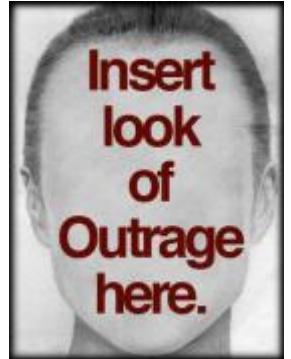


Youth and Our Future: An Era of Superficial Outrage Politics?

August 14, 2018



Many would like to believe that this American period of rampant national-conservatism is nothing more than a short stay in Republican purgatory. It is a reassuring idea that in a few years, as today's progressive youth becomes a large part of the electorate, the United States will become a shining example of tolerant and progressive prosperity. Just as neo-conservatives envision a global American hegemony built on capitalism and military strength, some progressives have adopted a belief that the United States is destined to reach national political *moksha* with strong welfare, a prosperous middle class, and minority rights; the nasty racists and homophobes, the "deplorables", will soon be outnumbered so vastly in the face of common-sense political ideology that the right will simply cease to exist. Unfortunately, this prophecy has proven a myth for millennials—and the nascent Generation Z doesn't appear to have better prospects.

Millennials were supposed to be the generation who would sweep away the conservative baby-boomers that elected neo-liberal career politicians like Ronald Reagan and George Bush for good. The results have been disappointing. While a 2017 Pew Research study indicates that millennials are more Democratic and more progressive than any generation before them, another Pew study indicates that millennials have by far the lowest rates of eligible voter turnout. For millennials in a world of increasing globalization and interconnectedness, where tech-savvy young people have the means of truly understanding the injustices around them, it may seem surprising that so few are willing to take the simplest step to better the world in their vision. Regardless of one's personal agreement with their beliefs, it is clear that many millennials can't be bothered to put in the time to vote.

But even if millennials exercised their right to vote, our time of increasingly overt plutocracy raises questions over the utility of voting in the first place. The capitalist erosion of democracy isn't unique to the modern United States. Through uncountable channels, institutions, and even ideas, the ruling class maintains a cultural hegemony that prevents deviation from the current window of acceptable moderate beliefs: the Overton window. From the sham of the American Dream to the illusion of choice in mainstream media, capital's power perverts young Americans' political lives. Sometimes, capitalists dispense with the pleasantries and tell elected lawmakers how to vote. The existing system was built by magnates and executives and continues under their supervision. Given that, it's not surprising that it's incredibly hard for any real progress to take form so long as it plays within the existing rules.

Within the system prescribed by the ruling class, young progressives lack the interest or the will for

bettering society. It seems that millennials are more content having it be known how progressive they are, rather than actually effecting the change they claim to want. This phenomenon, dubbed “virtue signaling”, can take many forms—among them, making true but ostentatious statements on low-hanging political fruit. For example, most of the criticisms of Trump I hear on campus are of his latest sex scandal or constant vulgarity. While his antics show his questionable personal character and morals, they hardly constitute terrible politics. More convincing attacks might be on Trump’s rollbacks on numerous critical environmental protections, or his continued expansion of U.S. imperial interests abroad, or his support for warmongering state sponsors of terrorism like Saudi Arabia.

If young people aren’t even digging into issues that will matter dearly to them in the future, but instead raging at the potty-mouth of one man, then it’s a far reach to assume that they’ll suddenly become well-informed and engaged citizens when they grow up. It’s easier to make broad political statements that lack substance or a need for background knowledge than to actually change society, and that has created a precarious political situation for today’s youth. What will happen when another neoconservative de-regulationist comes along, but this time with slightly more tact? Can millennials be trusted to support ideologically sound candidates, if nearly 70% of their disapproval for Trump stems from his personality issues rather than his policy?

Today’s voting-age youth grew up during a shift where the political question for individuals in America became one where information and opinions flowed from the top-down. It began with the rise of right-wing conservative talk shows on mass-media channels like Fox in the early 2000’s and simultaneous development of platforms like Youtube and Facebook that allowed for uninformed and often untrue opinions to spread at a breakneck pace. The product was that already-busy Americans were presented with an accessible form of political media that treated them as equals and required little background or deep thought to consume. The simplest topics to discuss are personal matters that everyone can relate to, as opposed to often complex and unclear matters of policy. What we get now is coverage of inane personal issues: Obama using Grey Poupon mustard, or Trump’s typos on Twitter. Sardonicly amusing to watch, perhaps, but this type of reporting detracts from education of the public on substantive matters. Now, we have a falsely conscious mass of voting youth who believe they are politically involved when they point out the president’s spelling errors.

The appeal of widely disseminated yet poorly constructed political beliefs has created opportunities for academic frauds like Stefan Molyneux and Jordan Peterson, just as it catalyzes vitriol against Trump. From the top, FoxNews is relentless in its polarizing barrage of patriotic right-wing propaganda and race relations are at an all-time low in the United States. Youth involvement is only now beginning to rise, but young progressives’ responses still come only after a specific issue has personally affected them. Young progressives are loath to act meaningfully outside of the riggings of the established system, and the most they can give in the standard political arena is occasional moral support. We are headed directly towards an era of superficial outrage politics, if we aren’t already there—and young people are fine with it.

*Jack Zhang is a sophomore at Phillips Exeter Academy. His columns on youth politics and global student issues have appeared in the *Boston Herald* and *Dissident Voice*. He can be contacted at jzhang2@exeter.edu.