

Progressive Re-Generation

At times in American political history, young generations have formed lasting ties to parties and ideologies. Is 2008 one of those times?

BY BEN ADLER

CHARISMATIC LEADERS AND TIDAL shifts in public policy have always shaped the party allegiance and policy preferences of generations that come of age at critical moments. After enduring the Depression, the Greatest Generation developed a commitment to Social Security and Medicare and to a Democratic Party that delivered those programs. Conversely, people who first voted during the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan's anti-welfare and pro-warfare rhetoric was reshaping the political terrain, remain more Republican today than voters both older and younger.

2008 presents progressives with a similar mobilizing opportunity. The bumbling of the Bush administration, the corruption of the recent Republican Congress, and the economic insecurity of the post-industrial information economy has led young voters to reject the Republican Party in droves. "It's a Democratic-leaning generation at the moment," says nonpartisan pollster Scott Rasmussen.

Upon ascending to their leadership roles, one of the first things Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi did was to begin youth outreach programs in the hopes of gaining long- and short-term political advantage. Meanwhile, according to youth-vote experts, the Republicans have been surprisingly complacent about young voters. Ian Rowe, vice president of strategic partnerships and public affairs at MTV, who previously worked in the Bush administration, says, "The Democrats have just been doing more aggressive outreach so far." And Jane Fleming Kleeb, executive director of Young Voter PAC, which works with Democratic candidates to engage young people, wrote in an

e-mail, "It is fascinating to me how much the right has let their youth outreach go by the wayside."

In 2004 and 2006, favorable demographic trends, combined with some modest policy proposals and merely not being the Republicans, was good enough for the Democrats to carry the youth vote. And it may be so again this year. Fleming Kleeb predicts, "Reagan won with 59 percent of the youth vote, and today [Republicans] will be lucky to get 40 percent in the general election." But a robust embrace by Democrats of the concerns of young Americans would achieve even more for their party.

Young voters are becoming more engaged as well as more inclined to support Democrats. In 2004 voters younger than 30 were the only age demographic carried by John Kerry, and he did so by nine points, according to exit polls, compared to Al Gore's one-point advantage among that age group in 2000. In the 2006 midterm elections the Democrats did better among young people than among the general population. Democrats carried the youth vote by 20 points in House races and 27 points in Senate races, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

Between 2000 and 2004 turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds jumped from 40 percent to 49 percent of eligible voters, according to CIRCLE. And in the 2006 midterms it was 24 percent, up from 21 percent in 2002. The share of the electorate under age 30 increased from 11 percent to 13 percent between 2002 and 2006.

However, turnout percentages among young people still lag behind older population groups. To reshape the political land-

scape for years to come, Democrats would need to articulate a broad vision and set of policies that would redefine young Americans' relationship with government.

THANKS TO THE BABY BOOM ECHO, THERE are 43 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 29. And there are plenty examples of specific races where young people may have tipped the balance in 2006. In the Connecticut 2nd District, where Democrat Joe Courtney unseated Republican Rob Simmons by just over 100 votes, Courtney promised to make college affordability a top priority. Not coincidentally, in 2006 turnout increased at the University of Connecticut, which is in the 2nd district. In November, Courtney sponsored the Accessing College through Comprehensive Early Outreach and State Partnerships Act, which would help low-income students attend college.

And an April 2007 analysis by the Harvard Institute of Politics concluded that increased turnout among voters ages 18 to 24 in 2006 delivered two Senate victories: Jim Webb in Virginia and Jon Tester in Montana. This trend is continuing in the run-up to November 2008. Rasmussen Reports tracks monthly whether the public says it is more likely to vote Democratic or Republican in congressional races next fall. Young voters routinely favor Democrats by a solid margin and, on average, by a wider gap than the population as a whole.

THE EARLY PRIMARIES OFFERED MORE EVIDENCE that this could be a historic year in which youth turnout powers Democratic victories. In the Iowa caucuses participation by voters under 30 shot up, with

the gains overwhelmingly on the Democratic side. There were 52,580 Democratic caucus-goers ages 29 and under but only 12,650 young Republicans who caucused. This was partly a reflection of greater turnout for the Democrats generally, but 17- to 29-year-olds made up 22 percent of Democratic caucus-goers, while they were only 10 percent of Republican caucus-goers. Youth support for Barack Obama and, to a lesser extent, Mike Huckabee helped those candidates sustain their respective victories. Fifty-seven percent of young Democrats caucused for Obama; 40 percent of young Republicans caucused for Huckabee.

