

ASHLEY: When Republican Nikki Haley announced she was running for president this week, she called for a new generation of political leadership. Haley is Generation X, but much younger Republicans are clamoring for power at the state and local levels, and they're worried. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Almost 70% of Generation Z voted for Democrats in November's midterm elections, a pretty devastating number for Republicans and their party that's trying to ditch their reputation as being the home of old white men.

ASHLEY: In the last episode, we looked at why Democrats are failing with rural voters. This time, we ask why the GOP does so badly with young ones. So, Richard, Generation Z is often described as overwhelming liberal, right?

RICHARD: Well, not just liberal, but even progressive and sometimes socialist. There are polls of Generation Z suggesting that they have grave doubts about capitalism, just one example of how far Left many young people are.

ASHLEY: Right, and they have strong feelings on abortion, gun violence, climate change. But in this show, we speak to two young Republicans who say it's just not that simple.

RICHARD: Yeah, our guests say that if the GOP actually put more effort into marketing to young people and social media outreach, they could win over a lot of people in their teens and 20s.

ASHLEY: You're going to hear from Joe Mitchell. He's a former state congressman from Iowa. He was elected to the Iowa House of Representatives at just 21. He's also the president and founder of Run Gen Z, a nonprofit that recruits and mentors the next generation of conservative leaders.

RICHARD: Also joining us is Karoline Leavitt. She ran for congress in New Hampshire last year and secured the nomination in the state's 1st Congressional District at 25. Previously, she'd worked in the White House as assistant press secretary to President Trump. Let's kick off our interview.

ASHLEY: So, Karoline, I'm going to start with you. Is the Republican Party ignoring voters under 30, kind of writing them off as a lost cause?

KAROLINE: Well, I certainly do believe so, unfortunately, and that's part of the reason I decided to run for Congress. I live amongst Generation Z. They are my friends. They are my former colleagues, former teammates, and they are overwhelmingly liberal. They are increasingly signing up to vote for the Democrat Party, registering as Democrats, voting for Democrat candidates, and the numbers really are starting to the GOP. 68% of Generation Z Americans voted Democrat in the 2022 midterm elections up and down the ballot. So I do believe that the Republican Party, including the establishment leadership and leadership on Capitol Hill believe that this generation is too far gone.

I would like to disagree because I think that sets a very sad narrative for the future of our country. I think the Republican Party needs to invest heavily in digital marketing to reach these voters. We have not done that in the past. That's, again, part of the reason that I decided to step up and run for Congress, and I hope that other conservative candidates will, to put pressure on the leadership to show that we are not all liberal, and we want representation amongst our party, and we deserve that, and our country deserves that, as well.

RICHARD: Joe, what are the numbers about voters in their late teens and 20s telling you? Are Republicans losing Gen Z voters by the sort of margins that Karoline says they are?

JOE: Absolutely, and Karoline is 100% correct in everything she just said. What I would always tell people is that when you look at --historically, younger people always vote more progressive. They always vote more liberal. And that's nothing new to us, but when you look at what's happened this last midterm, the disproportionate numbers that people voted for liberal candidates was astronomical compared to other election years. So, normally, when you see people under 30, they're voting 60/40 Democrat/Republican, and now that gap's almost widened to 70/30, which is a huge margin. And so, when we have more and more voters in our generation that are voting on the Left side of the aisle, but also they're starting to be more hardened, where they're self-identifying as radical Leftists, socialists, some people as communists. So it takes a lot more for us to then get them even back to the middle to consider voting for a conservative candidate or a Republican candidate.

RICHARD: So, to be clear, turnout among younger voters isn't the big factor. It's not that so many more young voters are going to the polls than in past elections.

JOE: Correct, yeah. So 11% to 13% of the electorate, when you look at the last five or six midterms, have all been folks under 30. So that number has not drastically changed. It's just the amount of people in that age group that are then voting for Democrat candidates has drastically changed, and those 10, 15, 20-point spreads are tens of thousands of people. So, when you're looking at extremely tight races like the Herschel Walker race, even Karoline's race, Kari Lake's race, those are all numbers that if we could've had, as a party, been more concise and not as divisive to young people, then I think we could've won a lot of these races, frankly.

ASHLEY: Let me just ask because, Karoline, you were talking about you're surrounded by, obviously people your age, but so many of them are on the Left. How does that feel?

