

POLITICO

The Millennial-Industrial Complex

Does anyone really understand the politics of young people today?

By Ben Schreckinger
February 11, 2014

In all the fighting over the Obamacare rollout, two points of consensus have emerged. One is that the law's success among young people will be crucial to its legacy. The other is that the Millennials are a generation whose political loyalties are as yet unsettled.

Of course, the deep-pocketed message massagers on all sides of the political spectrum aren't interested in letting young people figure things out for themselves. Into the battle for the hearts of minds of the youth have come, among others, the liberal ProgressNow and the conservative Generation Opportunity—a Koch brothers-funded concern that, like its progressive counterpart, is spending lavishly to influence Millennials. To put things optimistically, the results have been mixed.

ProgressNow, which receives funding from a number of labor unions and progressive foundations, tried to get young people interested in the president's health insurance by running ads featuring a young man with no pants [gargoyle-ing](#) on top of a keg. Another of the group's marketing efforts featured a young lady celebrating the fact that her Obamacare birth control would free her up to focus on getting a total hottie into bed. The ads were panned as [tryhard](#) at best, if not downright condescending.

The televised efforts of the Kochs's Generation Opportunity featured a larger-than-life Uncle Sam mascot, menacingly poised to attack a young woman's vagina in a doctor's office. Meant to lambaste the president's health law, it was an odd image—especially given that so much opposition to the Affordable Care Act has been engendered by a crowd of conservatives hoping to mandate transvaginal ultrasounds for women seeking abortions. The Daily Show [skewered](#) both campaigns.

Though you could be forgiven for reading these episodes as proof that the political apparatuses on both the left and the right have no idea whatsoever how to reach anyone under 30, these ads are in fact part of an intricately organized and long-established war for the political loyalties of the young—a battle on which more than \$100 million a year is spent, according to a 2012 [report](#). “There's a whole world of shadow politics,” said conservative activist David Horowitz, a zealous campus crusader in his own right.

But clearly, much of the vast youth-industrial complex is having a tough time figuring out this new generation of voters. And while left and right spend heavily in efforts that may or may not

be working, and political scientists theorize about a generation that's simply more allergic than their predecessors to America's traditional right/left political divide, the real momentum among Millennials are those whose politics skew young and libertarian. Fueled by a new array of activist groups, they've found a receptive audience amidst a generation suspicious of foreign military adventures, celebratory of live-your-own-way diversity and devout in its enthusiasm for the market. In just four years, the 20-point edge in party identification that Democrats enjoyed among 18-24-year-olds in November 2009 has shrunk to six points. Since 2008, the largest youth libertarian group has grown from nonexistence to a network of 162,000 activists. Perhaps it's not so much that the kids don't trust anyone over 30—but that they don't trust any political coalition over 10.

Measuring the Millennials

How the attitudes of the young compare with other generations.

Would vote to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states

18 to 34-year-olds: 69 percent
35 to 54: 52 percent
55 and older: 38 percent

Think marijuana use should be made legal

18 to 29-year olds: 67 percent
30 to 49: 62 percent
50 to 64: 56 percent
65 and older: 45 percent

Agree with the statement “government should do more to solve problems”

18 to 29-year-old: 59 percent
30 to 49: 45 percent
50 to 64: 39 percent
65 and older: 35 percent

Think reducing the deficit is more important than preserving Social Security and Medicare

18 to 29-year-olds: 41 percent
30 to 49: 35 percent
50 to 64: 28 percent
65 and older: 21 percent

Answered yes to the question “have you ever slept with your cell phone?”

19 to 29 year-olds: 83 percent
30 to 45: 68 percent
46 to 64: 50 percent
65 and older: 20 percent

1. Gallup poll, [July 2013](#); 2. Gallup poll, [Oct. 2013](#); 3. Pew report, [Dec. 2012](#); Pew report, [Dec. 2012](#); 5. Pew report, [Feb. 2010](#)

The idea that young people are a permanent Democratic constituency is a cultural myth seared into the American consciousness by the generational strife of the 1960s. It was never really true. Even in 1972, as the Vietnam War wound on, Richard Nixon handily won voters under 30 (albeit by a much narrower margin than his overall blowout of George McGovern). Over the next three decades, the youth vote held to this pattern: It was in fact the American vote. Sure, younger voters tilted a few points away from Ronald Reagan in 1980 and a few points toward Bill Clinton in 1996, but otherwise they voted for presidents in lockstep with the rest of the electorate.

