

POLITICS: YOUTH MOVEMENT

How Generation Y became Obama's political animal

PATRICK WHITE

NOVEMBER 11, 2008

For a brief moment on election night, a 21-year-old University of British Columbia student and 15,000 friends managed to temporarily eclipse Barack Obama's victorious glow.

Networks cut away from Chicago's Grant Park to show a horde of fist-pumping youths chanting outside the White House.

Was it an angry mob? Or a rapturous celebration?

No one seemed to know, including CBC's Henry Champ, who reported that the Secret Service was in a tizzy and that the crowd had co-ordinated the gathering using "text message machines."

Print Edition - Section Front

[Enlarge Image](#)



It was a symbolic capstone to Mr. Obama's campaign, which lit a fire under Generation Y, those voters under 30 whose purported characteristics are anathema to the democratic process: apathetic, over-coddled, narcissistic, illiterate, hopeless.

The results could mark the biggest generational power shift in North American politics since baby boomers took the reins nearly two decades ago.

And thanks to a few Canadian political missionaries who volunteered for Mr. Obama, it's a stumping style

that is already creeping northward.

"That was no riot," says Braeden Caley, a UBC political science major who campaigned for Mr. Obama in five states before marching to the White House gates on election night. "That was a celebration. And it was completely spontaneous, which gives you an indication of how this campaign worked."

Mr. Obama's campaign was a full-fledged youth movement. His field offices and online campaigns were run almost exclusively by bushy-tailed voters under 30 years of age.

They harnessed the young brains of Silicon Valley to co-ordinate everything from Mr. Obama's rallies to his personalized text messages. And in the end, Mr. Obama drew an eye-popping chunk of the youth vote, outpacing John McCain in the under-30 segment by an unprecedented 2-to-1 margin.

As Mr. Obama said in his victory speech, the campaign "grew strength from the young people who rejected the myth of their generation's apathy, who left their homes and their families for jobs that offered little pay and less sleep."

One of those sleep-deprived campaign workers was Ajay Puri, who along with Mr. Caley founded Canadians for Obama, a web-based group that sent 20 volunteers to Washington State, where they made up three-quarters of Mr. Obama's Snohomish County team during the winter primaries.

"We didn't care about sleep," says Mr. Puri, 28, who spent most nights in a sleeping bag on the campaign office floor. "We cared about Obama."

So what is it in Generation Y's DNA that predisposes them to Obama devotion?

Born in 1961, Mr. Obama is the first Generation X president, though his personal tastes can skew much younger: from basketball and the Fugees to *The Godfather* and ESPN SportsCenter, according to his Facebook page.

His hopeful message resonated with a generation raised amid political cynicism, brought on largely by George W. Bush's unpopular presidency in the United States and guarded minority governments here.

"He didn't talk down to us," says Rahaf Harfoush, a 24-year-old Torontonion who moved to Chicago for two months to volunteer with Mr. Obama's new-media team. "He's one of the very first politicians I've taken note of who spoke directly to us with policies like putting the lobbying database online and making himself and government more accessible online."

In Chicago, Ms. Harfoush worked across from Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, who directed the new-media campaign.

The social-networking guru helped launch My.BarackObama.com, a digital staging ground for ad-hoc rallies, volunteer opportunities, phone bank requests and other campaign events.

"You really felt like you were connected to a movement of people driven by the same goals," says Ms. Harfoush, who cried 40 feet away from Mr. Obama when he delivered his victory speech. "He gave us the tools and said, 'You be the change you want to see.' He came to where we were - on Facebook, MySpace, Twitter - and said, 'Here, you call the shots.' "

Mr. Caley has already brought the skills he learned on the Obama campaign to Canada. During the federal election he worked for Stéphane Dion's UBC ground campaign, sending out numerous text messages and Facebook updates. Liberal support in the area increased from 30 to 50 per cent, according to Mr. Caley, who is supporting Bob Rae in the upcoming Liberal leadership race.

Others Canadian youths are waiting for a more inspiring candidate to come calling.

"Canadian politics are so dull, so boring," Ms. Harfoush says. "If a candidate comes along who's willing to invite our generation into the process, I'll get behind them."

But is there a best-before date on this youthful fervour?

"This is really a permanent generational sea change," said David Madland, director of the American Worker Project at the Center for American Progress. Mr. Madland predicts that Generation Y, which is nearly as large as the baby-boom generation, will form a huge block of voters who favour liberal policies, such as universal health care and high education spending, for decades to come.

But that view could overlook the fickle nature of under-30 voters, some say.

"This is not a generation of enduring loyalty," said Gil Troy, a presidential historian at McGill University. "They have quicksilver loyalties compared to their parents. At some point, there'll be a confrontation between hope and government."

© Copyright 2008 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher