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Millennials sound off at GOP convention, and they're not happy

BY EMILY KOHLMAN

For the CDT

CLEVELAND

The words on his shirt: “Free Markets, Free People.” The words on his sign: “SOCIALISM SUCKS.”

His slogans notwithstanding, 21-year-old Nick Cocca didn't look like many of the other protesters outside the Quicken Loans Arena this week during the Republican National Convention. But he was there to make a point, just the same: Millennials are unhappy with the state of government and politics.

“Free tuition, free health care — it's all gimmicky stuff that sounds good, but many millennials do not understand how this rhetoric will actually benefit them,” Cocca said.

ADVERTISING

Millennials, which the Pew Research Center defines as people born between 1981 and 1998, hold a particularly powerful deck of cards this election. Many say they are exasperated with their options for president in 2016.

Cocca's goal is to educate other millennials about policies to help them more easily digest political jargon. He travels around college campuses with Turning Point USA, a nonpartisan campus activist group that doesn't endorse or oppose any candidate.

A registered Republican who voted for Mitt Romney in the past election, Cocca said he isn't sure who he will be voting for this term. All he knows, he said, is that he is not voting for presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

"Hillary is definitely opposed to everything I support. She's adopted Bernie's policies to garner the support of millennials, and that goes to show she just fixes her stance on issues to get votes," Cocca said. "She's just moving the party closer to Democratic socialism."

Cocca's dissatisfaction is not distinctive. In a series of interviews with other millennial voters, frustration with American politics seems to be the norm.

Tex Fischer, another Turning Point USA organizer, is also a registered Republican, but he said he is doubting his political affiliation.

He said he despises Republican nominee Donald Trump and views this election as a choice of the lesser of two evils. While Fischer said he is not sold on Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson, he is considering giving him his vote because he feels hopeless.

"There is nothing Trump could do to earn my vote," the 20-year-old said. "But I can see why so many people are flocking to him. Other candidates say to the American people, 'You're angry, and I understand,' but Trump actually tells America he's angry, too."

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Nick Cocca, 21

Neither Cocca nor Fischer, both of whom are from Youngstown, Ohio, see a clear choice for president, but each said voters seem to be "ticked with both parties" and want change.

The desire for change is what encouraged 22-year-old Alice Newberry to hold up a pink sign in the shape of a female body in one hand and dangle bras from her other hand outside the Quicken Loans Arena on the second day of the convention.

"I am not happy at all with the two-party system we have now," the recent college graduate from Seattle said. "So I don't really know which party to identify with. I am personally voting for Jill Stein."

Stein, the Green Party nominee, has a platform that Newberry said she can identify with most closely.

An organizer with Code Pink, a women's-led grassroots peace organization, Newberry said she would like to cut military spending and reinvest in local peace economies at home.

"There really is a great need for change in this country," she said. "I predict Hillary will win, but I'm not really a fan of her either."

The disappointment in the two-party system that's making millennials uncertain who to cast their vote for stands in stark contrast to the exuberance young voters expressed eight years ago when the first African-American president, Barack Obama, was elected.

"I am kind of surprised how little excitement there is about the possibility of the first woman president," said 22-year-old social worker Alyssa Holznagel.

A Cleveland native, Holznagel said millennials haven't been as pleased as they had hoped over the past eight years and are chiefly concerned about their school debt and finding jobs that can accommodate them financially.

Concerned about the high cost of tuition and dealing with debt, Holznagel said most of the energy of young people was behind Bernie Sanders.

Holznagel said the disillusionment of the election has kept the seemingly expected progressive enthusiasm down, but that won't stop millennials from participating.

"I think we are smart enough to go out and vote anyways," she said, mentioning she would probably be voting for Clinton. "At least, I hope millennials still show up to vote. We know how important this is for us."

In 2008, according to Pew, 50 percent of eligible millennials voted — a record. That percentage dropped to 46 percent four years later.

As a recent college graduate who majored in history and political science, 23-year-old Maryland native Carol Ewald said people don't realize what is happening with American politics.

“I think people are just upset and don’t know what to be upset at,” the registered Democrat said. “They want to blame something, and economic problems and racism create a platform for hate.”

Ewald, an intern at NARAL Pro-Choice America, an abortion-rights activist group, was protesting outside of a “Life of the Party” anti-abortion Republican delegation gathering at FirstEnergy Stadium Tuesday.

Another NARAL protester, who was wearing a giant uterus on her head, 24-year-old Adrienne Krol, offered her thoughts on what millennials are looking for in a future president.

“A lot of people my age are very curious people who want answers that are answered thoughtfully. Trump doesn’t do that,” the medical researcher said. “I think Trump is anti-LGBT, anti-women, anti-different. That isn’t what people my age are all about.”

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Adrienne Krol, 24

She said that even though she is voting for Clinton, she wants to see her be more inclusive of women of color and transgender women.

“This election is very reflective of the issues we face, and we are the ones inheriting the world,” Krol said. “I think millennials will come out and vote still, even though we aren’t left with the best options.”

Jamieson Weaver, a 21-year-old volunteer for Eagle Forum, a conservative interest group, handed out anti-abortion materials during the NARAL abortion-rights protest.

A registered Republican from Ohio, Weaver said she did not vote for Trump in the primary. She also said she wouldn’t describe herself as a “hardline Republican.”

“A vote for Trump is a vote against Hillary,” she said, “although neither candidate really has a good track record.”

Other millennials interpreted the political divide as an indicator that there needs to be more peace and cooperation in America.

Zac Alberty, 18, a registered Democrat who graduated from high school earlier this year, said he does not want to vote for Trump or Clinton.

Quite frankly, the Cleveland native said, he isn't sure about this election. He said he just wants everyone to get along.

Alberty, whose tall frame was enhanced by his gelled-up hairstyle, held up a "Shrek is love, Shrek is life" sign — a reference to a popular meme among millennials.

"I marched with the anti-Trump coalition yesterday," he said. "Trump's whole wall thing — come on, dude. Why can't we all get along and love each other? Hate kills everyday."

His views echoed those of a Dallas man providing free hugs outside of a Jimmy John's restaurant in downtown Cleveland.

Twenty-two-year-old Joseph Offutt is a member of Kindness 365, an organization advocating for people to be more compassionate.

"There are so many issues today," Offutt said. "And we can't address them divided like this. We need to stand together."

Emily Kohlman is a Penn State University journalism student covering the Republican National Convention for the Centre Daily Times.

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