KAROLINE: Well, Joe and I are certainly amongst the ideological minority in our generation. There's no doubt about it. I really realized that I was conservative when I was on my college campus. I did not grow up in a political family. I went to school to play sports on an athletic scholarship and quickly learned that I held dear were not held dear amongst my peers, my classmates and certainly my professors. And I guess that's where I began to identify as a Republican, as a Conservative. This was the 2016 election, interestingly enough, where I was definitely one of the few students on campus who voted for President Donald Trump. And so I realized then that I was amongst, again, the ideological minority amongst my generation. I take great pride in that, though. I spoke to so many young people who were liberal because that's all they know. That's the only viewpoint that is shared to them, whether it's through the mainstream media, big conglomerate channels like CNN and MSNBC, whether it's through social media.

We know -- the facts tell us that Generation Z Americans overwhelmingly consume their daily news on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and the Republican Party has failed to get our message out on those platforms. And so, when I've shared, whether it's news articles or my perspective on the news of the day, my inbox is always flooded right now with hundreds of messages from Conservatives amongst my generation or just apolitical folks in my generation saying, "Wow, I didn't even know this was happening in our country, in our world." And so I think a big part of this is the message. You know, they always say that the GOP used to be the party of the old white man. Well, when you have young folks, young women, young men of all races, ages, demographics that look

like these young people, talk like them, have the same interests, listen to the same music, etc., you can resonate. Sometimes the messenger is more powerful than the message itself.

ASHLEY: Joe, you became a state representative at a very young age, and you've also founded a group called Run Gen Z. Can you tell us about that?

JOE: Yeah, of course. So Run Gen Z, in a nutshell, is an organization that helps empower, recruit, and mentor the next generation of conservative leaders across this country. A little bit about myself, I got elected at the age of 21, when I was still a senior at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. And I ran in my home district back in southeast Iowa. And shortly after getting sworn in, I started getting asked to speak to these different College Republican groups, to Turning Point chapters, really just young professional groups in general. And my main message to these people was, "If I can do it, you can do it," and that I was able to do it at my age, and I didn't have this huge political resume built up or a lot of connections. I just went out there. I knocked on people's doors. I told them the message that I wanted to bring to our community, and they put their trust in me and voted for me.

And so, soon after that, I started mentoring several young people and started getting this idea that we can actually grow this coalition and grow this movement into something that could be incredible and, frankly, that we need because I saw, on the Left, they had run for something, and they had an organization. They were very well-organized. They were very well-funded where they were having young progressives run for office, and they were winning all over the country. So that's why you have people like Max Frost and AOC, and the party was much more open to those folks running, as well. I mean, Karoline can tell you, in her primary, she had to fight tooth and nail a lot of times because she was a young person, and she was a woman. So her having to go through that adversity, just like a lot of other young people did, I wanted to be able to showcase her story and many other people's stories around the country that are young conservatives that are running because, unless we have people to look up to that are in positions of power and that are elected officials, then we're not going to think that young people should be conservative.

ASHLEY: Karoline, you ran for Congress in New Hampshire during the last election. What was that experience like?

KAROLINE: Running for Congress, especially running for any office, is a huge, huge commitment. It takes a lot of sacrifice and hard work, and it certainly took a lot of hard work in our race. I started my career uniquely because I started at the federal level in Washington, D.C. I was granted an internship at the White House, which led to a full-time position for two years in President Trump's administration, and then moved to Capitol Hill, where I served as a spokeswoman, communications director for Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, who was, at one time, the youngest woman ever elected to the United States Congress.

So that was very inspiring to me. So I quit my job in D.C. and packed up my little apartment, moved back home to the district in which I grew up, my family has businesses, I went to school, and it was a remarkable experience, very difficult but very rewarding. And I was an unknown candidate, a first timer. I started literally in my dad's pickup truck. We went to American Legions, local Republican town committee meetings, barbecues, anywhere I could to just get in front of people and share my story, share my vision for New Hampshire.

And as we began to travel around the district and speak to voters, the momentum began to just fuel around our campaign because voters want young people to run for office. I think there's a huge disconnect between the Republican establishment leadership, if you will, the party leadership and the grassroots GOP voter. The Republican establishment did not want me to win the primary, but we won by 10 points because grassroots campaigning is everything, and when you're a young person, you have the energy to do it. I was making fundraising calls all day and then knocking doors all night, literally every single day for six months in the summertime, and I ran for a year and a half straight.

RICHARD: Both of you, tell us a bit about how you grew up. Why are you a Republican? First, Karoline.

