Opinion
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President Joe Biden delivers a speech on the U.S. economy and "Bidenomics" Sept. 14 at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland. (Official White House Photo/Adam Schultz)



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In my last column, I looked at the conundrum facing the Republican Party's candidates: They do not want to risk alienating voters who support Donald Trump, but if they do not take on the former president, they don't stand a chance at wrestling the nomination from him.

Elections, however, are not just about the candidates. They are also about the voters. (And about the campaigns themselves, the banana peels candidate X might slip on and the manner in which she recovers from the slip, debate performances, reactions to crises, etc.) And two recent articles published by the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies program look at recent polling on young people.

Some key things to remember about young voters are that they lean heavily to the Democrats, not as many of them turn out to vote as older cohorts do, and yet every four years, a large group of them join the electorate. At the other end of the spectrum, a certain percentage of older voters, who tend to be more conservative, go to their eternal reward (or punishment).

In the Brookings' series, Bill Galston notes that in 2020, Joe Biden walloped Trump among young voters, besting him by 24 points. But in a recent New York Times/Siena poll, Biden was only leading Trump among young voters by 1 point, 47%-46%.

Is the problem Biden's support for Israel? His administration's middle-of-the road position on transgender athletes? Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez criticized Biden for his stance on the latter issue in an April tweet. Maybe it is just that young people want a younger, more vigorous president?

Nope. "When asked whether economic or social issues would be more important in determining their vote in 2024, 62% chose economic issues, the largest share of any age cohort, while only 29% opted for social issues," Galston writes. "And these young adults think that the economy is doing terribly. Less than half of one percent

said the state of the economy is 'excellent;' just 7% said 'good' or 'very good;' and the remaining 93% said 'only fair or 'poor.' "

One big thing to remember about younger voters: There is a massive disconnect between the types of young people who staff campaigns or work at special interest organizations and the rest of the cohort. The "privileged college kid" has been identified by David Shor, who was himself a privileged college kid and is one of the Democrats' leading data gurus, as a major hurdle in messaging.

"It is descriptively true that people who work in campaigns are extremely young and much more liberal than the overall population, and also much more educated," Shor told Politico. "I think that this is pushing them to use overly ideological language, to not show enough messaging or policy restraint and, from a symbolic perspective, to use words that regular voters literally don't understand — and I think that that's a real problem." That article appeared in 2021 and the problem still exists.

In his essay at Brookings surveying recent polling data, E.J. Dionne cited pollster Daniel Cox, who directs the Survey Center on American Life, regarding "a certain skepticism toward presidential polls this far out from Election Day, especially among young voters 'who mostly do not pay attention to politics at this early stage.' "

"Many of these surveys, moreover, have relatively small samples of young Americans," Dionne added. "Cox observed that some of the surveys might reflect the likelihood that 'young conservatives were more committed to Trump than young liberals were to Biden.' "

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Dionne agreed with Galston that the economy is a big part of the story, and that the Biden campaign's "economic messaging needs a lot of improvement." And not just the messaging. Dionne calls for paying more attention to the economic circumstances young people face and advocates what he deems a "Next Generation Act of 2023" which "could include job training for a rapidly transforming economy; new stabs at student loan forgiveness and wider access to higher education, including community college; comprehensive childcare and early education; and seed money, similar to provisions of the GI Bill, for young people to buy homes and start their own businesses."

It is these last items that are especially important. Democrats need to launch programs that help all young people, not just those with diplomas. It is time to rid the party once and for all of the Clintonian heresy that college is the only means of achieving a worthwhile human life.

Both Galston and Dionne warn Biden's team to pay attention to the youth vote, and both also warn against overreacting to his currently abysmal poll numbers. Dionne notes that Biden leads Trump by 10 points among all young people in one poll, but by 24 points among the most likely voters.

Biden and his team need to push some legislation that draws a clear distinction between the parties, and creating good-paying union jobs in the sustainable energy field seems like just the ticket to attract both college students and those pursuing trades. There is time for Biden and the Democrats to right the ship, but they had best get going.