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Liberal Parents, Liberal Children



By Marty Kaplan

When it comes to politics, today's college freshmen resemble their baby boomer parents of 40 years ago in all ways except two. One way makes perfect sense; the other is a puzzle.

The evidence about kids and their parents isn't anecdotal; it's documented in a study just released by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, which has been investigating the attitudes of a massive national sample of American freshmen since the 1960s.

More freshmen today say they frequently discuss politics than at any time since Lyndon Johnson announced that he wouldn't run for re-election. Just since 2000, that slice of young people — 35.6 percent — has more than doubled, and it even exceeds by a couple of points the previous high-water mark, when Richard Nixon was elected president. When you add in the number of today's freshmen who say they occasionally discuss politics, you're talking about nearly 86 percent of them, another record.

Today, the proportion of freshmen calling themselves liberal has hit 31 percent, the highest it's been in 35 years. At the same time, the number of students calling their political views middle-of-the-road has hit an all-time low, just over 43 percent, territory it hasn't been in since 1970. Only one out of five students today describes him or herself as conservative, an erosion of more than two points since the year before.

You can see expressions of that liberalism — a word that doesn't seem to be a boogeyman to today's college freshmen — in the support by two-thirds of them for same-sex marriage; in the agreement by more than 60 percent of them that “the wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now”; in the belief by three-quarters of them that “addressing global warming should be a federal priority.” More than four out of 10 freshmen want marijuana legalized, while only 28 percent of them want higher military spending, a steep drop from the high of 45 percent in the wake of Sept. 11.

One difference between today's freshmen and the ones buying the Beatles' new “Sgt. Pepper” album — the difference that makes sense — is a drop in the number saying that it's very important or essential to find a meaningful

philosophy of life. It was 86 percent in 1967. By 2004, that had fallen to a record low of less than 40 percent. Though it stands now at 51.4 percent, that's still a huge drop since 1967. At the same time, the percent saying that being well-off financially is essential or very important has risen from 43.5 percent in 1967 — half the number looking for a philosophy of life — to nearly 77 percent today.

Who can blame them? The years between the 1960-61 recession and the 1973 oil crisis saw economic growth, which made it an opportune time to worry more about the meaning of life than about financial security. But with the pall now cast over the economy, it's a wonder that only three out of four freshmen are worried about making ends meet.

To me, the real conundrum in the attitudes of today's freshmen has to do with news. In the late 1960s, keeping up with politics was an essential or very important goal to 60.3 percent of freshmen. By 2000, the number had fallen to less than half of that, a record low. It rose after Sept. 11, but today the figure is still south of 40 percent. How can it be that almost nine out of 10 freshman say they talk about politics, but six out of 10 don't think it's important to keep up with politics?

Here's my guess, completely unsupported by empirical evidence: The opinion-mongering on talk radio, the food-fight culture of cable news, the rumors and screaming sirens online: These, plus campaign invective, are what most of today's freshmen conceive of as political discourse and political news. It's the world they've grown up in.

No wonder that six out of 10 freshmen don't think it's important to keep up with politics. Who would want to, when that means Bill O'Reilly calling people he disagrees with "un-American," or Rush Limbaugh rooting for Barack Obama to fail, or the Drudge Report retailing Republican talking-points as breaking news, or Sarah Palin labeling Obama a terrorist-by-association, or Karl Rove's minions lying about John Kerry's purple hearts?

I know, I know: the fifth of the country who still believe that George Bush was a good president also believe that the real villains of political discourse rule PBS, MSNBC, public radio and the blogosphere. But I believe that my favoring Bill Moyers over Bill Kristol, Rachel Maddow over Sean Hannity, Amy Goodman over Michael Savage, or Glenn Greenwald over Glenn Beck, is a matter not of partisanship, but of truth-value.

I suspect that some young people have figured this out as well. They're the ones who increasingly call themselves liberal, and who don't by that term mean traitorous; they're the ones who have found sources of political information actually worth keeping up with; they're the ones who watch Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, and who get more of the news that citizens need from a half-hour of satire than they do from a half-hour of the soft features and consumer segments that dominate the networks' evening newscasts below the fold of the first commercial.

Maybe the other freshmen, the six out of 10 who talk about politics but don't keep up with it, simply haven't yet found their way to political discourse that doesn't insult their intelligence. What's encouraging is that the trend lines are now going in the right direction. Maybe journalism is on the verge of having a new constituency. It may have to be delivered online, or on TV, instead of on paper, but there's no reason not to follow an audience to where it's spending its time. Who knows? Maybe someone will figure out a new business model that will actually pay for its production.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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