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Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Can Teenagers Save America? They've Done It Before

By JON GRINSPAN MARCH 26, 2018

While millions of Americans found this weekend's nationwide marches for gun control inspiring, many others are giving them a skeptical eye — and not just Second Amendment advocates. How could a bunch of teenagers have the wherewithal to make change in America's deadlocked politics? After all, they're just kids.

Older people have long grumbled about the young in politics, dismissing them as “baby politicians” or “beardless boys” in the early years of this country. But when American politics were at their darkest, in the late 19th century, it was young people who broke a partisan divide and helped save democracy. Maybe they can do it again.

Democracy, as a rule, has a labor problem. Someone has to do the hard, unpaid work of persuading millions of citizens to participate. For much of our history, enthusiastic young people did that labor for free. Even today, visit any campaign headquarters and you will find a sea of youthful volunteers phone-banking and poster-making. But while young people have long done an outsize portion of the political work, they were rarely allowed to pick the issues politics addressed.

It was only when adult politicians seemed stalled and issueless that a generation of young people stepped up to lead.

For much of the first century of American politics, young people operated as unpaid foot soldiers of partisan political armies. In a popular, loud, dirty system there was plenty of unglamorous work to be done. For every enormous rally or rowdy election, there were people still too young to vote working behind the scenes, handing out ballots and emptying spittoons, toasting allies' speeches and cracking rivals' skulls.

The one thing young people were not supposed to do, for much of the 1800s, was to champion themselves. They were referred to as “generous and unsophisticated” — worker bees to be directed by the older and wiser. As one 16-year-old antislavery activist in Maine complained, when he tried to talk politics with voters many laughed at his “childish enthusiasm and coolly reminded me that I was a boy.”

Even among youthful activists, many felt conflicted about whether they should “originate opinions” or merely carry them out. Young men and women were raised to revere their democracy, did they really have a right to guide it yet? During an 1831 rally against what they called the “slimy mark” President Andrew Jackson was leaving on the country, young men in Baltimore nonetheless worried that they were “overstepping the modesty which befits our age.”

When young men and women did play a role in their nation's politics, it was often over the resistance of older Americans. When young African-Americans in Philadelphia in 1838 fought to keep black Pennsylvanians' right to vote, they had to justify themselves even to their own community. Dismissed as “inexperienced, hasty, immature” by their elders, young black Philadelphians published newspaper statements directed at the city's black elite, announcing “*we will not be put down.*”

This was an age that could not afford to “put down” the young. Over the second half of the 1800s, American politics darkened. The succession of Civil War, Reconstruction and the Gilded Age was marked by bitter partisanship, endemic corruption, appalling violence and a general sense that democracy was failing. Adults seemed to be stuck, recycling the same partisan issues over and over.

And they insisted that the young follow their lead. As an established Minnesota politico told one rising 25-year-old: Don't think, just follow the party's platform, just “swallow it down.”

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But in the final years of the 19th century, a sudden burst of young people demanded new issues — their issues. Tired of, as one Coloradan put it, “rotten old hulks who monopolize the offices and dwell upon the past,” a generation of young men and women denounced their leaders and with them, partisanship. They demanded political reform, labor reform and social reform. “I declare that they would withhold their votes from any party that didn’t respond. “The ratio of party feeling and self-interest is rapidly changing,” declared one sharp-tongued New Yorker in 1898, adding that “the younger generation hates both parties equally.”

Politicians saw the change and chased after those young voters. Soon, The Washington Post was begging: “Don’t sneer at them as ‘boys,’ when they drop into your ward meetings, don’t make them do all the work of the campaign.”

In the new century, young people’s “self interest” helped kill extreme polarization by forcing both parties to pursue the same set of demands. Youthful independent voters emerged as a decisive third force, with just enough influence to swing close elections. Politicians scrambled after them, beginning the Progressive Era, passing laws protecting workers, cleaning up cities and championing the young.

Women played a key role in this shift. Because they could not vote, they were less corrupted by partisanship. Women in their 20s worked to refocus American public life toward social concerns. They built schools — nearly one a day between 1890 and 1920 — and fought child labor. The aggressive crusader Florence Kelley wrote that protecting young people is “the noblest duty of the Republic,” an act of “self preservation” that enables the next generation to champion itself.

This is the key to understanding youth politics. Young people cannot be truly selfish, because they cannot be permanently young. Youth is temporary, its gains are passed on. In the late 19th century, young people built institutions that helped protect 20th-century young people. The high school seniors marching over the weekend will hopefully make their schools safer well after they have graduated. If anyone should be choosing the issues in politics, it should be the young, for they “have a longer future to provide for.”

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Politics Personal and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century.”

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