

The Crisis within the Democratic Party: The Death of Democracy in America?

The Youth Vote and the Election of 2012

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In one of the most striking political comebacks in U.S. history, the Republican Party marched in lockstep to victory in the midterm elections and seized control of the House of Representatives and state houses across the nation. Republicans made a battle plan, they disciplined their troops, and the corporations paid for the ammunition.

Unless the Democrats do something drastically differently during the next two years, the rich and powerful will cement their victory around the body of democracy and dump the barrel of freedom into the deep dark waters of cash politics where it will be lost forever.

Looking across the piles of dead and wounded on the political battlefield at the vast hoard of mercenaries gathering to administer the *coup de gra e* to representative democracy, paid for by unlimited secret corporate financing, there is only one reserve force with the motivation, power and loyalty to defeat the army of fascism – those who have most to lose – the youth of America.

Pumped Up in 2008

The elections of 2004, 2006 and 2008 introduced the [Millennial Generation](#), those born between 1977 and 1998, to the U.S. political arena. The concentrated votes of these confident and mostly liberal young people helped the Democrats achieve a Congressional majority in [2006](#) and lifted Barack Obama over the top in 2008.

Fueled by aggressive efforts to increase the turnout of young voters from historic lows, more than half, [as many as 24 million](#), Millennials cast their ballots in the 2008 election, and more than two out of three voted for Obama. With older Americans splitting their votes between the two candidates, the youth vote [made a significant political difference](#) in those states where the popular vote was close.

Believing in a progressive domestic social agenda and sharing a deep concern for the environment, the Millennials had high hopes for the future of their country under an Obama administration. Unfortunately, the “change we can believe in” and the “change we need” turned out to be chump change in the currency of political deal making.

Ignored in 2009

Watching as the government continued to bail out Wall Street, suppress constitutional rights, and encourage deep ocean oil drilling, young people couldn't help but notice the compromises made by their president that favored the rich and powerful over the interests

of students and entry-level workers.

The economy sucked, jobs evaporated, college tuition increased, coal slurry continued to spill into mountain streams, and oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico.

Youthful enthusiasm was dampened by the repeated failures of President Obama and the Democratic Party to “change the way Washington works.” Although more than half of Millennials placed the blame on special interests and Obama’s political opponents, [one third of the young people came to blame Obama](#) himself for failing to deliver on his promises.

The effects of their disappointment was quickly felt as [young people reduced their political participation](#). Youth voting in the 2009 gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey was only 17 and 19%, and only 15% of Massachusetts young people turned out to vote in the special senatorial election in January 2010, resulting in the defeat of Democrat Martha Coakley.

Disenchanted in 2010

During the year following his inauguration, President Obama’s [approval rates fell](#) from 73 to 57% among young people, and a July 2010 poll found him [trailing a “generic Republican”](#) among 18- to 34-year-olds.

Young people have been especially hard hit by the failing economy, yet they were generally ignored by most Congressional candidates in the 2010 election cycle. As [Heather Smith of Rock the Vote said](#), “These young people are willing to participate and be active by nature, but they are not going to show up unless they are invited.”

Leading up to last week’s election, an October [McClatchy-Marist Poll](#) found that only 11% of registered voters under 30 were “very enthusiastic” about voting, compared to 48% of voters over 60 years of age. [An earlier Rock the Vote poll](#) in September found 34% of young voters favoring Democrats, 28% wanting a Republican takeover, but significantly, 36% believed it did not matter which party controls Congress.

An estimated [20.4% of young people voted](#) on November 2, which is about a million fewer than in 2006 and was less than half of those who voted in the 2008 presidential election. However, there was an increase in voting from 2006 levels in those states targeted by the Vote Again 2010 coalition, which facilitated voter outreach and targeted advertising to young people.

Although there were some desertions, the young people who did vote demonstrated far greater loyalty than other categories with only [+5% switching](#) their party vote to Republicans.

Motivated in 2011

Concerned about their progressive domestic social agenda and worried for the well being of themselves, their families, and their friends, the Millennials have good reason to fear the 112th Congress.

The corporate artillery is lined up, and the guns are locked and loaded with high explosive shells. Here are the announced targets: campaign finance reform; consumer protection laws, expiration of tax cuts for the wealthy; environmental controls on businesses; worker’s

ability to organize unions; health care reform; unemployment insurance; social security and Medicare.

As Samuel Johnson famously said, “Nothing focuses the mind like a hanging.” The young people of America are being hung out to dry politically and they will continue to flap in the wind as the new Congress rolls back even the modest gains of the Obama administration.

Mobilized in 2012

First, an understanding and then a plan.

The progressive attitudes of the Millennials are more representative of the American people than the election indicates. [For nearly two decades](#), prior to 2008, “Voters have become more supportive of government spending and more sympathetic toward the poor. They were increasingly secular and increasingly likely to favor gay marriage. They were more worried about climate change and more inclined to support universal health care. And not surprisingly, they were more and more likely to identify as Democrats.”

Since 2008, fear of economic collapse has caused people to become more conservative; however, the 2010 election does not mean that the majority of the people have changed their political attitudes. Instead, [the Tea Party movement demonstrates](#) that “the entire political system has become disconnected from the practical needs and values of Americans, suggesting that its voting power stemmed as much from a populist sense of outrage in a tough economic moment as it did from ideology.”

Many of the “Blue Dog Democrats” were just voted out of office and replaced with Republicans, which means that the Democratic caucus of the new Congress will be more liberal than the current one. It does not mean that the Democrats have suddenly grown a spine; it only means that, if they can find the courage to stand firm and not give in to pressure, the American public will respect and support their efforts.

[A recent poll](#) found that most voters do not support a freeze on all government spending, only on the part going to national security, and a majority do not want to permanently extend the Bush tax cuts on incomes greater than \$250,000 a year.

[Another poll](#) revealed that a majority of voters do not want to raise the social security retirement age or reduce benefits for future retirees, nor do they want to repeal the new health care law.

So, what should President Obama and the Democratic Party do?

First, the President should stop running for reelection. It is not all about him! Obama is further ahead in the polls than Reagan was at the same point. He should just chill out and do what is right and good for workers, the middle class and small business owners, rather than for the rich and powerful. If the President is incapable of such leadership, it will be no great loss if he is defeated in 2008. He will have been just another elephant trying to fit into a donkey suit.

In the meantime, Congressional Democrats should avoid compromising the principles of their constituencies and aggressively represent those who placed them in office. If they can't do that, they do not warrant the trust placed in them and they too deserve to be defeated in 2008.

Finally, the Democratic Party should recognize that young voters are the best hope for the future of democracy. Democrats should take the advice of Rock the Vote's Heather Smith and "invite young people to the party."

The Millennials are loyal, progressive and inclusive, and they are prepared to work for what they believe in.

Most important, with their ability to instantly communicate with each other using the Internet, text messaging and social networks, young people are less vulnerable to being manipulated by the corporate media.

Corporations and the wealthy will continue to secretly pour millions of dollars into negative campaigns for the next election to cement their power. The Democratic Party and the institutions and foundations that support the progressive agenda must respond with a powerful positive campaign that not only motivates and turns out the youth vote, but one that makes use of their abilities to connect with others.

The reserve force of young voters is ready and willing to engage in the battle for freedom and their weapons of modern communication are in place; all they need is leadership.

A failure to provide them direction, here and now, will mean the death of democracy - not just here in the United States, but everywhere political power is dedicated to greed rather than need.

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