: "Akin effect" -- a reference to Todd Akin, the Missouri U.S. Senate candidate who made controversial comments about "legitimate rape" and pregnancy.

While noting that Akin's words were "pretty horrible," "those comments were played over and over again nationally, and we were portrayed as troglodytes," she said. "That's not what we're about, but that became the narrative and the Democrats played that brilliantly."

Stickan wishes more people would pay attention to strength of women in the GOP.

"I think there's this perception that Republicans don't engage women enough, or that we're not listening to women," she says. "I've been talked to and listened to by many campaigns. You may have someone who goes out there and makes a comment, and just because he's one person doesn't mean he speaks for the whole party."

Moreover, she adds, the party has a good bench, including South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez and others at local levels.

"We have some amazing candidates being elected all over the country. I think it's important to showcase them," she says.

One of those women, Rep. Martha Roby of Alabama, gave a stemwinder at a convention lunch. The 36-year-old Roby, a Young Republican herself, exhorted her listeners to push their way to the front.

"Now, more than ever, our party needs bright young people engaged in meaningful conversation, with fresh ways to implement our conservative ideas," she said. "Now is your turn."

In an interview later, Roby reiterated her hope that more young Republicans will get involved, but emphasized that she sees the problem to be less a matter of Republican principles than Republican messaging.

"It's not about becoming Democrat-lite, it's about staying true to the conservative principles we hold dear," she said. "But we have to find a different way to talk about it."

Reaching across the aisle

Whether the Young Republicans will change the GOP is an open question. Some have plans to run for office; others expect to stay behind the scenes, working on grass-roots organizing or consulting.

And though there appear to be fewer differences among Young Republicans than in the national GOP, social issues can still cause friction. One Southern delegate was enthusiastic about the

focus on entrepreneurship, but his voice quieted when he pondered pitching same-sex marriage to his state.

It's a longstanding split. George W. Bush found it challenging to unite the party on immigration.

His father found favor with religious conservatives but lost the fiscally minded with the 1990 budget deal. Indeed, about the only GOP politician who's succeeded in bridging the chasm, says historian Critchlow, is Ronald Reagan. He dealt with various conservative blocs both as California governor and president and showed a willingness to talk with Democrats -- whether it was the legislature of California Speaker Jesse Unruh or the House of Tip O'Neill.

Still, the Young Republicans are determined to try to expand the party's base -- even to the point of metaphorically crossing the aisle. Encouraged by Stickan, the outreach committee struck an agreement with the National Urban League -- an African-American advocacy group that favors Democrats -- to partner on an Urban League program.

The Urban League runs entrepreneurship centers in 10 cities focused on improving business skills and mentoring among minorities, and the Young Republicans saw that the program aligned with their own principles, said Darius Foster, a Birmingham consultant and member of the Alabama Young Republicans.

"We might disagree with 85 or 90% of what they do, but that 10%, we can use that as inroads with the Urban League and their members," said Christopher Sanders, a Young Republican from Atlanta. The Georgia capital is going to be one of the partnership's test cities, along with Houston and Cleveland.

The YRs also paid tribute to the social-media and outreach activities of Garcia's Chicago chapter by recognizing it as the year's "outstanding large club," an award Garcia said was unexpected. As he nears 40 and aging out of the Young Republicans, he's taking on one more job -- Midwest regional coordinator -- and believes the party is primed to make inroads.

"I've been going to these things since I could vote, and this is the first time I'm hearing people from the top of the party down talk about issues and talk about actual strategies that are actionable," Garcia says. "We have work to do, but it's more diverse, and more representative of what the party really is, than what I've seen."

Deaton, the gay Young Republican from New Hampshire, hopes that's true. He wants action, not just talk. The concept some national leaders have pushed -- "better messaging" -- drives him up a wall.

"What they're saying is there's actually nothing wrong with the Republican Party. We just don't talk about it the right way," he says. "But the problem is that some of the beliefs are also wrong. I think Americans are hungry for fiscal conservatism. I think, though, that they want a bit of a more humble foreign policy than what the GOP has been offering for the last decade, and they do want the Republican Party to take a new approach on social issues.

"It doesn't just mean repackaging or putting a new label on it," he says. "You have to change the recipe."