KAROLINE: Sure. Well, I grew up, as I like to say, not in a political household but a patriotic household. My father served in the United States Marine Corps. My family were a small business family. I was actually the first in my immediate family to graduate from college. We owned a used truck and car dealership, and we owned an ice cream stand my entire childhood growing up, where I spent many of my childhood days helping my mom run the business. I was a manager of the shop. I scooped many ice cream cones throughout my upbringing. And I think those values, whether I knew it or not, I was being instilled with hard work, love of faith, love of family, love of community, but I do credit my conservative values to my conservative upbringing, whether I knew that or not at the time.

RICHARD: Joe?

JOE: Very similar to Karoline's story, my parents were entrepreneurs, as well, and so I grew up in a family where my dad quit his job when I was five years old to start a manufacturing company. And neither my mom nor my dad had college degrees, and so they just got finished off paying off our very small, ranch-style home in rural Iowa, put up that home to start their business out of their garage, make orthopedic braces for babies with clubfeet. And so, for two years, we had no income coming in from my dad. He was out in the garage trying to invent this brace. My mom had to go back to work as a bank teller and had very tough times, and eventually, my dad had a breakthrough, created this brace that has now fixed tens of thousands of babies' feet around the world. And so, when they started that business, they gave over half their profits away to philanthropic charities and their own foundation, eventually, and to our church.

So my dad always told me when I was younger, he said, "You start a successful company. The government takes half away, and then me and your mom are giving half away, anyways, to the church and to our philanthropical missions because that's what we believe in." But he said, "Think of where that money could go if the government didn't take half away," because he said, "I have no problem paying taxes, but you see what they're spending the money on, and it doesn't seem responsible." And so he was always for a more limited government in general. But they were entrepreneurs, they were people of faith, and so all those values aligned with the Republican Party at that time.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Joe Mitchell and Karoline Leavitt on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: We know there are a lot of you listening out there.

RICHARD: Yeah, and we're really happy about how our listenership has really grown in the past year or so, and we want to hear from you. We'd love your opinions on the current show, as well as how it could improve.

ASHLEY: You might have ideas for a specific topic or guest, or you might hate something we said or something a guest said and never want to hear it again. Either way, let us know.

RICHARD: And it's easy. Just head over to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. You'll see a link right there to tell us what you think. And thanks. Now back to our interview with Joe Mitchell and Karoline Leavitt.

ASHLEY: Karoline, large majorities of young voters do support abortion rights, and, as you know, they tend to be liberal on social issues. Do Republicans need to change their policies or their message?

KAROLINE: No, I don't think that we need to change our policies, and I don't think we should. We have to have conviction in our policies and in our beliefs. As a young woman, myself, I am Pro-Life. I believe strongly in that, and I think, sadly, our culture has not become a culture of life in the United States of America or, frankly, the world. The reason that I'm Pro-Life is, if you talk to any mother in this country, in this world, and you ask them, "Do you wish you had aborted your child?" every single mother, 100% of the time, will always tell you, "No, absolutely not." And so I believe that we, as Conservatives -- I'm a Christian, as well -- we have a fundamental obligation to celebrate life and to empower women. So I think this is an issue the Republican Party should not shy away from. We should have courage in speaking about it and sharing enlightening, positive, heartfelt stories to encourage a culture of life.

RICHARD: Joe and Karoline, you're both passionate about politics, committed Conservatives. As you know, most Americans aren't nearly as interested in politics as you are. How do you reach across and persuade people who are unconvinced or perhaps don't think that who's in power matters that much to them? I guess it's a common ground question because we're Let's Find Common Ground on this show. Joe?

JOE: Yeah, so I think several different aspects here -- number one, in the legislature, I believe, when you are elected, you're elected by not only Republicans. You're elected by Democrats, as well, and independents, and that's who you're representing when you're eventually governing and in the State House. You're in that city council or in Congress. So I knew that was my job, was to govern and try to represent as many people as I could in my district. So I had no problem with working with Democrats on issues that we may agree on. In the legislature, people don't understand this: 90% of what's passed is bipartisan.

So you have support from both parties. Obviously, topics of abortion and large tax bills, 2nd Amendment right type of stuff is the 10% that is showcased on the news, and those are going to be the most heated debates, of course. But still, when you get up to the Capitol, and you start talking to the Farm Bureau or to the realtors or the financial institutions, a lot of these technical fixes that they have, whether you're Republican or Democrat, you agree that, yeah, this is going to help my small-town bank or my small-town realtor, or this is a good thing for our public schools. So I think that's something that, when you're outside of politics, you just see the headlines, and you say, "These people never get along," and that's just not the case. And even you've seen the past few weeks, the speakers race, and you saw AOC talking to Matt Gaetz. These people talk to each other. The news doesn't like to highlight it a lot, but I think

telling stories, especially when you're actually a legislator and you're an elected official, telling stories of the humanity of being in a governing body and working across the aisle, I think, is extremely important.