Likewise, youth turnout skyrocketed in New Hampshire. Forty-three percent of eligible voters under 30 voted in that state's primary, more than twice the 18 percent who voted in 2004.

The disparity among Democrats and Republicans was smaller. Voters under 30 accounted for 18 percent of Democratic voters and 14 percent of Republican voters. That's up from 14 percent and 11 percent for young Democrats and Republicans in 2004 respectively.

In South Carolina Obama won 67 percent of young voters, compared to 55 percent overall. Whites under 30 were the only white age demographic Obama carried. On Super Tuesday, Obama won the young white vote in many states where Clinton won older whites, such as in Georgia and New York. He carried the youth vote in all but three states. And he lost Massachusetts youth by only a point, while losing the state by 15 points overall. In some states, Clinton did win young whites, in Tennessee, for instance. She also, notably, won young Latinos in California by a wider margin (67 percent to 32 percent) than Obama won young whites in California (62 percent to 33 percent).

So while there is greater enthusiasm for Democrats than Republicans among voters of all ages, young people are clearly leaning more heavily Democratic and young Democrats are more enthusiastic

about their candidates. The reasons are both ideological and demographic. While Democrats are doing well among youth in lily-white Iowa and New Hampshire, they are also benefiting nationally from the greater diversity of young voters.

Consider the Harvard Institute of Politics online survey of 18- to 24-year-olds from December. Democrats actually continue to trail Republicans very slightly among whites in that age group, 29 percent to 31 percent. But with an unprecedented 40 percent of whites in the survey identifying as independent there are plenty of young white voters up for grabs. And many of those young independents, like independents generally, are leaning Democratic at the moment.



Year of the Young Voter? College voter-registration drive at the University of Alabama, Birmingham

Just as importantly, Democrats trounce Republicans among young racial and ethnic minorities, all of whom are growing as a percentage of the electorate. They lead among African Americans, not surprisingly, by 52 percent to 4 percent; and among Hispanics 46 percent to 22 percent. Most interesting, though, is their lead among young Asian Americans in the survey, 47 percent to 15 percent. Asian Americans have not always been a Democratic constituency. As recently as 1992 they favored the Republican presidential candidate. But they have been trending more Democratic with each consecutive election, swinging strongly for John Kerry in 2004.

Betsy Kim, a 44-year-old Korean

American who works on outreach to communities of color for the Democratic National Committee, says that her parents' generation of Asian Americans were attracted to Republicans because of their hawkish anti-communism (many were refugees from Vietnam or Korea) and Republicans' pro-business rhetoric. But younger Asian Americans, Kim says, emphasize access to higher education. And like young Latinos, who are becoming a potentially decisive constituency in states like New Mexico and Nevada, they are turned off by Republicans' anti-immigration rhetoric.

Yet the Democrats would be foolish to assume that advantage will translate into an automatic payoff at the ballot box.

Asian Americans, like Latinos, usually vote in relatively low numbers. To mobilize young Latinos and Asian Americans will require unprecedented outreach, in ethnic media and in their native languages.

FOREIGN POLICY ALSO PRODUCES

an immense advantage for Democrats to capture the affections of younger voters. In the words of Rasmussen, "everything bad for the Republicans in this next election starts with Iraq." While young people tend to cite Iraq as the No. 1 issue (it led with 28 percent in the November 2007

Rock the Vote poll of 18- to 29-year-olds), the meaning is the opposite for liberals and conservatives. To many young conservatives, the Ron Paul fans obviously excepted, the important thing is picking a president who will stay in Iraq, not one who will withdraw from it.

The issues young people rank the second through fourth most important demonstrate the more pervasive leftward shift of young people. In the Rock the Vote poll, young people cited health care as the second most important issue at 22 percent, with the economy and education (which includes the cost of education) following at 14 percent and 13 percent respectively. When you add those three together you find that 49

percent put some kind of domestic issue that has traditionally favored Democrats as their No. 1 issue.

These concerns are driven by a very real feeling of personal economic insecurity. For instance, the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan institution that researches health care, found that 42 percent of young people are very worried about being able to afford the health services they think they need. Only 30 percent of those 50 and older share that sentiment.

Perhaps the best way to take the pulse of young Americans on an issue is to look at social networking Web sites where they spend massive amounts of time. Facebook demonstrated the intense youth support for Barack Obama over a year ago when the group One Million Strong for Barack Obama started picking up thousands of new members each day.

