

An Interview with Charlie Smith, National Chairman of the College Republicans

- 1. Based on your experience with youth activism, and your work with organized political campaigns, what are some of the things those running for office do right in terms of organizing youth involvement? What are some of the things they could improve on?**

There are two things that politicians and campaigns need to keep in mind when courting youth voters: you need to talk to them where they go to find their information (online) and that youth voters care about the same issues as regular voters, we just need to hear about them in terms youth voters can relate to. Campaigns are often reluctant to engage youth voters in new mediums such as Facebook or MySpace because they are unfamiliar with how to use these new peer-to-peer networks, but it is absolutely essential to reaching voters in our demographic. Millennial voters (born 1982-2003) are begging for more information and for new ways to become involved in campaigns, and candidates are missing major opportunities if they fail to make a sincere effort to reach out to them. This engagement can happen in more traditional forums as well such as forums, television, or print media, but the by far the most effective and cost-effective way to reach us is online and through our peers.

Some campaigns do “get it” and are implementing very new and innovative ways to attract young volunteers and supporters. I've seen many candidates on both sides effectively use YouTube to spark interest in their candidates (see Mike Hucakbee's Chuck Norris video) and try to get young supporters to rethink the mentality behind making a donation (see Obama's asking students to give up their daily latte and make a \$5 donation).

The keys are to be sincere – we've been hit with advertising since we were two years old and we can smell the poll-tested marketing a mile away – and to actually get out there and ask us to vote and volunteer – we will respond when asked as is proven by the bump in turnout in 2004 and the major spike we've seen so far in 2008.

- 2. Many point to “apathy” as a major reason young people are not as engaged as other groups. What have you found to be the most significant challenge in organizing young people to participate in political campaigns?**

Apathetic youth voters has become a myth so ingrained in the public's mind that it's going to take more than just one cycle (or two or three) to overcome, but it is starting to be noticed for what it is – a thing of the past. Millennial voters are interested and engaged. They are turning out in record numbers not only in this cycle but were the demographic with the largest increase in voting percentage from 2000-2004 and 2002-2006.

That said, there are still some challenges. Honestly, the hardest thing I've seen in politics is the willingness of campaigns to embrace new kinds of volunteer activism. Walking doors and making phone calls is absolutely imperative to winning a campaign, but some people will just never want to participate in that way. But they will sit at home on their computer and blog for ten hours a day or they will hop on Final Cut Express and churn out some supporter generated content.

Our challenge is to give each of these volunteers the opportunity to participate in the way that they will be most effective. They will self-identify if given the opportunity and the tools to get it done, but we have to make that first leap to signal that we want their help. My challenge specifically is to get young Americans to realize that they can make a big impact if they devote maybe 5% of their online time to some activism – post your thoughts on an influential blog, make a video about why you support a specific cause, or send an email invite to five friends about the event you are going to tomorrow.

- 3. In your experience, how do political campaigns view the potential contributions of young people? Are they considered a potential source of votes and volunteer, or too much trouble?**

There honestly is a mixture. One bad experience can really sour a campaign manager to trusting young volunteers, but overall I would say they are extremely grateful for our contributions to the effort. Not many people can walk doors for 10 hours or make 1,000 phone calls in a single day, but I've seen plenty of College Republicans do just that. On top of this traditional type of activism, College Republicans are now engaging in some very important efforts to spread our message online – it comes naturally to college students to express your political views online in ways similar to what other generations did with letters to the editor or petition drives over fax machines.

I know of numerous campaigns that have relied on a backbone of College Republican volunteers to meet their GOTV goals, and have been grateful for the support of these tireless volunteers.

4. What would you say was the defining moment for you in terms of political activism? Working on a campaign? Becoming focused on a cause?

9/11. That day obviously has had a major impact on our generation as a whole, and it certainly did on me. I had always been interested in politics, always wanting to debate with someone or read more about current events, but that day really gave me a sense that I had to do something to change the way our country was operating. We were floating through time with no sense of the dangers around us or the important opportunities we were missing here at home, and it all became pretty clear on that day that we had to change things, and change them drastically, in order to continue our way of life in America.

5. As you travel the country and interact with countless young Americans, what do you think are some of the issues that are important to this group? To what extent do you think those running for office address those issues in a way intended to speak to young people?

As I mentioned above, for the most part youth voters care about the same issues as older voters – the economy, the war in Iraq, the environment, health care, etc. There are some others that are more specific to younger people such as college affordability, but I don't know many young voters that jump off the couch and run to the voting booth because of the drinking age or legalizing marijuana, as is sometimes the stereotype.

The difference rests in how candidates approach these issues and where they talk about them. For example, when talking about the economy, mention how your plans will address the concerns of graduating seniors who are looking for some job security upon entering the “real world”, and instead of just publishing your thoughts in the Wall Street Journal, post the relevant passages on your Facebook page and take two minutes to record a straight to the camera YouTube video geared towards college students. It takes one staffer five minutes of work, but it shows you care.

