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Introduction

On January 20, 1973, Richard Nixon celebrated his inauguration with the silent majority’s loudest, youngest supporters. After his landslide victory, Nixon tapped the 1972 campaign’s Young Voters for the President director, Ken Rietz, to organize the inaugural events that one journalist described as “colossal,” with an impressive $4 million price tag, while White House aide Jeb Magruder vowed to bring the “best inauguration ever.” Since Nixon requested this “heavy accent on youth,” his inauguration planners acceded, as one explained, “after all, it’s his party. President Nixon is pretty dedicated to these youngsters who confounded the experts.”

Specifically, the celebration focused on young supporters with the slogan, “the Spirit of ’76.” First, the Inaugural Committee planned an unprecedented youth concert at the Kennedy Center as the Mike Curb Congregation entertained thousands of the twelve thousand invited young campaign workers. On the formal side, while Nixon attended five elegant black-tie events that night, the first-ever Youth Ball served as the perfect setting for Nixon’s most lively appearance of the evening. Si Zentner’s orchestra sounded so good to the president, he decided to invite any “girls” at the event to dance with him after the first song with his wife. After cutting in on the first couple, one young Nixonette blushed when recalling her presidential moment, joking that she “could have danced all night.” However, Nixon let her go after just one song with a hug and a kiss as he had to make time for nine other young women. An exuberant Nixon then climbed on stage in his tux and told his Young Voters for the President, “I see you so young and so virtuous with all your hopes . . . I want to make the next four years the best that can happen.”

In the wake of Nixon’s reelection, before the chaos of Watergate, these young supporters inspired Nixon’s vision for his second term and the GOP’s future. This moment represented both the height of Richard Nixon’s political career and the beginning of young voters’ prominent role in the Republican Party.

In 1971, the ratification of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment guaranteed eleven million Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty
the right to vote, contributing to an unprecedented explosion of young voters. This development caused concern in Nixon’s administration when experts identified the youth vote as antiwar and left leaning, arguing that the voting booth offered “a fresh sense of power and identity to a generation that until now could test its muscles only in the politics of street protest.” After all, a *Life* magazine article in 1972 claimed “the margin of new Democrats over Republicans is roughly 5–2, even in GOP strongholds.”

Two obvious factors—the 1960s youth revolt and Nixon’s tough stance on the Vietnam War—motivated Democrats’ confidence with young voters. Furthermore, Nixon’s advisers feared that his “law and order” image personified the gap between the generations and fueled young voters’ reluctance to support the president. Additionally, in a time when young Americans warned each other never to trust anyone over thirty, one of Nixon’s critics mused that he “seems the kind of kid who [must have] always carried a bookbag. Who was 42 years old the day he was born.” Pictures of Nixon dodging the surf while wearing a suit and wingtips further cemented his square reputation. In 1971, before Nixon’s campaign managers knew their opponent, pundits, political scientists, and even Nixon’s personal pollster, Robert Teeter, predicted potent youth support for the Democratic challenger.

His sights set on a landslide victory, however, Nixon proclaimed that “there can be no generation gap in America” and resolved to fold young people into his constituency. Despite the widespread assumption that the vast segment of young voters casting ballots for the first time would tilt the electorate to the Democratic Party, this book reveals how Republicans recruited young Americans not aligned with the left—people Nixon’s staff called the “sons and daughters of the silent majority.” After the nation ratified the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in record time, the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP) promptly established Young Voters for the President (YVP), which included over four hundred thousand members and received unequaled funding and autonomy within the Nixon campaign. Surprisingly, Nixon earned youth’s trust and split the youth vote, as one Gallup poll even showed 57 percent of the voters under thirty years old found the president “more sincere and believable” than his antiwar opponent, Senator George McGovern (D-South Dakota).