RICHARD: In the last podcast we did, we spoke with a progressive Democrat, Chloe Maxmin from rural Maine, who won a couple of races in conservative, rural parts of her state. And she said that very often, convincing people who are skeptical of you is about helping them understand that you share their values. Do you think that very often persuading people to vote you is not just policy, as we so often hear in the media, but also about values?

KAROLINE: Yes, I do, and I think that politics is also a lot about likeability, and it's about trust, and it's about looking someone in the eye and having a hard conversation with them about policy but coming to common ground -- to use the name of this wonderful podcast -- coming to common ground on just basic values. I had a lot of conversations with people who were Democrats or independents or even maybe skeptical Republicans who were more moderate than me on certain issues or maybe even more conservative than me on others. I guess politics is -- it's about sales, right?

And when you're selling anything, whether it's a product or your campaign or your message, what's the first thing every good salesman does? You find common ground with that person. So that's something that I found to be hugely important when I was pitching myself to voters who were skeptical. Look, Ronald Reagan said it best, "Someone who agrees with me 80% of the time is my friend," and I think that has been in our politics today because of the media sensationalism always wanting to pull us apart. But, as Joe mentioned, both on the Hill, where I worked, there's a lot of bipartisan work that gets done that doesn't make the headlines because it's not exciting as the omnibus bill or immigration reform or 2nd Amendment rights, which are issues that strife up a little bit of political division.

ASHLEY: Okay, so I want to get to the meat of how you actually get people to vote for you because we've talked about abortion, we've talked about that so many of your generation are on the Left, even more than were in the past. And Karoline, in an interview you did fairly recently, you said, "We can't continue to run on issues that young voters don't care about. We have to talk about the issues they care about and persuade them to believe in our policies and our solutions on them." So, okay, give an example. How is this going to work?

KAROLINE: I'll give you a great example. Well, first of all, in order to get someone to vote for you, in a congressional race at least, I read a statistic once that said, "You need a voter to hear about you, see you, or listen to you 13 times before they make up their mind to vote for you." One of the things that we did more than any candidate in our race, both on the Republican and Democrat side of the aisle, was in-person events. We hosted grassroots events every single day, it felt like, to meet voters one-on-one.

And we did a college campus tour. I actually labeled it "Wake Up Gen Z." And we were the only candidate to go to every single college campus in the state of New Hampshire. That one-on-one engagement when you're talking with voters and going back and forth, you can't put a price on that. You can run all the TV ads in the world, but if you're not showing up to the college auditorium or the honky-tonk barbecue on a Saturday, which many days you have to do, you're not going to earn votes.

ASHLEY: Joe, anything to add to that?

JOE: Yeah, I think that's universal, right? Especially in a local race, which that's what Run Gen Z focused on, is state, local races, city council, county order supervisors, state legislative races, and almost every single one of these races that we participate in, that we give mentors to are races where you can knock every single door in that district and talk to those voters one-on-one. That is the best tool that you have.

ASHLEY: Just going back to a specific issue for a minute, Joe, you've said -- well, you've both said Republicans need to be sort of unapologetic about your stances, and yet voters in their teens and 20s have grown up with fear of mass shootings at their schools and other places. Do Republicans need a more urgent message about guns?

JOE: It's not a matter of giving an edge to the other side, but saying that we care about school safety, as well. I mean, we care about school safety just as much as the Left does. We just have different solutions to it, and that's called having more secure schools, having potential armed guards at your school. So I think a lot of these issues, whether it's abortion, whether it's the gun safety question, whether it's the environmental questions, is that we need to be more proactive about getting our message about, saying that we also care about these issues, as well, but we just have a different avenue of getting there and in protecting these people. And so I think that's where there's been a huge messaging problem overall from the Republican Party and from the conservative movement is we try to kind of sweep these issues under the rug and not talk about them. And we need to talk about them and be more proactive about it because when we're not proactive about it, then the Left gets to define what we think about these things.

RICHARD: You have twin tasks, both of you. One is to convince more skeptical young voters to move over from voting for Democrats to Republicans. The second task you have is convincing your own party. So how do you convince them to take you more seriously?

