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Mixed Portrait of Freshman Political Views

Their beliefs may lean liberal, but their politics tell a different story

By Libby Sander

New research reveals that college freshmen hold increasingly liberal views on key social issues like same-sex marriage and rights for illegal immigrants. But the progressive viewpoints haven't translated into significantly greater levels of activism or heightened enthusiasm for national politics.

Those findings, published Thursday in an [annual survey](#) from the University of California at Los Angeles, paint a complicated election-year portrait of the country's newest prospective voters. Are they progressive-minded and eager to embrace more-tolerant social views? Are they cynical products of a sour economy and a fractious political era, bent on punishing the establishment by staying home on Election Day? Or are they simply more inclined to favor civic engagement on a local level—volunteering in their communities, say—over national politics?

Or are they all of the above?

The research, done each year by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, along with other recent reports, provides some clarity, but only to a point. Consider these trends: In 1997, the year that UCLA researchers first began asking freshmen for their views on same-sex marriage, slightly more than half of all respondents said they supported it. In the latest survey, that percentage had reached an all-time high of 71 percent. (For more on how students' views on social issues have changed over time, see [related charts](#).)

Other findings from this year's survey point to whether students act on those political beliefs.

Ten percent of respondents said they had worked on a local, state, or national campaign during the past year, placing them on the low end of a figure that has fluctuated between 8 and 15 percent over the past four decades.

At a time when angst over student debt and demonstrations linked to the Occupy movement have ignited some campuses, only 6 percent of respondents said they anticipated taking part in student protests while in college. (In the late 1960s, those numbers were, perhaps surprisingly, even lower: In 1968, 5 percent of respondents said they planned to take part in protests. The figure has never topped 9 percent.)

Numbers, of course, tell only part of the story. For every statistic that portends an apathetic future for today's young voters, there is a student whose behavior augurs something quite different.

"I used to hate politics like crazy," says Kavita Singh, the founder and lone member—so far—of the Youth for Ron Paul chapter at Southwestern University, in Texas. Ms. Singh, who grew up in a conservative Indian family in California's left-leaning Bay Area, said her view on politics during her early high-school years was simple: "What does it matter?"

"But eventually I got into it," she recalls. By the time she arrived at Southwestern in the fall of 2010, Ms. Singh, who is now 19 and majoring in economics, was a self-proclaimed libertarian.

She soon joined the campus's libertarian group, did a marketing internship for a school-choice organization, and last month worked remotely to register voters for Ron Paul's campaign in Louisiana. This semester, she is attempting to drum up support for Representative Paul on Southwestern's tightly knit campus of 1,400 or so students.

In doing so, Ms. Singh has unwittingly acquired a reputation on campus as "the Libertarian."

"People have been just very curious about me as a person," she says. "They come up to me and they say, 'You're a woman and you're not white and you're not a racist or a bigot, so why are you a libertarian? Why do you believe what you believe?'"

'Politics Is Personal'

It's a question that presidential candidates might well consider as they battle their way toward November. The recent research on freshmen, for starters, could provide hints on how to recapture the youthful vigor that defined the 2008 race.

Most freshmen responding to the UCLA survey will be eligible to vote for the first time in the forthcoming election. And they appear to have different views from arriving students in the past, says John H. Pryor, the report's lead author

"What might be a more polarizing issue among the general population might not be polarizing for this population," he says. "So even though more people are espousing these liberal views, they're not necessarily thinking, 'OK, I have this liberal view, therefore I'm a liberal.'"

Indeed, many of the hot-button social and political issues the survey asked students about yielded responses that lean liberal. Yet there have been no major shifts in the percentages of students who identify themselves as liberal or conservative.

The proportion who viewed themselves as "liberal" has varied from a high of 38 percent, in 1971, to a low of 19 percent, in 1981; in the newest survey, it was about 28 percent. "Conservative" students, who constitute about 21 percent of the 2011 respondents, have seen their representation fluctuate from 14 percent in the early 1970s to 24 percent in 2006.

Most students, it is clear, see themselves as someplace in between: In the survey's 45-year history, the largest proportion of students have consistently characterized their views as "middle of the road." (In the latest survey, 47 percent do.)

That comes as no surprise to Neil Howe, a consultant and author who studies the generation known as the millennials, or those born in 1982 or later.