*Children of the Silent Majority* investigates the emergence of young Americans as a major force in national politics, arguing that while the
1968 generation initially threatened the conservative realignment that Republican leaders envisioned, it eventually fortified the GOP with a cadre of new voters and party leaders after the voting age fell to eighteen. Recent scholarship on this generation has explored an international cohort that shared a lasting and influential radical political sensibility. While this historiography on the American 1968 generation looks almost exclusively at radicals and long-hairs as part of a transnational movement, most young people did not fit that mold. The 1968 generation in America, however, had unique characteristics that drove the country’s political direction both toward and away from liberal policies.

This focus on youth politics within the context of the Republican Party’s rise to power after 1968 provides a corrective to the narrative that emphasizes Nixon’s antagonistic relationship and conflict with the generation gap. While some of these interpretations show Nixon had a draconian and authoritarian side, others point out that the youth revolt also confused and “discombobulated” Nixon. According to Rick Perlstein, campus turmoil and the generation gap had Nixon “politically on the run.” Complicating this approach, scholars have added that Nixon stemmed domestic unrest with youth and African Americans through nuanced, even “Machiavellian” counterintuitive political concessions. Although Nixon’s “Black Capitalism” initiative fell short of expectations, Robert Weems and Lewis Randolph argue, it “did help Nixon achieve his larger ideological goal of domestic ‘détente’ by ‘containing’ potential domestic black radicalism.” In addition, Jeremi Suri points to Kent State as a key factor in motivating Nixon’s foreign policy of détente to marginalize radicals on the left. However, while Nixon succeeded in “isolating domestic opponents,” Suri argues, “many protesters turned away from politics entirely in the next decade.”

For moderate youth, however, Nixon’s generational détente included a youth-focused policy agenda, campaign organization, and image that supported Nixon’s massive effort to include these young voters into his “silent majority.” The YVP established a constituency and leadership cohort for the party’s future while it opened the Republican Party to new methods that facilitated the GOP’s shift away from both its “backlash” reputation and “country club–big business image.” This outreach to young voters signaled the underappreciated history of youth politics and reveals that the press, pundits, Democrats, student radicals, and even some Republicans were wrong about the youth vote.

Research on the 1960s “nonshouters,” such as Wayne Thorburn’s
A Generation Awakes and John Andrew’s The Other Side of the Sixties, documents the rise of the devout conservative group Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) to debunk the 1960s mythology that emphasizes “the causes on the New Left to the exclusion of almost anything else.” That emphasis, however, develops a counternarrative of the Right to the exclusion of Nixon’s less dogmatic young supporters. While YAF activists carried Republican youth politics in the 1960s, the Nixon administration asserted its chances with a wider section of youth: as Charles Colson wrote H. R. Haldeman, “it is very difficult to draw conclusions on last year’s experience and even riskier to project what may lie ahead a year hence.” With a targeted approach, Nixon’s advisers hoped, the youth vote could even become Republican!

At first, Nixon and his advisers took caution and acted defensively to blunt the youth vote’s challenge to Nixon’s conservative policy agenda. Young voters’ increasing influence after 1968 played an important role in determining Nixon’s positions on the environment, the Vietnam War, the military draft, and other controversial topics. An examination of the Republican Party’s presidential youth efforts during this period shows that young Americans’ increasing political roles influenced issues. During Nixon’s first term, this generation’s independence pushed the GOP and Nixon to moderate the party platform.

Thirty-two percent of twenty-one-to-twenty-four-year-old voters registered as independent in 1964; 52 percent did so in 1972. In an odd twist, the process of declaring themselves as independent linked young voters to a larger, shared political sensibility. Three developments created this rising independence. First, more educated young Americans challenged their parents’ politics and developed their own political views, as high school graduation rates rose from 63 to over 80 percent during the 1960s and college enrollment doubled. Second, young voters from traditionally Democratic strongholds such as urban, ethnic, white, and working-class enclaves in the North also broke away from party loyalties. Last, as the political scientist Louis M. Seagull claimed in 1971, party identification and party machines lost the “glue-giving function” because of “mass media and communication.” The politics of image also eroded political loyalties that had determined older Americans’ votes. Thus, the GOP stood poised to challenge the Democratic Party’s claim to the political future.

