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Millennials Don't Like Conservatism

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In the closing remarks of the annual Libertarian vs. Conservative debate between summer interns from the CATO Institute and the Heritage Foundation, John Konicki from the libertarian side asked whether the interns in the 2027 version of this debate would be arguing over the same issues brought up that night. Would some of the discussed topics become non-issues, or would they continue to fight about the same things for years to come?

If the showing at the debate is any indication of where the younger generation is headed, conservatives might have a problem on their hands.

The annual Libertarian vs. Conservative debate attracts hundreds of people each year and is considered one of the biggest events of the summer in the D.C. area, especially among the city's thousands of interns who pack the crowd. The interns at Heritage and CATO compete against each other, within their respective think-tanks, to claim the coveted two spots on either side to defend their ideological beliefs.

I attended the debate on Thursday night at the CATO Institute.

It occurred to me during the Libertarian vs. Conservative debate that I felt much as I do when I'm sitting through a lecture at college. I hear little quips and snickers and observe outraged hand gestures whenever a conservative speaks, but when it's the opposition's turn they're often met with clapping and head nods of agreement. Except I wasn't surrounded by liberals here, I was surrounded by libertarians.

The debate touched on policy questions regarding immigration, foreign policy, drug legalization, and privacy. The debaters were then prompted to explain why the other side's ideology was wrong. Following that exchange, it was left to the audience to ask the questions that went unaddressed.

The positions each side took were unsurprising. Libertarians were for drug legalization, conservatives were not. Libertarians advocated for privacy from government spying while conservatives thought government intelligence data was necessary for national security. The conservatives insisted that interventionist wars were necessary evils; the libertarians believed the United States should stay out of other countries' affairs.

What was interesting was the vocal support among many young people in the crowd for the libertarians. Konicki of Vanderbilt University and Jack Brown of George Mason University Law School were forceful, to the point, and confident in their answers. The conservatives also possessed these qualities. Meridian Paulton of Patrick Henry College and Elle Rogers of The King's College were obviously well-prepared, and they delivered their remarks with poise.

The nature of the two sides' argumentation was different though. While both the conservatives and the libertarians used a mixture of philosophy and data to bolster their points, the conservatives favored philosophy while the libertarians favored data. They also used this evidence in very different ways. The libertarians used their data to not only drive home their points but also to call into question the conservative argument while the conservatives sought many times to make their case on the basis of morality or precedent.

For this reason, the conservative side did not resonate with the crowd. At the mention of philosophers such as Aristotle, audible "what's" and "heh's" could be heard among the students. When any semi-provocative idea by the conservative side was iterated, the crowd began to chatter frantically amongst themselves, whereas when the libertarian side made a critical remark about the conservative position on gay marriage there was an outburst of clapping.

To be fair, I was not in the actual auditorium where the debate was taking place. Instead, I was assigned to the overflow room for people who either came too late to get a seat or were not registered. It could be the case that all the libertarians were in that room and all the conservatives were in the auditorium.

From what I observed though, millennials at this debate—many of whom will go on to be leaders in Washington—were not taking to conservatism.

This could be due to the philosophies themselves. Libertarianism is attractive to young people as the basis of the ideology is highly individualistic. Everyone does what they want to do, the government stays out of your business, and everything will work out for the best that way. This phenomenon could be seen in the post-debate survey where a majority of attendees identified as libertarian (philosophically, 41 percent; party 35 percent).

Conservatism, on the other hand, is based on family structures and authority, things that are inherently unattractive ideas to young people. Therefore, it was much more difficult to explain and convince people of conservative ideas, especially under a strict time limit, than it was to explain libertarian ideas to this subset audience. Sixty five percent of attendees thought the libertarians were the winners of the debate while only 34 percent thought the conservatives won. Only 39 percent of those who attended considered themselves conservative Republicans.

This could signal a larger problem for the conservative movement. If even younger conservative spokespeople can't resonate with their peers, it may portend a decline in conservatism altogether.

Does that mean then in the next few years, as millennials begin to participate in the workforce, we'll see a wave of libertarianism?

Of course, some of these students will go on to work at CATO or become the next Rand or Ron Paul, but some also may switch to the conservative side as they get older and learn more about the two ideologies.

The debate suggests that conservatives need to work on their recruitment tactics. This might start by presenting conservative philosophy in a more accessible manner. Conservatives can talk about Aristotle, of course, but they could explain what he meant in their own words and how his arguments apply to today. Conservatism does not have to be articulated as an out-of-reach-for-the-average-person type of ideology. It can be compelling to young people depending on the person advocating for its ideas. It takes specificity and an understanding of the audience to be effective, but it is very much possible. We know this because there are young conservatives out there who were persuaded. We need to look at how they came to believe in their ideals and what we can do to advance the ideology in the future.

Conservatives should take notes from the libertarians at this debate. Their speeches were filled with hard, fact-based evidence, and they drove their core points home repeatedly. The conservatives were taking a roundabout approach to get to the central thesis of their arguments, and the fleeting references to philosophers that most young people have not read did not help. If conservatives in the future figure out how to better channel their audience they will be much more persuasive.

We'll see what the debate looks like in 2027.