That began to change as Millennials—the approximately 80 million Americans born between the early 1980s and the very first years of the 21st century—entered the voting ranks. In 2004, John Kerry fared six points better among young voters than the general electorate. In 2006, the youth vote propelled the Democratic wave that won the party back the House, and in 2008, the energetic support of Millennials helped boost Barack Obama to the presidency. He won two-thirds of young voters, compared to just over half the total vote. Youth turnout reached its [highest level](#) since 1992.

But Obama's success wasn't the only development among young voters in 2008. That year, septuagenarian Texas Rep. Ron Paul's niche candidacy in the Republican primary struck a surprisingly strong chord with libertarian-minded college students who were disillusioned with the presidency of George W. Bush but culturally or intellectually disinclined to get on board with Obama. When the dust had settled on Paul's candidacy, two new youth organizations had sprung up: Young Americans for Liberty and Students for Liberty.

In fact, you could argue that the rapid growth of these libertarian groups has been the real story of campus politics in the Obama era. With the formal blessing of Ron Paul, YAL has grown to 162,000 "activists" spread across 500 chapters, including 7,000 dues-paying members. Yes, thousands of the same kids who steal Netflix from their friends rather than pay \$8 a month for unlimited entertainment pay dues to a libertarian political club. That stands in stark contrast to the old-guard campus organizations on the left and the right that have long fought for the attention and enthusiasm of college kids by paying students in retreats, grants, fellowships and well-compensated internships.

Indeed, this the vast constellation of political campus groups—they're most highly organized on the right—has for decades propped up a political superstructure now in place in America. Before there was Heritage, Cato, the Center for American Progress or Priorities USA, there was William F. Buckley and the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, which the conservative Catholic ran after its creation in 1953. Buckley had made his name two years earlier with his seminal [God and Man at Yale](#), which inaugurated the modern conservative movement by attacking the liberal

orthodoxy he saw at his alma mater. He called on the college's WASP alumni to take control of the curriculum and return the campus to its God-fearing, conservative roots.

Buckley was unsuccessful, and his vision for a Christian, individualist college took root not in New Haven, but on largely obscure Catholic and Evangelical campuses in the South and center of the country. His counterparts on the left—the activists who established Students for a Democratic Society at the University of Michigan and helped build the political infrastructure for the New Left of the 1960s—had an easier time winning the sympathies of the young. Since then, though, big national outfits on the left correctly claim they're vastly underfunded compared with those on the right, and are playing decades worth of catchup. Of course, that's because they won the fight; if progressives were everywhere on campus, who needed some organized group?

But that conservative campus movement was accomplishing something significant, even if it didn't manage to win the war for kids' hearts and minds; it grew and nurtured a whole new generation of conservative leaders. Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito, strategist Karl Rove, tax activist Grover Norquist, commentators William Kristol, Laura Ingraham and Ross Douthat, along with a dizzying array of other journalists, thinkers and political operatives came out of Buckley's original outfit, now renamed the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and its successors, which remain active today. ISI spent \$6.7 million in the year ending in June on activities including journalism training, publishing books and campus lectures; others include the Buckley-founded Young Americans for Freedom (Ronald Reagan served on the board), the Fund for American Studies (which spent \$10.4 million in 2011), the Young America's Foundation (which spent \$15.4 million in 2011) and the Leadership Institute (which spent \$8.9 million in 2011).

But the new libertarian upstarts on the right—Young Americans for Liberty and Students for Liberty—have managed to expose what an aging infrastructure that old conservative network had become. Chris Long, the current president of ISI, told me he's trying to respond to the upswing in libertarianism by preaching to them the gospel of traditional conservatism. But he admits that his 61-year-old organization could use some help reaching young people. "We're not exactly cutting-edge," said Long of the organization's outreach efforts, which consist largely of publishing books. "All my donors and trustees tell me kids don't read these days."

Ron Paul's national youth coordinator, Jeff Frazee, founded YAL specifically to turn the campaign's cadre of Millennial backers into a permanent movement. Meanwhile, SFL was founded by a handful of undergrads, including executive director Alexander McCobin. The two groups view each other as allies, and their activities are complementary. YAL is more pragmatic and activist, while SFL is more ideological, framing its mission for social change in terms inspired by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek: think of the student body as raw material, student leaders as intermediate goods, and alumni as final products. Its leaders sign off emails, "Sincerely & For Liberty."