It's a dependable cycle, he says: A new generation comes along and cuts across the political labels. As baby boomers were coming of age, for instance, tensions flared over the "new left" versus the "old left," he says: In cultural shorthand that has come to symbolize that time, it was a matter of rock music, free love, and disdain for

bourgeois lifestyles squaring off against unions, the middle class, and wearing a suit. But all of it was still lumped under the label of "left."

Some of the generational shifts have been profound. In the early days of the Freshman Survey, in the late 1960s, nearly three-quarters of respondents said it was important to them "to develop a meaningful philosophy on life." Less than half said it was important to them to be "well off financially." In the most recent survey, those responses were practically reversed, with 80 percent of freshmen saying it was important to be well-off and just 47 percent emphasizing a need for a life philosophy.

"So much of what the boomers did was to defy and rebel against a world built by their liberal parents," Mr. Howe says. "I think millennials are no different."

Take Nora Stephens, who is cultivating her own brand of political engagement.

Ms. Stephens was bred for political activism. Her mother is a lobbyist who counts Planned Parenthood among her clients. Her father works for the U.S. Forest Service. The two met on Capitol Hill, and Nora, who grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, is their only child. Being politically active, says the University of Michigan student, was more than a birthright. It was an expectation.

"I would've been a letdown if I wasn't," she says with a quick laugh. "For me, politics are personal. But for other people, it's not."

Ms. Stephens was only 17 when Mr. Obama ran for president. She was too young to cast a ballot, but instead, during the autumn of 2008, she organized teenagers to canvass in the battleground state of Virginia.

"We would knock on doors, and our line would be, 'We're here because we can't vote. We want you to vote for us,'" says Ms. Stephens, who is now 20 and a junior at Michigan. She still gushes over the experience, recalling adrenaline, intense friendships, and a sense of being part of something big.

Yet it was just that personal connection that prompted Ms.

Stephens, during her freshman year at Michigan, to move away from political activities toward community-oriented work: organizing in Detroit, teaching in South Africa, and working in a charter school in Washington, D.C. She now majors in psychology and has two minors: in art history, and in community action and social change.

It wasn't that she had tired of political activism, or felt disengaged from the process that she had known so well. Her interests had simply come into sharper relief. "I really wanted to be involved with something more specific," she says, "something that I was passionate about."

'An Ominous Sign'

Four years ago, Mr. Obama rode that wave of infectious enthusiasm to the White House, buoyed by young voters who turned out on Election Day in the largest numbers seen in nearly four decades.

Scholars and pundits are watching the youth vote closely again this year. Some are already predicting that young voters will not cast ballots with anywhere near the force of four years ago—possibly out of punishment for what they see as Obama's caving to a political process now viewed with increasing distaste.

Youth turnout at the early primaries has been mixed. Young voters in Iowa cast ballots at the same rate—4 percent—as in 2004, the last primary election in which, like this year, only one party was nominating a candidate. Fifteen percent of New Hampshire youth turned out, lower than the 18 percent who voted eight years ago. (In 2008, with both major parties engaged in competitive races, youth turnout in Iowa and New Hampshire was 13 and 43 percent, respectively.)

Ms. Singh, at Southwestern, says there's a different vibe now compared with four years ago. For many of her friends who supported Mr. Obama in 2008—despite being too young to vote in that election—the heady enthusiasm of four years ago has washed away. "A lot of people my age were really expecting something that was never going to happen," she says. "It's just this great disappointment."

Their vision then was hopeful and energetic but also ill-defined, she says. And their discontent now is just as deeply felt—and for equally elusive reasons.

A poll published last month by the Harvard Institute of Politics showed increasing political disengagement among 18- to 29-year-old voters. More than half indicated that they believed the United States was "headed in the wrong direction," and nearly three in four cited the economy as their top concern. Those numbers had grown significantly from a previous poll six months earlier.

The increasing disenchantment with the political process worries some observers, who fear that it may be more than just a temporary malaise.

John Della Volpe, the institute's polling director, deems the results an "ominous sign" for the future political engagement of America's largest generation. Indifference to government, let alone an outright disdain for it, makes it hard for the country to leverage the talents of the millennials' best and brightest to solve entrenched global and domestic problems, he says.

"The issues that we face in the U.S. and around the world have never been greater," he says. "Not having young people engaged in the very act of voting and the basic part of citizenships makes it far less likely that they'll consider spending part of their career in government. It's a brain drain."