In the wake of Watergate, this opportunity seemed squandered as the conservative columnist Robert Novak called the Republican Party
“a laughing stock among young voters.” Yet, young Republicans in the late 1970s revived Nixon’s youth constituency and organizational approach to rebuild the GOP. In 1977, Senator Bill Brock (R-Tennessee) became the Republican Party’s chairman and utilized the grassroots strategy that he oversaw as the YVP chairman in 1972. Young voters and youth issues have played a central role in the Republican Party’s transition from the minority to the majority party after 1968, as Nixon’s youth campaign also encouraged the organization and strategy for Ronald Reagan’s victories during the 1980s. Youth for Reagan, boasting one hundred thousand members, provided the votes, volunteers, and organizational strategy to build the GOP into a majority party during the 1980s. This book evaluates that long-term influence but also explains that the GOP in the 1980s honed a youth strategy that started during the Nixon era.

Over the past twenty-five years, three problems have dominated historical scholarship on the political history of the postwar United States. First, historians have focused on the rise and fall of the so-called New Deal order. In particular, they have offered rival explanations for the collapse of the liberal electoral coalition that had prevailed since the 1930s. The turmoil of the late 1960s—conflicts over war, race, campus radicalism, and law-and-order issues—detached reliably Democratic voters from their previous allegiances. If many historians focused on the defection of the “silent majority,” voters who had supported Kennedy, Johnson, and other Democrats, a second line of analysis has focused on the rise of the Right. This literature examines the development of the conservative movement—the mobilization and maturation of a New Right in precincts (like burgeoning Sunbelt suburbs) and among constituencies (like previously quiescent evangelical Protestants) that exerted little influence on national politics before the 1960s. Finally, scholars across many disciplines have analyzed the period’s tectonic shifts in the structure and style of political competition as well as its content. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, mass media became the central means of political communication and mobilization, convincing participants and observers of the political potency of carefully crafted images. Specifically, scholars credit or blame Nixon for the dominance of symbolic campaign efforts to define a candidate’s image. According to David Greenberg, “Americans came to believe that politics revolves around the construction and manipulation of images—a shadow that Nixon still casts upon our age.”
Children of the Silent Majority makes important contributions to these ongoing debates; indeed, this study reveals the centrality of youth politics to all three of these scholarly controversies. First, as the South no longer provided the Democratic Party a dependable electoral region to maintain the New Deal order after 1964, young voters became a central target in liberals’ attempt to form a new constituency that would replace the traditionally reliable voters from the Sunbelt. Young people during and after the 1960s, however, carried an independent political position that made this youth realignment difficult and opened a political generation to choosing the GOP. Not only did the Democrats’ youth campaign fall short; it also created a devastating cleavage between the party establishment, such as labor leaders, and party reformers like McGovern. Second, while campus protesters and young radicals dominated public perceptions of young people in the 1960s, Republicans rallied a burgeoning evangelical youth population from the South, campus conservatives, and young urban ethnics who found the GOP an attractive alternative to the Democratic Party. Simplistic and derisive interpretations of these young voters have overlooked their significance. As Samuel Freedman wrote in his book about young conservative party switchers after the 1960s, “For all their importance, few groups of voters have been so stripped of depth and complexity.” This book shows that shrewd Republican leaders utilized this growing segment to build an infrastructure for training and leadership that fostered the party’s future successes. Finally, the 1968 generation, raised in the era of television and carrying an independent sensibility that rejected party affiliation, encouraged new forms of media and targeted campaign methods that pushed politicians to adapt to the realities of a more fluid electorate after the 1960s. Children of the Silent Majority also explores how youth politics fueled the politics of image in presidential campaigns between 1968 and 1980, compelling candidates to embrace the visual turn that emphasized their personal characteristics over party loyalty.