KAROLINE: Well, I've been having discussions with people in Republican Party leadership both at the RNC and on Capitol Hill. I think the 2022 elections proved that the GOP, our greatest, most colossal challenge is Generation Z and Millennial voters. This is a demographic that's not going away. It's growing every single day. Americans are turning 18 every single day, and, to Joe's point earlier, it's not the old times where you're very liberal when you're young, and then you get a job, you start paying taxes, and you become conservative. No, these young people are being brainwashed, in my opinion, more than ever before because of the power of the digital age that we live in. That's something that I think the Republican leadership needs to understand. So I think the party's starting to wake up to the effect that this is having. We just have to convince them that it's a worthy investment to make, and that's really what's lacking, is the investment in young candidates, the investment in digital advertising to meet young voters where they are, and to relay our conservative message. Young people built this country. Young people can save this country. And I am hopeful that the GOP leadership and establishment will get on board with that.

RICHARD: Final question: what does common ground mean to you? Joe, you're first.

JOE: Common ground, to me, is taking two issues that are divisive and talk about, "Okay, what can we agree on?" One of these things people always talk about is abortion, "Okay, there's nothing in abortion we can agree on," which is not true. I was in the legislature. I said, okay, neither the Democrats, my Democrat friends claim that they don't want abortions, either. Neither do Republicans. So I said, okay, how can we figure out how to be proactive and stop that decision from being made at all? That was access to birth control. And so I cosponsored several different bills to make it easier for women to be

able to get access to birth control, whether that be the pill or the arm bar or an IUD. Those are things that Democrats and Republicans were able to come together on for the most part.

You had people on the fringes of both parties that didn't like the idea of that, but being able to come to the middle and say, okay, there's got to be something in each individual issue that we deal with, whether that's the school safety question, whether that's abortion, whether that's the environment, whether that's taxes, where we can all come together on and say this is something we're trying to be proactive on to prevent this decision from happening, period. Once you sit down across the table from somebody and start really discussing the problem, you can normally find some sort of solution that both parties agree with to a certain extent.

KAROLINE: It's a great question and one that I don't think I've specifically thought of before, and I agree with what Joe said, is any good negotiation, you have to compromise a little bit to get to common ground. But I also think common ground here in the United States of America is that sense of patriotism, that sense of being an American, being blessed to live in the greatest country in the history of the world. And what's the bedrock of this country? It's family. I think that's what it all boils down to.

ASHLEY: Thank you. Thank you both.

KAROLINE: Thank you.

JOE: Thank you, guys.

ASHLEY: Karoline Leavitt and Joe Mitchell on Let's Find Common Ground. So, Richard, what do you think? This is the first time we've had two young Republicans on the show at the same time, I think.

RICHARD: Yeah, and we followed up from having a young Democrat on the show the previous episode, and, before that, we were talking about independents, really trying to explain why the two main political parties often misunderstand large groups of voters.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and this latest show has been about how the Republican Party just doesn't seem to get the youngest voters.

RICHARD: Yeah. I was really struck by Karoline Leavitt saying that she wasn't really going to compromise on her views, very controversial issues like abortion and guns. Instead, she talked about how to reach out to young voters with salesmanship and with a better media strategy, right?

ASHLEY: Right, and, also, a work ethic. I was struck by where she talked about how hard you have to work and just how many doors she knocked on over such a long period of time, and, obviously, she didn't win, but she did pretty well. She secured the nomination, which was, I think, quite a feat.

RICHARD: Because she was only in her mid-20s when she did so, but I think she was quietly saying, without actually saying it, that someone in their mid-20s has a lot more energy than somebody in their mid-60s or 70s when it comes to knocking on doors and reaching voters.

ASHLEY: And when we spoke to Chloe Maxmin for the last show, she, in a different way, talked about how much time she spent knocking on doors. In her case, it was about meeting rural voters where they

were and finding common ground with them really by listening to their stories and empathizing with them.

RICHARD: You know, the other podcast that we also did recently about another very large group of misunderstood voters is the show with Jackie Salit and John Updycke on independents. I think that was really fascinating in the way that they lifted the hood on voters that are often mischaracterized.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and they revealed to us just how many young voters are actually identifying as independents, not Republicans or Democrats. That was something I hadn't really taken in.

RICHARD: I think they made a really strong case on Episode 76. That podcast was released last month.

ASHLEY: And we have one more note about our show, or a relative of our show, before we go. Common Ground Committee founders Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen have their own podcast these days. It's called Our Take On Common Ground. You can find it at commongroundcommittee.org, and it's coming very soon to an app near you. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard, and thanks for listening to our show, and we hope you'll take a listen, as well, to Our Take with Erik and Bruce.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.