Likewise a perusal of Facebook groups, most with hundreds or more than a thousand members, on the health-care issue shows more than 20 that advocate some form of expanded government provisioning of coverage. But only three groups that actually oppose universal health care exist, all of them with just over 100 members at the time of this writing. According to Kaiser, 56 percent of young people say they want presiden-

omo. He just felt strongly that “anything is better than our current system.”

So for the Democrats to reap the full benefit of young America’s inchoate policy preferences it will require a massive effort to convince youth voters that just because a Republican sounds like he cares about a problem doesn’t mean he will improve it much with a “market based” plan. Whether Democrats can convince young America of this proposition will likely hinge as much on communication skills and strategy as the objective facts of the matter.

But this much can be said: The traditional conservative response to problems ranging from health care to global warming would not gain much traction with young people at the level of broad, general principles. Polls from organizations like Rock the Vote, the Pew Research Center, and the Harvard Institute of Politics all confirm that young people are more likely than the general population to believe that government can and should solve social problems. While young people may show anemic approval ratings for both the president and Congress, or a cynicism about the political elite, these views have not translated into a distrust of government or an aversion to expanding governmental intervention.

Voting skyrocketed this year among the 43 million Americans aged 18 to 29.

tial candidates to present a plan that would provide health insurance to all or nearly all of the uninsured, even if that means a substantial increase in government spending.

At the same time, young people’s views on the details of how to address these problems may be very malleable and short on details. For example, Dan Buonomo, 21, an independent and a Southern New Hampshire University student said at John McCain’s MySpace/MTV presidential forum on his campus that he was won over to McCain in part by his health-care plan. McCain proposes tax credits and deregulation to increase affordability. The actual particulars of McCain’s plan weren’t necessarily what impressed Buon-

“We’ve seen that while young adults are pretty skeptical about today’s politicians, they are very supportive of the idea that government should help those in need or alleviate social or societal problems,” said Kat Barr, research director for Rock the Vote. “They tend to agree that government should do more to address issues like global warming or the economy more than older voters.”

Another example might be the genocide in Sudan. Young people have organized on and off campus from the left and right wings to take direct action, such as getting their schools to divest in holdings in Sudan as well as lobbying the federal government to be more involved in stopping the bloodshed.



HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE PREMATURE FOR the Democrats to start writing their inaugural addresses on the basis of the youth vote. Unfortunately for the Democrats, their party has yet to lock in the latent support so clearly demonstrated by the polling data—because Democrats have not yet demonstrated a capacity to deliver solutions. For example, when asked why young people are trending Democratic, Alexandra Acker, executive director of the Young Democrats of America, identified “this feeling of, ‘if we were lucky enough to go to college, do we have the resources to pay off our debt, have health insurance?’” Acker added, “They’re seeing the interconnectedness of these issues. College affordability is connected to economic insecurity, which is connected to health-care costs.”

But are the Democrats bringing these issues together? Often on the campaign trail it seemed that Democratic front-runners Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama talked about these issues as if they were in separate silos. John Edwards’ stump speech was a broad, progressive economic pitch but in an angrier, anti-corporate tone that did not resonate with the college students and



young college-educated professionals who overwhelmingly supported Obama in the early primaries.

Democrats, it seems, are not fully capitalizing on young people's economic anxiety to build support for expanded social investment among the rising generation. After the ABC News/Facebook presidential debates of Jan. 5, Facebook members were asked in an online poll which issue they wish the Democrats had spent more time discussing, and economic concerns prevailed. "The economy" was first by a wide margin, and health care came in third, after the environment. Even more striking, in a recent poll taken on Facebook, 76 percent of respondents said they were worried about their "economic outlook." However, when Democrats are asked what they are doing to ameliorate this economic insecurity among the young, they tend to talk about some pretty small-bore accomplishments such as raising Pell grants by a few hundred dollars and the minimum wage by a few dollars an hour. These are real accomplishments, but they constitute no paradigm shift in the American social contract.

A particularly key area of economic

insecurity for many young Americans is the cost of higher education. According to the College Board, average tuition has risen faster than inflation for each of the last 11 years. For the 2006–2007 academic year average tuition at a private college topped \$30,000 for the first time ever.

Except for the occasional effort by a conservative like Rep. Buck McKeon of California to publicly shame the most expensive colleges through an annual list (arguably as much about attacking academia as about holding down college costs), Republicans did little to nothing to combat the problem during the six years in which they controlled the White House and both houses of Congress.

