

# BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

## **Battleground: MSU students have been a liberal voting bloc, but some are hoping for change**

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Young voters on college campuses have been strong supporters of Democrats in the last decade, but that could change during next year's election.

Young conservatives, some decidedly libertarian, don't mesh well with what they call the Republican Party "establishment" but could have a big impact in Montana.

This semester, at least four Montana State University student groups are promoting libertarian ideas: Students for Rand Paul, Turning Point USA, Young Americans for Liberty, and College Republicans.

Their work could affect thousands of votes in the voting districts around campus. In 2008, the three campus districts cast 16,924 votes. The vote count dipped to 13,938 in 2012 but will likely come back in 2016.

That could represent a significant number of votes for Montana's statewide candidates next year, including Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat who won in 2012 by 7,571 votes, and possible Republican challenger, Bozeman resident Greg Gianforte.

The Montana Democratic Party is focused on protecting Bullock and is already sending staff to film Gianforte during public appearances.

The stakes are high, and some Democrats are already saying that the 2016 gubernatorial race hangs on Bozeman, and others admit they're behind on organizing on campus, though they had little trouble getting more than 20 members of the Queer Straight Alliance to protest a Gianforte speech on Thursday.

### **A libertarian push**

According to national polling, 35 percent of young voters nationwide identify themselves as Republicans or lean Republican. An analysis by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, or CIRCLE, suggests that if Mitt Romney had received half of youth votes in four key states, he would have won the 2012 election.

## *What is Libertarianism?*

Libertarianism in America is a minor but important ideology that raises personal liberty above all other considerations.

The core principle is that the government should stay out of people's lives as much as possible. That means lowering taxes, shrinking government.

On social issues, libertarians can become divided but controversial positions advocated by them include legalizing recreational marijuana use, eliminate food stamps, ending government licensing of marriage, and terminate income taxes.

Libertarianism has been criticized by both conservatives and liberals. On the right, conservatives desire limiting citizens access to same-sex marriages and drugs. On the left, liberals advocate for an activist government that finances poverty reduction programs and manipulates the economy.

As a party, libertarians have struggled to break through the social conditioning that supports the two-party system. Traditionally, libertarians have instead influenced policy through the American Civil Liberties Union and the Cato Institute. In recent years, a group known as Americans for Prosperity has sought to raise libertarian issues during elections and support libertarian candidates.

“A common misconception about young voters is that they are all liberal, Democratic voters,” said Dr. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of CIRCLE. “The truth is, like all Americans, young voters are a diverse group that includes millions of self-identified Republicans.”

Historically, during presidential election years, the youth vote has tended to be competitive between the two parties. In fact, in 1984 and 1988, a majority of young voters — ages 18-29 — voted for the Republican candidate for president. However, in recent years young voters have become increasingly more supportive of Democrats.

Another study, this time by the Pew Research Center, indicates that “both parties have lost ground among millennials in the past 10 years, though Republicans have lost somewhat more ground than Democrats.”

Half of millennial adults, a group aged 18-33, now say they're “political independents,” numbers substantially higher than previous generations.

Kyle Mack, a 20-year-old political science major at MSU, is drawn to libertarian principles. He is president of Young Americans for Liberty, a group with roots in Ron Paul's presidential campaign that teaches people about constitutional and libertarian issues.

“If there's going to be a swing, 2016 is the year,” Mack said.

Young Americans for Liberty went cold last semester, but Mack is rebuilding it. He's hoping to attract a large group of students, generally on the right, who discuss ideas, discover their beliefs and hone their arguments. They've already had a few “Liberty Pub” events, a sort of bring-your-own-beer gathering where they provide food at a member's house and debate politics.

But Mack said that the potential for a big Republican turnout on campus depends on the candidate.

“As long as it's not an establishment candidate, I think they could swing,” he said.

And for him, and many other students on the right, that means Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, the only Republican candidate with a visible presence on campus.

### ***Chronicle poll***

Last week, the Chronicle informally polled 100 randomly selected MSU students on the 2016 presidential election. By party, 46 students said they would vote for a Democrat, 37 would choose a Republican, three selected libertarian Gary Johnson, and 14 were undecided or said they wouldn't vote. Rand Paul tied Donald Trump at five votes and was just one behind Jeb Bush's six.

And for the left, it's a similar picture, where most of the students support Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Democratic socialist from Vermont who is running for the Democratic presidential nomination as an alternative to Hillary Clinton.

Forward Montana, a progressive left group, is regularly on the MSU campus registering students to vote. On Tuesday, the group is partnering with the League of Women Voters for a citywide voter registration drive.

Mack said that libertarians and progressives overlap on ending the war on drugs and rejecting corporate domination of government but disagree on the size and role of government. He derides dependency on government, and, as an example, said charity is the free market solution to poverty.

"Foreign policy is a big thing for millennials, too," Mack said, criticizing America's foreign interventions. "We've been 'at war' for most of our lives."

The current cohort of college students want change, but they've largely become politically aware under the administration of President Barack Obama. That splits them off from the older millennial Americans who began voting while President George W. Bush was in office.

### **Against established politics**

Erin Yeoman also wants change, and for her that means Rand Paul in the White House.

Six months ago, the 26-year-old English literature major from New Hampshire was disconnected from politics. But after meeting her boyfriend, she realized she's libertarian and that being apathetic is wrong.

"I believe in the free market," she said. "I was just in Columbus, Ohio, for a summit where a lot of the other Republican candidates spoke. They didn't get me fired up the way Rand does."

Now she's volunteering for Rand Paul's campaign, and is collecting email addresses — she's up to 100 — in hopes that the senator will reward her efforts with a campus visit.

Both Yeoman's boyfriend and Mack work for Americans for Prosperity, the political arm of the industrialists Koch Brothers, Charles and David. While Democrats vilify the billionaire brothers, the libertarian students point to billionaire liberals like George Soros or spending by the Clinton Foundation.

And the president of the MSU College Republicans, Kendall Cotton, is an AFP alum who worked in Missoula. But that's not to say the organization is taking over campus groups, but that the students they train and empower are.

"Something I hear across the political spectrum is that students feel alienated by the establishment politics," Cotton said.

In his assessment, there's conservative groups active on campus, but they're not necessarily doing more than the liberal groups. And in both the libertarian right and progressive left it's issues that students face, like mounting student debt, that attract students. And Cotton said he's going to bring those ideas to the Montana GOP.

Their friend, Chase Sick, is also a Rand Paul supporter, and his day job is as the field coordinator for Turning Point USA, which means he's regularly on campus sitting at a table full of free market literature. Turning Point USA is a free market group, aimed at young people, whose slogan is "big government sucks" and is supported financially by Gianforte.

Sick declined to talk about his employer, or the two-day student training event they're holding in Bozeman in November.

But on its website, the group allows free downloads of the 48-page "How to Organize: Winning the Battle on College Campuses."

The first paragraph reads, "College campuses are battlegrounds. The left knows how to organize and for too long the right has fallen behind in the development of grassroots tactics that build strong, effective activist groups."

Another publication, "Indoctrination Prevention," explains that "Progressive professors want to make you question your beliefs and then hope that you will abandon them altogether. They want to make you think like they do.

"They want to brainwash you."