This book pursues a narrative that both examines political elites’ organization around youth politics from the top down and shows how movement politics intersects with party politics from the bottom up. While historians and contemporary pundits alike question the role young Americans play in the political process, the YVP in fact required massive resources that Nixon’s campaign dedicated to the youth vote and also forced significant political change in policy, organization, and style. By showing this relationship, I argue that the youth vote emerged
in the 1960s and 1970s as an essential component to the rise of the Right and enabled Reagan’s electoral victories that marked the GOP’s apex in recent electoral politics.

The first two chapters examine Nixon’s law-and-order approach, which attacked American youth’s permissive culture to attract older voters during 1968—as Democratic candidates such as Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy had mobilized young voters. Agreeing with the political consultants who defined “middle-America” as “the un-black, the un-poor and the un-young,” in addition, Nixon struggled to find young voters, as ideological purists in Young Americans for Freedom preferred more convincing conservatives such as Ronald Reagan while moderate and independent youth proved elusive.

Thus, Nixon rallied social conservatives in urban ethnic enclaves, in the Sunbelt, and in the suburbs against rebellious young people. Still, Nixon implemented and adapted this hard approach to the politics of youth after winning the White House. Nixon’s tough stance on controversial youth issues such as marijuana use and campus unrest underlined his constituency’s exasperation with young Americans’ permissive protest culture. Even though law and order had fueled Nixon’s 1968 campaign, he realized that stance created a structural barrier in his project to usher in a conservative era in American politics. As Nixon’s chief of staff H. R. Haldeman characterized a polling report, “Harris believes that all kids tend to identify with each other, they stick together. More than any other generation, they resent being talked down to by their elders” and “it is almost impossible to attack one without attacking all.” A tough law-and-order position on marijuana and campus unrest suited Nixon as a campaigner, but this approach proved more difficult to maintain as president. Still, Nixon’s law-and-order issues and policies highlighted the square culture he could wield to segment both his student and nonstudent voters.

Chapters 3 and 4 explain that during Nixon’s first term, especially after the tragedy at Kent State in 1970, the administration had to find new ways to appear youth friendly. This effort became more important when the voting age dropped to eighteen. Youth issues—the voting age, the environment, and the draft—pushed Nixon to react defensively, owing to his concerns over young Americans’ mounting influence and the wider public relations problem this created. The president, though
reluctantly, supported policies that one former YVP organizer called “counterintuitive” to soften the “old Nixon” law-and-order reputation.34

Searching for a way to reach young voters in 1972, Nixon found a New Republican, Bill Brock, who rejected the GOP’s reputation as the same old party of the “tired and dreary.” Several young Republicans joined Brock; as one journalist noted, “Until 1966 . . . Democrats seemed to have a monopoly of political sex appeal.”35 In 1970, Brock’s successful campaign to unseat Senator Albert Gore (D-Tennessee) proved the perfect model as he established a Youth for Brock campaign that attracted more young voters than the liberal, antiwar incumbent. In addition to his conservative base, Brock attracted moderates with television- and media-based strategies to circumvent the existing party structure that favored Democrats. While Nixon’s Southern Strategy to end the Democratic Party’s dominance below the Mason-Dixon line failed (at least in 1970), he eagerly eyed Brock’s neatly packaged, youth-focused campaign—and Brock’s campaign manager, former public relations executive Kenneth Rietz. In 1971, Nixon hired Brock and Rietz to organize the autonomous, heavily funded youth campaign for his own reelection.

Chapters 5 and 6 show that young voters offered a tantalizing yet problematic segment for Democrats and Republicans. Challenging President Richard Nixon in 1972, Senator George McGovern encouraged Democratic Party reforms that expanded the influence of youth and tied his electoral hopes to young voters. However, McGovern’s attempt to ride a youth organization branded his campaign with the radical reputation as the candidate for “Acid, Amnesty and Abortion.” McGovern’s campaign manager, Robert Kennedy holdover Frank Mankiewicz, tried in vain to counter the senator’s “three A’s” stigma. His attempt after the convention to shift back to traditional Democratic voters lacked the necessary organization. The results proved disastrous, as Nixon lost only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia in the general election. Despite its liberal reputation, the youth vote also represented an opportunity for New Republicans.