For now, it's anyone's guess what college students, particularly those in their first year, will do on the first Tuesday in November. Ms. Stephens says she views her housemates in Ann Arbor as a barometer of sorts for what might happen—at least as it concerns Mr. Obama.

Of the seven students with whom she'll live in the fall, five expect to vote for Obama. (She includes herself in that group, and plans to knock on doors and canvass in Ohio and Michigan in the months leading up to the election.)

But two others, Ms. Stephens says, have been struggling with their political loyalties, thanks to a deepening distrust of government. As she puts it: "They're just mad."

That anger dissipated earlier this week. Mr. Obama's State of the Union Speech on Tuesday night electrified the seven friends. The two skeptics, Ms. Stephens now reports, are back in the fold. For the moment.

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LIBIntOrg 2 weeks ago

Thanks for the article.

Libertarians might react that what's astonishing is that Libertarians are the major force against bigotry in much of the world, but are portrayed on campus as bigots. It is not astonishing that the approximately 20% who test libertarian-leaning do not show up in 'scientific surveys' that exclude the category—or are assumed to be politically inactive as many work 'under the radar' via coalitions in a country where third parties and independents themselves still face legalized bigotry and discrimination ignored in the article.

Libertarian groups are making a difference in every country including India. For info on people using voluntary Libertarian tools on similar and other issues, please see <http://www.Libertarian-Interna...> , the non-partisan Libertarian International Organization.

7 people liked this.



snoonan 1 week ago in reply to LIBIntOrg

LibInt. Have you seen the video of Ron Paul talking about how the Civil War resulted in a loss of individual liberty whilst standing in front of a Confederate flag? This is why people, rightly, think Libertarians are bigots.

14 people liked this.



Jorge Emilio Emrys Landivar 1 week ago in reply to snoonan

Lincoln jailed people who spoke out against the war. Yes, the result overall was more freedom due to loss of slavery, but to ignore Lincoln jailing people for speech is pretty serious.

1 person liked this.



bcamarda 5 days ago in reply to snoonan

Yup, we hear people like Paul talk about how precious liberty is to them. Then we hear them say it would've been better for a few more generations of slaves to just wait until someone got around to freeing them peacefully. We find ourselves wondering why they think slaves, of all people, would value liberty less than they do. We find ourselves wondering why these libertarians seem to think some peoples' liberties are more worthy of fighting for than others. We find ourselves concluding that, AT BEST, these libertarians haven't really thought through the history because that particular history just isn't very important to them. We wonder why that might be. We then read Mr. Paul's newsletters and wonder if the truth about some libertarians isn't far darker. In each of these cases, we find ourselves concluding that these libertarians are prepared to view some people as less worthy than others, based on their color and/or genetics. We call that racism. Do you have a better word for it?

Like



cjb6163 1 week ago

Interesting article. I wonder what the picture is like for college juniors and seniors. In my experience, most college freshmen today (including myself at that age) haven't necessarily had the independence yet to consider themselves "adults," and haven't yet begun to regularly read the news or interest themselves in current affairs. Neither have most of them experienced the financial independence that might lead them to an informed view of tax policy or labor issues. And even if they hold liberal social views, many of them aren't yet knowledgeable about how progressive causes are fought for on a policy level. I think for many people, college is the time in life when this initiation occurs. A lot of Chronicle discussions seem to focus on the extent to which the Millennial generation has been infantilized by "helicopter parenting" and other factors; I don't find it surprising that they enter college lacking political convictions. Many college students had been encouraged throughout their childhood and teenage years to focus on personal achievements that can be listed on a resume rather than to see themselves as members of a larger community (apart from performing community service to list on that resume) or to think deeply about what might constitute civic good. Their relative lack of engagement seems more the result of how much adolescence has been prolonged in our society than anything else. But it seems likely that as this generation gets older, their views on issues such as gay marriage will profoundly affect the political landscape.

9 people liked this. Like



teapartydoc 1 week ago

This article talks about indifference or outright disdain for government as if it was a bad thing. Rather than ominous, I see this as a good reason to have a drink and toast our youth. Huzzah!

6 people liked this. Like



mbkirova 1 week ago

What may be happening among young libertarians is realizing they can be socially liberal and fiscally conservative at the same time, something the the US has never really seen, but Europe has in fair plenty. The Repubs and the Tea-partyists are so overrun with religious nuts and bigots that maybe the young can really start to found a classic liberal party that doesn't depend for its votership on social conservatives. I'd vote for that.

Like

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