Poll says many on campus marching to GOP's beat

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November 4, 2003

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- While he was growing up, the politics in the household of Steven Druckenmiller always leaned toward the liberal side. So when the 20-year-old goes home, he takes delight in wearing a shirt from his College Republican club.

At Capital University here, Druckenmiller and several dozen others regularly hold meetings to discuss tax policy, free trade and other conservative bedrocks. Membership in the rival Democratic group, meanwhile, has dwindled to two.

"Sure," the college junior said with a smile, "some of us have liberal parents and are rebelling."

Druckenmiller and his friends represent a growing trend of college students identifying with the Republican Party. Gone are the days when most college campuses were liberal strongholds, awash only in principles of the Democratic Party.

A new poll by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University showed that 31 percent of college students across the country identify themselves as Republicans. The poll also showed that 61 percent of college students approve of President Bush's job performance, which is about 8 percentage points higher than the general public.

Twenty-seven percent of the students say they are Democrats. And 38 percent say they are independent or unaffiliated, which makes them ripe targets for presidential candidates who are paying careful attention to the youngest segment of the electorate, particularly the nation's 9 million college students.

"The days are over of colleges being a bastion of Democratic politics," said Dan Glickman, director of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. "We've had 20 years without much radicalism on campuses around the country. The campuses now reflect more of the country as a whole."

He added: "This group ought to be mined by the candidates. If they don't, it's at their own peril."

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's presidency inspired a generation of conservatives on college campuses. GOP strategists hope to re-create and expand that movement and are turning to college-age Republicans such as Druckenmiller who were barely born when Reagan took office.

Shaped by TV

It was here in Columbus, in fact, that the television sitcom "Family Ties" was set from 1982 to 1989. The series featured Michael J. Fox's college-age character Alex P. Keaton, who worshiped Reagan, much to the dismay of his hippie parents. That show, which Druckenmiller watched in reruns, first inspired his political thought.

So when Bush came to downtown Columbus on Thursday, the junior economics and philosophy major from Fremont, Ohio, stood on a street corner for nearly two hours to show his support for Bush. Wearing a College Republican sweatshirt and holding a bullhorn, Druckenmiller marshaled more than a dozen young conservatives through a thicket of Democratic protesters.
"We are a new wave coming in!" he said in an interview, stepping away from the demonstration for a moment. "It's a blend of Arnold Schwarzenegger-esque conservatism."

Indeed, the Republican Party hopes to capitalize on the energy and interest created last month by the actor's election as California governor. And as Schwarzenegger does, polls show that young Republicans are more likely to support moderate positions on issues such as abortion and gay rights.

To be sure, the Democratic Party is not ceding the young vote. Last week in Washington, nearly 4,000 young professionals danced to hip-hop music at a fundraiser led by former President Bill Clinton.

In a quest to build its own new generation of supporters, the party is concentrating on one message for college students: jobs. The Democratic presidential candidates will focus on the economy and other issues Tuesday night in Boston at "America Rocks the Vote," a CNN debate where young voters will quiz the candidates for 90 minutes.

"We've got to have young people understand why this election is so critical," Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe said. "Right now, 7 out of 10 college graduates cannot get a job this year. They've got to understand the issues. If they don't, that's our fault."

Since 1999, though, the College Republican National Committee has tripled its membership and now has 1,150 chapters and more than 1,000 student coordinators on campuses nationwide.

Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor who has surged to the front of the field of nine Democratic candidates, launched a tour of college campuses this fall through his "Generation Dean" program. His is the only campaign with student organizations on virtually every major campus in America.

Many say they will vote

In the Harvard poll conducted late last month, more than two-thirds of the students said they were registered to vote and 82 percent said they would definitely or probably vote in the 2004 presidential election. History, though, suggests those numbers might be optimistic as apathy toward politics among youth has grown in the last three decades.

In the 2000 election, for example, only 29 percent of eligible voters ages 18 to 24 cast ballots for president. By comparison, more than 45 percent of young voters cast ballots in the 1968 election, as controversy raged over the Vietnam War.

In next year's election, though, strategists from both parties are predicting a higher turnout than in the 2000 election. A competitive Democratic primary, in addition to concerns over the war in Iraq and the economy, could stir more interest.

For the future of both political parties, the stakes are high, because some of these voters are casting ballots for the first time.

"They are much more open-minded," Glickman said. "But once you're a Republican or a Democrat, you tend to stay there."

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