

Politics | Voting

Young Republicans Lament Lost Ground With Gen Z, Millennial Vote

GOP allies say party is writing off younger voters as a 'lost cause'



Karoline Leavitt speaks with diners during a campaign stop in Manchester, New Hampshire, in November. *Photographer: Reba Saldanha/AP*

By Akayla Gardner

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Republican Karoline Leavitt hoped to be the youngest member of Congress at age 25, telling supporters in stump speeches this fall that without winning over young Americans, the GOP would “lose elections” and “lose our country.”

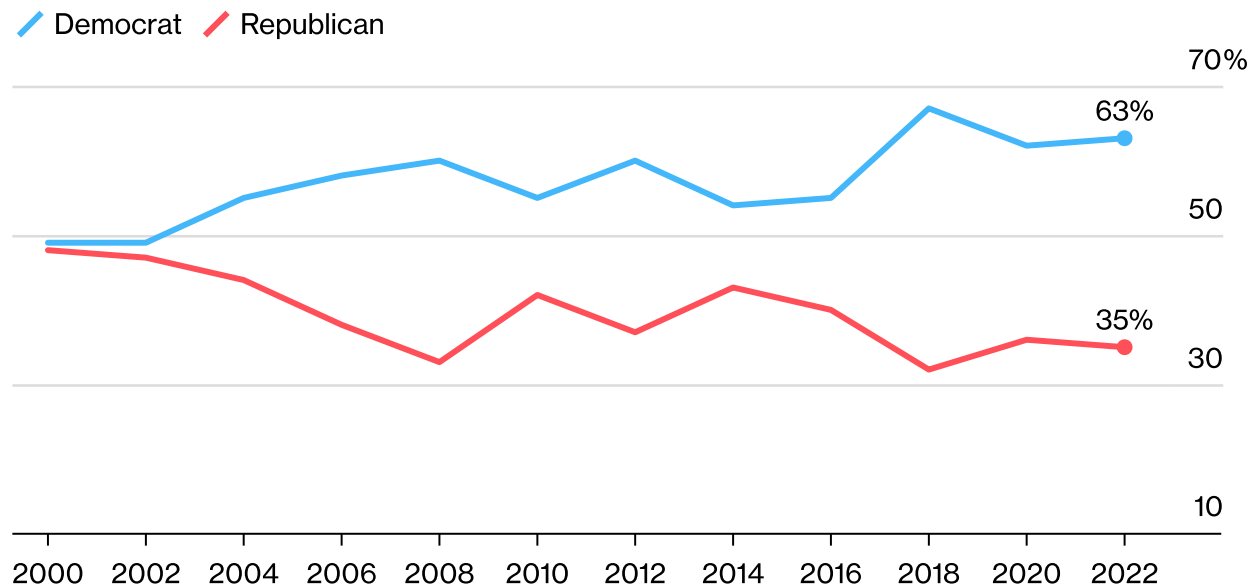
“Every old person in the room always shook their head in agreement,” she said in an interview.

Leavitt, a former Donald Trump staffer who had his endorsement, lost her House race in New Hampshire in November by about seven points. Party leaders, she contends, should be focused on an issue they have long ignored: winning support from Gen Z and millennials.

Republicans managed to eke out a narrow majority in the House in the November elections, but it was the fifth midterm in a row in which voters under 30 favored congressional Democrats. The last time the parties were competitive for that demographic in House races was 2002. Across the country, President Joe Biden's party outperformed expectations in the election in part due to outsize support from younger Americans, data show.

Young Voters Increasingly Favor Democrats

Over the last two decades, young voters trended left in House elections



Source: CIRCLE analysis of Edison Research exit poll data

*Ages 18-29

The Republican National Committee has poured funds into outreach to Black and Latino voters, groups that have also trended Democratic. But GOP allies worry the party lacks a similar plan to make inroads with young voters from all ethnic groups.

RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel launched a review of the worse-than-expected Republican midterm and created an advisory council to guide strategy going forward, including on “winning the youth vote.”

But after a series of disappointing GOP election performances, McDaniel is facing a tough re-election bid for chair at the end of this month.

Earlier: GOP Chaos Spotlights Identity Crisis Bedeviling Party Into 2024

Another failed House candidate, Madison Gesiotto Gilbert of Ohio, is the youngest member of McDaniel's advisory council at age 30, with three others under 42. None of the members referenced youth voters specifically as a priority in statements when joining the panel.