The Democrats demonstrated the potency of young people—and their parents who help pay tuition—as a constituency in 2006. They made college access for all a core plank of their "Six in '06" agenda, including increasing Pell grants and reducing the interest rate students pay on their educational loans. Upon their election they passed those provisions into law.

But that hardly went far enough. When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller went to Howard University

in Washington, D.C., to unveil their progress report on the 110th Congress' "New Direction for Young Americans," they were warmly received but also aggressively questioned about how they would fix remaining issues with the cost of education, such as exorbitant textbook prices.

The Democratic presidential candidates all put forth proposals to address college cost more aggressively. But in their speeches, if they mentioned it at all, they did not effectively tie the debt burden into the larger, daunting prospect of trying to afford middle-class prosperity that preoccupies so many young people.

Republican proposals on college cost and tying additional benefits to participating in national service programs like AmeriCorps tended to be more modest, when they even existed. So Democrats may get away with not offering much tuition relief and still have a partisan perceived advantage on the issue. But will proposals like Hillary Clinton's \$3,500 annual tuition tax credit create a generation loyal to the party that put them through college? They might win a 20-year-old's vote with that now, but five or 10 years later, \$3,500 might seem to be less than they stand to save

from a Republican's proposed tax cut.

Ironically, Republican Mike Huckabee may have done the best job of expressing the economic anxiety of middle-class Americans, perhaps explaining why he did better among young Republicans than he did overall in the crucial Iowa caucuses, though Huckabee is short on specifics, too.

THE ECONOMY HAS FAMOUSLY PLAYED TO Democratic advantage, notably in 1992, when Bill Clinton parlayed voters' pocketbook concerns into electoral success. The Republicans' trump has invariably been cultural conservatism. But this year, cultural conservatism does not seem to outweigh economic or foreign policy, particularly for young voters beyond a religious-right minority.

From talking to young Republicans during the primary process it was apparent that many are uninterested in candidates who make social conservatism central to their pitch even if they share some of those positions. Even the most socially conservative major candidate, Mike Huckabee, emphasized the issues he knew would appeal to young people rather than his intense opposition to abortion rights or gay rights. When stumping in front of young audiences Huckabee waxed poetic on the impor-



Dream affordable are the right ones.

As Howard Dean pointed out in his speech to the Yearly Kos convention last August in Chicago, the likelihood that one will vote, and vote for a given party, is largely locked in during a new voter's first few elections. Dean has embarked on a strategy of bringing young people into the Democratic Party, through outreach efforts like requiring a proportional representation of young delegates at the 2008 Democratic National Convention from each state.

The party that captures the economic allegiance of young voters this year could create another New Deal generation.

tance of artistic education and the joy he derives from playing in a rock band—very different from the sort of address he gave to the much older attendees at the Family Research Council's Voter Values Summit.

The sharp political minds in both parties know that for a generation shaped by the attacks of September 11 and an era of vanishing middle-class economic security, the culture wars are dead, at least among swing voters. Both parties and their candidates will seek to appeal to young voters by convincing them that their approaches to fighting terrorism and making the American

But the paradigm shifts in a generation's party allegiance and attitudes, from New Deal Democrats to young Reagan Republicans, were as much about articulating and achieving a different vision for government as they were about outreach and infrastructure. Democrats need to learn from Reagan's delivery of ideology with hope rather than anger.

Obama won the youth vote in most primaries while offering the least ambitious domestic agenda on some issues, like health care, though he is a fervent advocate of better housing and education policy and a vocal proponent of civil rights. In the run

up to the Feb. 5 primaries, Obama subtly shifted his message to focus more on economic issues. This more aggressively liberal posture did not seem to harm Obama at all among young voters.

WHAT DOES THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN portend to date? Young people, when asked why they supported Obama tended to offer ambiguous explanations like his promise of change or his unifying persona. By contrast, Edwards' full-throated populism left him doing worse among young Democrats than Democrats as a whole. The only challenge to Obama among young voters came from Clinton, who appealed to some in New Hampshire by touting her record and proposals on education and health care.

But that didn't last long. In the following primaries Obama once again widened his youth lead over Clinton in Nevada and South Carolina. Nonetheless, among all young people Clinton remained the second most popular presidential candidate in either party, suggesting that either Democrat would enter the general election with a strong advantage among young voters. However, it remains to be seen whether a Clinton victory would leave at least some Obama supporters deflated and disaffected.