On the flip side, you need to realize that these social networks are two-way streets of information. They allow you to send your message out, but they also let you listen to what your constituents are saying. Hold a contest asking young voters to submit their ideas on how to impact the environment or ask recently returned soldier to comment on their experience in Iraq. Then select the most popular videos for a prize, or reply to them in a video of your own. Now, not only do you care, but you also listen. As much as we want to hear from you, we want you to listen to us as well.

Again, some campaigns have adopted these strategies, although mostly for voters in general and not youth voters specifically – but hey it's a start and youth voters certainly aren't prohibited from participating in these larger conversations.

6. Based on your experience, how actively and through which means do you think young people go about advocating their positions? To what extent does this vary from other types of activism, and how?

I think my answers above covered quite a bit of it, but it's worth elaborating on. Millennials

communicated with each other in a constant, unrelenting wave of Facebook status updates, text messages, YouTube posts, twitter feeds, blog posts, and the occasional in-person meeting. We are constantly connected (sometimes to the point of exhaustion) with our peers, and we engage in a never-ending process of data collection about everything our friends are attending, thinking, and producing.

If campaigns never tap into this energy, they will never experience the level of support youth voters are willing to give them. We don't watch as much television, listen to as much radio, or read as many newspapers. Why should we? We can get it all faster and in a more personalized format online. When campaigns do reach into this world (by the way this world is never, ever going away – it will only get worse) they can experience a surge in activity in their supporter base.

Young people express their policy positions in the same ways they express their thought on the latest hit movie or disaster that befalls some celebrity diva. Are we out there writing technical white papers on CAFTA? Usually not, but I won't say no. Typically though, we are expressing ourselves by sharing articles, YouTube videos, and Facebook notes with friends that we find interesting or persuasive.

This isn't totally different from past generations, in that we like to send our opinions to our peer network, but it is much simpler for our generation and pervasive in our culture.

7. What would you say are a few strategies that you consider innovative ways to approach young voters? Which, if any of these, would you personally seek to implement and why?

The online video contests I mentioned above would be a great place to start engaging in a two-way conversation with youth voters and it's something I would certainly pursue in were I to run for office. They let people know that you're listening and they give a very personal, non-fabricated touch to your message.

More tactically, campaigns should start geo-targeting campuses through Google Ads. You can just draw a little circle around a campus and then your student-centric ads will appear right where your audience resides. Making your ads a little more exciting and funny doesn't hurt either. Humor can really cut through the perception that we are being targeted with some right-out-of-the-focus-group message.

8. How has the 18-25 year old demographic played into Election 2008 and what type of outpouring of involvement do you anticipate next Fall?

The 18-25 year old demographic has exploded in their level of involvement in the campaigns this cycle, continuing a very strong trend of increased activism seen in the past few cycles. This is not a one-time bump; I believe this is a generational trend that will continue for multiple cycles into the future and data supports this claim. I would predict a much larger than normal turnout among youth voters in the fall, barring some extremely major shift in the way events are unfolding. We will not see the "typical" drop-off in enthusiasm among youth voters this November.

There has been a great deal of attention on Barack Obama's level of youth support, and to deny he has a great many followers would be dishonest. However, I don't believe that youth voters can be motivated solely by a far-left message full of platitudes about "change" and "hope". We just ran our first online recruitment drive in mid-May and brought in over 14,000 new members in seven days. This is but one of many contests we will be running throughout the year. With some investment, we can bring this generation back to our party, but we must act now.

9. In your experience as a youth leader, what issues should the candidates for 2008 be focusing on in order to engage younger constituents?

Talk to college student about jobs, health care, the environment, and the war in Iraq. Explain the disastrous effects high taxes and more government bureaucracy will have on graduating students trying to get a job. Relate government health care to going to the DVM or the post office – long lines,

poor service, and ridiculous technical hoops to jump through. Talk about cleaning up our environment in a responsible and effective way. And speak to us who have friends and family serving in the military or who are currently serving ourselves. Are they going to have the tools necessary for victory? Are we going to stand by them as they fight to protect our freedoms? Are we going to let them come home in victory or force failure and defeat upon them?

But the most important thing, and this really can't be overlooked, is now that you've raised all these questions, you have to provide answers to them. Our generation will not support anyone who backseat drives our government. We want solutions to problems, and we want specifics on how you will get them done.

10. In Election 2008 how have you seen the candidates approach younger voters in comparison to 2000 and 2004. Do you feel as though any particular candidate has been more successful or innovative in engaging America's youth?

2008 has opened up a whole host of new ways candidates have tried to talk with us. This is mostly the result of the internet lowering the barrier of entry when trying to reach and speak with youth voters. No longer do you have to track down our mailing address, or try to catch our attention the local radio station, you can just friend us on Facebook.

I think that every candidate has made serious attempts, some more successful than others. Sen. McCain attended an MTV sponsored forum to speak directly with youth voters, thereby applying his very personal brand of politics specific to people in our generation. Mike Huckabee had his Chuck Norris videos. Ron Paul has a tremendous amount of online activism from young voters. Barack and Sen. Clinton have each had large amounts of support from young voters.

This election cycle presents an opportunity for every candidate to make serious inroads with our generation. I hope they take advantage of it.