



To Win Millennials, the GOP Needs to Embrace Its Inner Libertarian

The under-30 crowd doesn't think much of most Democrats, but it's got an easily lower opinion of Republicans. Nick Gillespie on how the GOP can revive its brand.

By: Nick Gillespie – June 4, 2013

Earlier this year, Bobby Jindal, the GOP governor of Louisiana, surveyed the wreckage of Mitt Romney's sad-sack presidential campaign and told his fellow Republicans that if they ever want to capture the White House again, "we must stop being the stupid party."

While Michele Bachmann's decision not to run for a fifth term helps the party out on that score, a new report from the College Republican National Committee (CRNC) strongly suggests that another tack would be even more successful: The GOP should embrace its small, youthful, and increasingly influential libertarian caucus that focuses on cutting government spending—even or especially on old-age entitlements—and quit fretting over gay marriage or the need to invade and occupy foreign countries.

Despite its endless small-government rhetoric, such a change may be too radical for a Republican Party whose last two candidates were a combined 138 years old when they ran for the Oval Office. But it's the best way forward for a GOP that's even less exciting than your father's Oldsmobile.

Drawing on August 2012 and March 2013 surveys and focus groups of 800 registered voters ages 18 to 29 from around the country, "Grand Old Party for a Brand New Generation" observes that it was the youth vote that largely consigned Mitt Romney to the ranks of presidential losers. Romney pulled 2 million more votes than Barack Obama among voters over 30, but the incumbent won a whopping 5 million more votes than the former Massachusetts governor from so-called Millennials. That's even more stunning given that voters ages 18 to 29 had *lost* much of their enthusiasm for Obama. In 2008, Obama outpolled John McCain among young people by 34 percentage points, while in 2012, his lead dwindled to just 23 points. "The election reinforce[s] the generational challenge fac[ing] the GOP," deadpans the report.

What do young voters want? More than anything, a shot at working and thriving in a growing economy. Yet even though only 22 percent of Millennials thought "Obama's policies had made it easier for young people to get a job" and "only 29 percent thought they were better off as a result of the stimulus package ... Democrats held a 16-point

advantage over the Republican Party among young voters on handling of the economy and jobs (chosen as the top issue by 37 percent of respondents).”

That’s because young voters are turned off by the GOP’s emphasis on tax cuts *über alles* and habit of embracing big businesses rather than scrappy entrepreneurs. They are equally turned off by the GOP’s constant thumping on gay marriage, which more than any other social issue has emerged as a “deal breaker,” or an issue that will cause a voter who agrees on everything else with a candidate to vote for his or her opponent. Abortion, immigration, even health care are less important in this regard, according to the CRNC.

Millennials, says the report, don’t care much about abstractions such as that favorite Republican bogeyman, “big government.” But they are into cutting government spending and reducing the national debt, as they realize both things are strangling their future before it begins. Fully 90 percent agree that Social Security and Medicare need to be reformed now, 82 percent are ready to “make tough choices about cutting government spending, even on some programs some people really like,” and 72 percent want to cut the size of government “because it is simply too big.” Only 17 percent want to increase spending on defense and just 30 percent said that “marriage should be legally defined as only between a man and a woman,” with 44 percent saying same-sex marriage should be legal everywhere and 26 percent saying it should be up to individual states.

You don’t need a decoder ring to read the libertarian strain in such responses. Often described as socially liberal and fiscally conservative, libertarians argue for keeping the government out of the boardroom and the bedroom. They tend to favor more-open borders for people as well as goods and services, agitate for legalization (or at least decriminalization) of drugs, and push for choice in whom you can marry as well as where you send your kids to school.

Today’s younger voters—who have grown up in a wild, wired world in which the click of a mouse brings forth endless options in entertainment, commerce, and identity—naturally imbibe an essentially libertarian ethos that privileges individual choice over top-down control. They’re not anarchists: The CRNC report notes that 88 percent support safety-net programs that help people temporarily and 86 percent favor trimming regulations but maintaining ones “that keep us safe.” But Millennials plainly have a spirit of innovation and experimentation that is stymied by centralized government.

These views should provide an opening for Republicans. If Obama once conjured up the audacity of hope, he has pissed it away with a failed economic program, endless new regulatory schemes, and continued wars on terror and drugs that rival or exceed the follies of George W. Bush. During January 2013 focus groups conducted for the study, the CRNC asked respondents to name future leaders of the Democrats. Even Democrats had trouble coming up with one. Newark Mayor Cory Booker, a rare Democratic champion of school choice who got into trouble with the Obama administration for defending Mitt Romney’s private-equity firm Bain Capital during the election, came up occasionally, but more typical responses were “We don’t have any” and “I can’t think of any.”

The Republicans, on the other hand, seem relatively flush with young studs who are at least partly libertarian in spirit: “Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Paul Ryan, Bobby Jindal, and Rand Paul were all mentioned” in focus groups, according to “Grand Old Party for a Brand New Generation.”

Of these, the last two are perhaps most interesting and on point. As governor of Louisiana, Jindal has simultaneously taken a scalpel to his state's budget—garnering an A grade in fiscal policy from the libertarian Cato Institute—pushed school choice, and, despite being an “unapologetic pro-life Republican” called for oral contraceptives to be made available without a prescription. Whatever the merits of his individual proposals, he is working hard to save the GOP from the “stupid party” label and he is certainly not your father's Oldsmobile.

Rand Paul, the freshman senator from Kentucky, is already a frontrunner for the GOP nomination in 2016, having won the straw poll at CPAC after making a speech in which he called his own party “stale and moss-covered.” He's made a name for himself by challenging the Obama administration on its terrible civil-liberties record, calling for a non-interventionist foreign policy, and proposing a budget that would immediately trim \$500 billion in annual federal spending and theoretically balance the budget in five years. He's also a proponent of industrial-hemp legalization and drug-sentencing reform, issues on which he's reached across party lines. While he is himself a socially conservative Christian, he also believes “states should be able to craft their own drug or marriage policies, instead of the federal government.”

Unlike most of his fellow Republicans, he takes seriously the idea of reaching out to a broad cross-section of Americans, telling a New Hampshire audience, “We need to be white, we need to be brown, we need to be black, we need to be with tattoos, without tattoos, with pony tails, without pony tails, with beards, without.” Paul has taken his “hipster outreach program” to historically black colleges and to Silicon Valley. He is one of the few politicians of either party who openly talks about changing old-age entitlements so they no longer rob from the relatively young and poor and give to the relatively old and wealthy.

Characters such as Paul and Jindal suggest that the Republican Party might just have a future with younger voters. Which means it also may have a future with the rest of us, too, by offering an alternative not just to the Democrats but to the old and “stupid party” that fared so poorly in the last two presidential elections.

Nick Gillespie is the editor in chief of Reason.com and the co-author *The Declaration of Independents: How Libertarian Politics Can Fix What's Wrong with America*.