

The Youth Vote

Every election cycle we hear about the significance of the youth vote. First-time voters are sought out and questioned by interviewers who are eager to learn the young's idealistic solutions to society's foremost and enduring problems.

I admire young people's energy. But I attribute their so-called idealism to naivety. The world never works quite like young people expect. They do not yet know enough to know they do not know enough.

My old college buddies and I solved most of the world's problems by 2 am. And we did it all without leaving our dorm rooms after downing a few beers. When I think back to our arguments I realize now how pedestrian they were.

Change always sounds like a great idea and young people in particular want greater change. But greater change means greater risk and disruption of society. There's a reason people tend to grow more conservative and more traditional as they age. They learn that just because we want change to develop and conclude in a predictable manner does not make those desires a reality.

In the 1960s and 1970s environmentalism became a primary focus of our culture. Sweeping bipartisan environmental laws were passed, budget money was eagerly allocated, and environmental agencies were established. The positive consequences of those actions is that we have cleaner air and water today than we did a few decades ago. But those same popular measures resulted in the loss of countless manufacturing jobs. Manufacturing is almost by definition a messy industry, producing by-products of pollutants, toxins, and waste. To produce a cleaner environment we outlawed or regulated the waste. But we did so at a cost. Today many of those manufacturing plants have long since departed our country and have moved overseas. While this is good for the environment those industries were a crucial source of employment for millions of people. Less manufacturing means a cleaner environment but higher unemployment.

Few could imagine that a seemingly generous act like giving government assistance to fatherless households would actually contribute to more fatherless households.

After the creation of the birth control pill, improvements in the quality of condoms, and the rise of accessibility of birth control for both men and women, who could anticipate that unexpected pregnancies in our society would actually increase?

In politics, predictions also prove largely unpredictable. After the 2012 election many experts believed that the future of the Republican party and conservatism was in peril due to demographic trends. But less than one decade earlier when the GOP held the White House and both houses of Congress there was talk of a permanent Republican majority.

Just in my lifetime the Republicans won 5 out of 6 presidential elections, and it appeared that they were the political party that Americans trusted to run the Executive Branch. That was followed by the Democratic nominee winning the popular vote in 5 of the next 6 elections.

When a crisis strikes there are always calls for greater cooperation between government agencies. That is inevitably followed by a corruption scandal involving those agencies, which leads to calls for the agencies to work independently and act as watchdogs against each other. This lasts only until the next tragedy, and the same experts will claim that the tragedy could have been mitigated or avoided completely had the agencies worked together.

Young people in particular do not understand why the political parties cannot work together as they represent the wishes of over 310 million people. Yet, they forget how much disagreement there was in their dorm rooms among a few buddies drinking beers and discussing politics – and how intransigent they were when it came to bending their own political views.

Every action or decision has consequences – some anticipated but most unexpected and unintended. Societal trends tend to be more circular than linear. Compromise is something we expect from others but seldom something we ask of ourselves.

We can warn young people of these truths but it takes time and experience to truly understand them. Until then they will continue to be idealistic, unwilling to compromise their morals and principles no matter the cost and regardless of the situation. They will continue to believe they have greater insight and wisdom in political matters than previous generations.

Eventually, they will recognize that wisdom and understanding only grow with age. That to experience something allows for greater understanding than just reading about it or discussing it at 2 am in some college dorm room. And perhaps they were not as wise as they – and the rest of our youth-centered society – were led to believe.

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