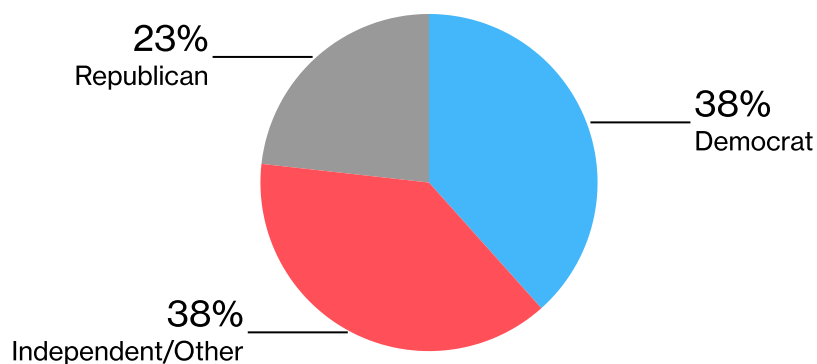
RNC spokespeople did not respond to a request to interview McDaniel or a member of the council about the party's strategy to win the youth vote.

"The establishment and the leadership needs to get on board," Leavitt said. "If we want to win elections, we don't have a choice."

Midterm exit polls showed people under 30 preferred Democrats on issues such as abortion, immigration and crime, according to an analysis from Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, highlighting the uphill climb Republicans face.

Young Voters Likely to Identify as Democrats, Independent

Less than a quarter of young people describe themselves as Republican



Source: Harvard Institute of Politics Fall 2022 Youth Survey
*Ages 18-29

Biden made a direct play for those voters in the midterms with his plan for student debt relief, pardons for federal marijuana possession and support for abortion rights.

Santiago Mayer, founder of progressive Gen-Z group Voters of Tomorrow, said Democrats are simply better aligned with his generation's priorities.

"Gen Z believes in the things that, right now, Democrats are advocating for," Mayer said.

Leavitt, who applauded the Supreme Court decision overturning the constitutional right to abortion, said Republicans should stand by "conservative principles" but find more effective ways of communicating their message.

"We can't continue to run on issues that young voters don't care about. We have to talk about the issues that they care about, and persuade them to believe in our policies and our solutions on them," she said.

'Model for Winning'

Sunshine Hillygus, a Duke University political science professor, said Republicans face a tough future if they don't close the gap.

"If young voters voted at the same rate as those who are 65 and older, the Republican Party would not be in control of many of the current states in which they're in control," Hillygus said.

For now, those voters may be most influential in Democratic primaries. Maryland Governor-elect Wes Moore, 44, credits them with turning his campaign around.

"Do you know one of the groups who absolutely gave us light in the beginning? When we were polling at 1%, literally 1%: it was young voters," Moore told Bloomberg News.

The critical difference between the parties, according to Tyler Brown, a former RNC digital strategy director, is that Democratic candidates target young Americans by design.

"Democrats are looking to turn out younger voters as part of their model for winning," he said.

Republicans historically have been reluctant to devote significant resources to younger voters, in part because they don't tend to vote as often as older Americans, Brown said. 2022 saw the second-highest youth midterm turnout in three decades, but their participation still trailed older age brackets.

"It takes too much effort to turn them out," Brown said. "Where you have limited time and limited money, what is the better path to victory? It's being with voters who have an established record of coming out to vote."

Outside Groups

In the absence of an outreach strategy by the national party, independent conservative groups and individuals have stepped in, said Giancarlo Sopo, a Republican media strategist.

"Conservative influencers are kind of filling a void," he said.

One of the most prominent conservative student groups is Turning Point USA, led by Charlie Kirk, an ally of former President Donald Trump. The group has more than 3,500 chapters at high schools and colleges, according to spokesman Andrew Kolvet. Its advocacy arm, Turning Point Action, held rallies, endorsed candidates and registered voters in midterm swing states, Kolvet said.

There are questions about whether such groups are effective at drawing unpersuaded voters to the Republican fold.

Sopo said Turning Point "primarily serves young people who already have conservative leanings," but is not necessarily focused on attracting or engaging students who are centrist or undecided.

Turning Point has drawn criticism for an approach that its opponents say emphasizes campus controversies and racial divides.

And it is sometimes at odds with the party establishment. In December, Kirk announced an initiative to target some RNC members and criticized McDaniel.

More broadly, GOP strategists acknowledged the party struggles with social media, important for targeting younger demographics. Brown said Republicans were “extremely effective” on Facebook, though that platform skews older.

Courtney Hope Britt, chairwoman of the College Republican National Committee, says Gen Z Republicans are waiting for the party’s attention.

“We are a demographic,” she said, “that has been kind of been written off as a lost cause.”

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