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Tough political realities quiet youth 'Obamamania'

Sept. 22, 2009 01:14 PM
Associated Press

CHICAGO - Young Americans showed their collective power when they helped vote President Obama into office. Inspired by his message of "change," they knocked on doors, spread flyers, voted for him by a 2-1 margin, and partied like rock-the-vote stars when he won.

Since the election, though, that fervor has died down - noticeably. And while young people remain the president's most loyal supporters in opinion polls, a lot of people are wondering why that age group isn't doing more to build upon their newfound reputation as political influencers.

"It's one thing to get excited about a presidential candidate. It's another thing to become a responsible citizen," says Jennifer Donahue, political director for the New Hampshire Institute Of Politics. She and other political analysts think they have yet to prove themselves.

Professors and students themselves also are noticing the quiet on college campuses, which were hotbeds for "Obamamania" during the campaign.

"They're supportive, but in a bystander kind of way," says Laura Katz Olson, a political science professor at Lehigh [University in Pennsylvania](#).

Erin Carroll, a 19-year-old sophomore at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, blames the lack of engagement on her generation's short attention span. They want change - right now, she says - and haven't gotten it.

"I feel like everybody walks around with their cell phone and their laptops. We feel like we need everything immediately. So that's what we've become accustomed to," Carroll says. "We're the 'me-me-me' generation."

It's not just on college campuses.

Russ Marshalek, a 27-year-old professional in Astoria, N.Y., observes his 20-something peers sitting back and letting the president do the work for them. "Rather than allow him to speak FOR us, we need to be inspired BY him, and volunteer in our communities, speak our minds, write, read, think, act," says Marshalek, a social media director who works with small businesses.

Such is the fate of Generation Y, as they're known, both praised for their willingness to volunteer but also maligned as the "entitlement generation" - eager to help but unsure how to deal with tumultuous times that are a first for many of them.

On top of that, many of their parents are baby boomers who witnessed, and participated in, the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests that followed John F. Kennedy's death. That's a lot to live up to.

But to be fair, says political scientist Mike Wagner, it's tough for young people - or any American, for that matter - to know how to get involved in issues with solutions that aren't always so clear-cut.

Volunteering for a candidate? Fairly easy to do. Helping solve some of the toughest issues to face our nation, from health care reform to a deep-seated financial crisis? Not so much.

"These aren't easy issues for young people. It's not 'Should we go to war in Iraq?' or 'Should gay marriage be legalized?'" says Wagner, an assistant professor at the [University of Nebraska](#).

He sees a lot of young people getting lost in the details, or bored by them. Or like a lot of us, they're more focused on their own worries, such as getting a job or paying off mountains of student loans.

Some say the president also could be doing more to engage this demographic that was so key to his early success.

"I think young people do have clout, and I think it's a mistake if he doesn't use them," says Mary Ellen Balchunis, a political science professor at LaSalle [University](#), who counts Carroll among her students. Balchunis witnessed the fervor on campus during the campaign - the "dorm storming," when students persuaded their peers to go to rallies and eventually to the polls. She also recalls how students danced in the streets with nearby neighborhood residents after Obama won.

Certainly, health care was on their priority list then, and remains so. An AP-GfK poll conducted earlier this month found that two-thirds of 18- to 29-year-olds rated such reform as "very" or "extremely" important. So far, though, the proposed health care overhauls have failed to win the support of a good number of them. Only about half of them said they approved of the way the president was handling health care and only 38 percent said they supported health care plans being discussed in Congress.

Balchunis thinks the president could boost youth support on these and other issues - and get them influencing their parents, as they did in the election - if he mobilized and spoke directly to them, the way he did during the campaign. He could for instance, make use of the well-organized student groups that campaigned for him to push the issues of the day.

If he doesn't, Balchunis thinks that also could have negative ramifications for Democrats in the upcoming midterm elections, because those young voters will lose interest and won't bother to show up at the polls. That's what happened, she says, after her own young generation was initially excited about Bill Clinton when he was first elected president in 1992. Then, just two years later, Democrats lost control of Congress.

Letdown is inevitable to a point, says James Emmett, an unemployed recent college graduate.

"Of course I'm not as hopeful because everyone's been exhausted, absorbed by the economic realities, from man on the street to Congressman," says the 23-year-old artist who's living with his parents on Long Island, N.Y., while he looks for work. But, he adds, the president needs to "trust that we're still with him, build upon his community of support."

Certainly, the ugliness of the political process has turned off some young people, and made even some of the president's most ardent supporters antsy.

"The only thing that has changed in my mind is the sense of urgency I feel for the president to do what he came to Washington to do," says Sam An, a 20-year-old student and president of the Young Democrats group at the St. Louis [College of Pharmacy](#). "I feel that if he got some substantial things accomplished, it might quell the heated political discourse."

That's tough to do in a system that was set up to encourage legislative gridlock, even if it doesn't fit well with young people's hunger for change, says Joshua Dyck an assistant [professor of political science](#) at the University at Buffalo.

"Gridlock is as American as apple pie," Dyck says. "The question is whether getting excited about an election and then being exposed to the letdown, the gridlock and compromise, whether that will lead to an erosion of the voter turnout gains we saw in 2008."

For her part, Jessica Sullivan, a senior at Elmhurst College in suburban Chicago, remains hopeful about the president, about her generation, and about her own ability to stay inspired and give back.

"I have to be," says the 22-year-old who's doing her student [teaching](#) this fall. "I'm about to walk out of college in February with a degree in education."

And if it wasn't so in college, the real world - health care, economy, all of it - is about to get very real.