Unlike the older conservative groups, whose upper echelons are stocked with gray hairs, both YAL and SFL appear to be truly grassroots and student-driven. YAL boasts 14,000 donors and

spent \$913,000 in 2011. SFL spent \$663,000 between July 2011 and April 2012. McCobin argues that SFL represents the political views of a new silent majority of Millennials. The polling may disagree with him. For instance, according to a 2012 exit poll conducted for the television networks, 59 percent of young voters agreed with the statement, “Government should do more to solve problems”—far more than any older age cohort. But there’s reason to think a libertarian movement could still have serious legs. Polling also shows that a majority of young people who know what the term “libertarian” means [view it favorably](#), and, more so than any other age cohort, their views on whether to prioritize preserving government entitlement programs or reduce spending are aligned with [those of Republicans](#).

What’s more, for all the attention lavished on the Millennials who pushed Obama to victory in 2008, a divide is developing between older and young members of the generation. Young people who came of age in time to vote for Obama the first time around remain firmly in the progressive camp. But younger Millennials are [less likely](#) to identify as Democrats—and it’s not that young people are having second thoughts about gay marriage, pot or a United Colors of Benetton image of American identity.

It remains an open question whether libertarian leanings will be enough to bring a new cohort of Millennials into the conservative coalition, or whether the things that traditionally come between libertarians and the GOP—a cultural gap, social issues, military spending and foreign policy—will be deal-breakers. So far, the reception for YAL and SFL among traditional campus conservative groups has been tepid.

Long, who became president of ISI in 2011, has worked closely with young libertarians, and he’s wary. “I think there are some people, not at ISI, but there are some conservative donors who exist, who think that if we can just get all these young people to self-identify as libertarian, then they’ll be with [conservatives] for 30 years,” he said. “I’m just worried that it’s not quite that simple.” Given their laissez-faire social views, he sees the young libertarians as potential “fair-weather friends” to the conservative movement, and he worries many are bandwagon-jumpers who will desert the conservative cause when the winds shift.

Perhaps nobody within the web of established conservative campus groups has been better prepared to pounce on the libertarian youth bulge than the Koch brothers—the oil billionaires Charles and David—who’ve been seeding the ground for decades. In 2011, [they funded](#) the 501(c)(4) group Generation Opportunity—a so-called dark money organization whose donors can remain unidentified. “The organization was originally founded as a small group of young people,” Evan Feinberg, the organization’s president, told me, declining to discuss the involvement of the Koch family and stressing that the group advocates for the interests of young people, rather than on behalf of any other agenda. In its mission statement, the group points out twice that it’s a “grassroots” organization.

In addition to spending \$750,000 for the “Creepy Uncle Sam” anti-Obamacare ads, GenOP, as it prefers to be called, hosts a blog that decries “Obama’s war on the young” and slams the media for suggesting Republicans are hostile toward gays. The organization appears to have wisely

realized that all Millennials, no matter what they do, believe they are entrepreneurs, and so the blog talks a lot about entrepreneurs.

As far as barometers of success go, the group's 2.6 million Facebook "likes" stand out, representing far more than those for the libertarian student groups—and twice the number the Republican Party itself has. The Facebook page for GenOP is a repository of anti-Obama Internet memes featuring everything from South Park characters to Chuck Norris to the watermelon-smashing comic Gallagher. Whatever strange thinking led to a nearly 70-year-old comic being used to reach Millennials might also be credited with the Uncle Sam debacle.

The better option for comprehending the clout—and grasping the ideology—of these upstart libertarians can be had in the flesh. This Friday, SFL will convene its annual [conference](#) in Washington, and it must to be said that these are not your grandfather's young conservatives. Among the featured speakers will be Jeremy Scahill, the muckraking [Nation](#) writer who, this week, launched with Glenn Greenwald a new investigative [publication](#) funded by liberal backer Pierre Omidyar and dedicated to unearthing more Big Brother-ish behavior on the part of the U.S. government in the wake of the Edward Snowden NSA revelations. Last year, the event drew 1,400 attendees. For comparison, the National Conservative Student Conference, put on by the Young America's Foundation, once the big event on the campus political calendar, drew a scant 500 attendees last year.

Beyond Scahill, the young libertarians descending on D.C. this weekend will be treated to quite a spectrum of speakers—everyone from Rep. Justin Amash (R-Mich.) to Cato President John Allison to the director Oliver Stone to former MTV VJ Kennedy, who now hosts a show on [Fox Business](#). It's an unlikely coalition, built quickly. Only six years since founding SFL, McCobin admits, "it's bigger than anything we'd ever dreamed of."