John McCain, as the presumptive Republican nominee, could conceivably pose a challenge to Democrats among

MICHAEL TEMCHINE / NNS / LANDOV

young voters. Young people are disproportionately likely to be independents, a group McCain did well with in open primaries thanks to his maverick image. He also did better among Republican voters who were anti-war, pro-choice, and dissatisfied with the Bush administration, despite his staunch support of the Iraq War and opposition to abortion rights. College newspaper editorial boards almost unanimously endorsed him for the Republican nomination.

But he did not do particularly well among young Republicans in the primaries. Though he carried them, he did so by no greater margin than he won overall. In fact, his support skewed old. The two Republicans who pulled disproportionately young support were Ron Paul and Mike Huckabee. Paul's supporters typically cited his opposition to the Iraq War as a primary reason, while some of Huckabee's talked about his empathetic noises on education and the economy—two issues McCain seems ill at ease discussing.

Thus far Obama has demonstrated in presidential politics what Dean did in party identification and Pelosi did in the congressional midterms: Young people, like any constituency such as evangelicals or Latinos, will be won over and excited to turn out in large part by whoever pays them the most attention. Throughout the primaries Obama put more emphasis than his rivals did on young-voter outreach. He spoke more frequently on college campuses throughout the campaign. In Iowa and New Hampshire he began every speech by bringing out his young, local organizers and segueing into how as a young man he worked as an activist. But after Obama's big Iowa win, Clinton subtly changed her tactics to emphasize youth bread-and-butter issues, and Obama carried the youth vote by a smaller margin in New Hampshire.

"Clinton saw Obama's youth margins in Iowa and went after a group within the youth demographic they knew they could get—young women and working-class young people," Fleming Kleeb of Young Voter PAC said in an e-mail. "I think in the last few days of the campaign Clinton was able to appeal to working-class young people with her message of Obama living

in the clouds [while] she is working in the trenches." Exit polls showed Obama being named far more often than Clinton as the candidate who could best unify the country, while Clinton won voters who said the economy was their most important issue.

The challenge for the Democrats will be to combine Obama's ability to transcend partisanship with the muscular progressive economic message of Clinton and Edwards. So the interplay of young voters' economic anxieties and the parties' proposals to engage them in this election cycle could help redefine Americans' relationship with government for years to come. Will the Republicans move to the center on young voters' concerns and propose expansive economic policies? Mike Huckabee's ambiguously populist rhetoric notwithstanding, his policy proposals do not give much reason to think so, nor do his compatriots in the Republican Party.

The Democratic Congress has ad-

vanced only modest proposals to make middle-class security within reach for more Americans, especially young ones. However, the presidential contenders all put forth more aggressive, though by no means radical, proposals, such as universal health care and a "living wage" that should be well-received by the majority of young Americans.

If the Democrats, from the presidential level on down through the congressional leadership to individual members, pull those threads together into a new social contract, they could create another New Deal generation. But whether they will seize the opportunity remains an open question. **TAP**

Ben Adler is a staff writer for Politico, where he primarily covers youth politics. His writing has appeared in Newsweek and The Washington Monthly among other publications.

Big Vote On Campus

Progressive groups increase their focus on colleges—and not just the usual suspects.

BY KATE SHEPPARD

IN 2004, KEVIN KILLER WATCHED AS his fellow Oglala Sioux Tribe members were turned away at the voting booth in South Dakota when poll volunteers misconstrued new voter identification procedures and rejected tribal identification cards. A Denver native, Killer was volunteering for Democrat Stephanie Herseth's bid for the House of Representatives in a special election, on the Pine Ridge Reservation where his father had grown up. But it was watching that systematic disenfranchisement that really politicized him.

"I couldn't believe it was still going on in 2004, especially to my own people," Killer says. "They don't have money to give to campaigns. All they have is their vote to give, and for them to get turned away, why should they have faith in the system?"

Killer, now 28, decided to take time off from school at the University of Colorado in Denver to be a field organizer for Tom Daschle's senatorial campaign, working in Native American outreach on Pine Ridge. He brought other youth from the reservation on board with the campaign, going door to door to educate and mobilize voters in their community.

"Since we were much younger than the people we were talking to, we held them responsible," Killer says. "We said, if we're this young and we're voting, then you should be voting. It's all of our futures."

Though Daschle narrowly lost reelection, turnout on the reservation increased by 50 percent in 2004, in large part because of the door-to-door work of Killer and his peers. Working on the campaign on Pine Ridge convinced