

# The Democratic Party Has Become So Useless It's Making Young Liberals Look Longingly at Rand Paul

Elizabeth Nolan Brown | Nov. 17, 2014 4:52 pm

Democrats have become so frustratingly useless to young people that it's inspiring *Salon* writers to say semi-nice things about libertarians. Yes, my friends, perhaps the partisan apocalypse really is nigh.



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In a piece at *Salon* today, Tim Donovan explores how millennial-voter turnout in the recent midterm elections was low, and that didn't bode well for Democrats. He scoffs at the idea that the dismal showing had much to do with voter identification laws or other logistical barriers. Rather, Donovan suggests (as I, too, did recently) that Democratic candidates have done a crap job of focusing on issues that actually matter to young voters:

For those of us who follow "millennial issues," this generation's low turnout hardly came as a surprise. Last April, the Harvard Institute of

Politics found something surprising while talking with young voters: considerably more young Republicans expected to vote than Democrats. Armed with this troubling data, Democratic candidates had *months* to adapt their messaging and court our votes. What happened? Universally, Democratic candidates didn't bother to address the (very real, very serious) problems that are on the minds of many millennials: the racist and costly drug war, ballooning student loan debt, long-term unemployment, flat wages at shitty retail and restaurant jobs, and an imperiled climate. Democratic strategists seemed to assume that running as the Not-Republican Party would carry them to victory among young voters.

I don't know that the issues Donovan mentions are necessarily those that excite millennials the most, nor that it's true Democratic candidates didn't focus on wages or climate policy this election season. But he's certainly right that they focused much more on scaremongering about Republicans than actually setting themselves apart from them in substantive ways. Donovan continues:

Personally, I'd vote for Rand Paul for president faster than you can say "libertarian wacko" if I thought he would actually end the drug war, slash corporate welfare and plow the savings into student loan debt relief or a robust infrastructure bill. If someone like myself—a pajama-festooned, latte-sipping, liberal hipster *who writes for Salon, for chrissake*—is willing to ignore party preference in favor of actual legislative gains, I can only assume that less ideologically committed millennials are even more willing to vote Republican for the right candidate or platform.

Woo! Sure, Donovan may still see Paul as a "libertarian wacko", but being a bit wacko seems like a comparatively good thing in this context. The alternative is doctrinaire Democrats and Republicans who put partisan needs over ever accomplishing anything. And millennials are less likely than generations past to stand for that noise, as poll after poll and anecdote after anecdote show.

If millennials are a "politically unclaimed" generation, however, it's never been so true as right now and won't be as true for much longer.... *Thanks, Obama!* There are still plenty of people who want to talk about the spell President Obama cast on millennials, and how anyone who thinks they can get young people to vote Republican (or libertarian, or any oddball third party) is deluding themselves. But I think this drastically underestimates the extent of millennial disillusionment with the president, and the political potency of this disillusionment.

It's the first-cut-is-the-deepest phenomenon: Millennials mostly came into political consciousness during cartoonishly-evil, Karl Rove-era GOP power. Then came Obama, promising to care about civil liberties and end the Iraq wars and let gay people get married. And for a minute, the narrative of Democrats as a more modern, less authoritarian party and Republicans as rich old men who want to bomb everyone while banning sex seemed cemented in the millennial mind. "Thanks to truly epic Republican awfulness on just about every possible issue from gay marriage to foreign affairs to budget-busting, the Dems have indeed been able to take the kids for granted in recent years," as Nick Gillespie writes.

Then Democrats spent the past six years systematically squandering their millennial advantage. Obama turned out to care about civil liberties as little as Bush did and like

bombing people about as much. Little changed in a Democrat controlled Congress. Then little changed in a Republican controlled Congress. And progress on issues like legalizing marijuana and allowing same-sex marriages continued with little help from Congress or the White House. For all but those most inclined to be partisan hacks, the idea that either side is inherently distinguishable from the other seems to be quickly dissipating among Gen Y.

But this is likely a strike while the iron's hot kind of moment. A gift, really. Here's a young electorate too let down by politicians on both sides to feel especially tribal, yet too optimistic (as of yet) to let this sour them on politics entirely. A lot could change by 2020. Right now, here's a group practically *begging* to be won over, if only anyone on either team red or team blue could manage to actually stand for something.