A focus on youth politics from 1968 to 1972 explains that even though Nixon fell short of the electoral realignment he desired, the Republican Party cultivated a youth cohort that strengthened the GOP for decades.36 YVP’s leaders united conservatives on campuses, brought young southern independents into the GOP, and fortified training networks for young Republicans to fine-tune their ability to “Get Out the Vote.” Young leaders in the Republican Party welcomed this opportunity,
as organizers such as Karl Rove made important contributions to the Fieldman training schools that attracted a new cadre of young voters to the GOP. In addition, Nixon’s youth campaign tested the Republicans’ new methods and strategies to develop a carefully structured, though autonomous, branch of the CRP.

Chapter 7 explores how youth politics integrated the politics of image into campaigns, organization, and policy. Young voters’ independence privileged image over party loyalty, encouraging politicians to appeal directly to voters through media. Nixon’s youth campaign in 1972 focused his campaign’s appeal to the rising role of image politics. Tom Wicker of the New York Times agreed, as he pointed out that television “allows candidates to go over the heads of organizations and delegates” and “focuses on personality rather than record of party service.” The youth vote forced an emphasis on new forms of image politics that undermined traditional party affiliations, attracted young voters, and targeted groups with more segmented efforts. Whether during the convention, at rallies, or in television commercials, Nixon’s YVP always had a presence in the campaign. This effort sharpened the targeted and sophisticated campaign methods that would enable the GOP to continue to build a new Republican majority while the Democrats struggled to command the image-focused environment of politics after 1972.

Last, chapter 8 examines youth politics’ transition after Watergate, allowing for new, more institutionalized, and less moderate youth politics. In addition, although GOP youth leaders and prominent YVP leaders from 1972 became central, youth outreach became an old man’s game. Young voters’ turnout fell dramatically from 1972 to 1984, allowing the GOP’s highly sophisticated youth organization to win a larger percentage of the youth vote on election day.

While Ford lost young voters to Carter in 1976, 54–46 percent, Ronald Reagan increased his success with the youth vote from 44 percent in 1980 to 61 percent in 1984—two percentage points above the 59 percent of the popular vote that Reagan won in his landslide reelection. After Watergate, young conservatives began the rebuilding process within the GOP that ended with a Republican majority in the 1980s. This version of youth politics, however, became more beholden to special interests and ideological commitments on the right. Motivated by the College Republican Fieldman School model for training young leaders, Morton Blackwell founded the Committee for Responsible Youth Politics in 1972 and oversaw the Reagan-Bush campaign’s outreach to youth in
1980 that utilized former YVP leaders and its emphasis on organization and “peer group pressure.”

This organization’s precedent-setting youth campaign remains obscured for two reasons. First, Watergate tarnished the YVP leaders’ standing in politics. After YVP director Ken Rietz testified during the Watergate hearings, admitting that he paid a student to infiltrate a peace vigil, Nixon’s downfall stigmatized the YVP. Journalist Jack Anderson called the YVP “a network of young spies and dirty tricksters who came to be called the ‘Kiddie Corps.’”38 While Nixon’s demise stunted the career of many YVP leaders, Watergate also distracted political observers from the YVP’s strategic innovations.39 Second, the standard narrative exaggerates this generation’s rebellious reputation and dismisses the YVP as a contrived oddity. In his book *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, Robert Mason affirms conventional wisdom, claiming: “An appeal to youth was a notable element in the McGovern campaign. In contrast, Nixon and the Republicans made few overtures to young people.”40 By focusing on this overlooked effort, I argue that the Republican Party in 1972 honed a targeted youth strategy to develop the new majority Nixon envisioned.