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Underdog role OK to Young Democrats

By [Kevin Duffy](#)

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The governor's Republican. The lieutenant governor's Republican. The state Senate and House are Republican. What's a YD — a Young Democrat — to do? Move to New York?

Nah. Head to happy hour. If you have to be the underdog, at least have some fun.

"It's disheartening, but at the same time, it's kind of energizing," said Aaron Karp, communications director for Young Democrats of Atlanta, one of 27 YD chapters in Georgia.

Among other aims, the Young Dems hope to help influence the direction of the wider state Democratic Party, which is scheduled to elect a new slate of officers Saturday.

On a recent night, Karp and his peers gathered at a candle-lit Midtown nightspot for YD of Atlanta's monthly soiree.

About 25 people were there, all younger than 40, including a few newcomers, who were greeted with applause. Growing the ranks is one of the goals.

Young Democrats — students and professionals — currently number about 1,000 statewide, far fewer than Young Republicans, who have 41 chapters and about 6,500 members, not including high school students.

"We're not going to turn Georgia into the next Connecticut overnight," said Billy Joyner, the 24-year-old president of Young Democrats of Georgia, the umbrella group. "It's going to take baby steps."

So far, the Young Dems are not much of a force, according to Jason Shepherd, chairman of the rival Young Republicans of Georgia.

"This is the first time I've heard of any concerted effort by Young Democrats to get out for the

candidates," Shepherd said.

Attempts by Young Repubs to set up a debate and a softball game with the Dems have failed, he said, which is a shame because "I don't think there's too much difference, except party allegiance, between the two groups."

Before the Young Dems' happy hour, which featured a speech by an advocate for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, Karp and Page Gleason, executive director for YD of Georgia, lamented the shift to the right by America's youth.

"We find this very distressing," said Gleason, a 36-year-old political consultant.

"Disturbing to no end," added Karp, a 30-year-old Web site developer.

Yet the Young Dems believe that once Georgia's politically disaffected youth hear their message, they will help topple the Republicans.

The environment, education and taxation are some of the issues Young Dems hope will resonate with their peers.

Georgia has 367,123 registered voters ages 18 to 39 who haven't made contact with a county registration office in three years — 17 percent of all voters in that age group, according to the secretary of state's office.

"They're turned off by politicians because they're cynical," Karp said. "They have a much higher radar for doublespeak."

In the run-up to Saturday's election for state Democratic Party officers, Young Democrats have been courted like never before. Mike Berlon, a candidate for party chairman, and state Sen. Doug Stoner (D-Smyrna), a vice chairman candidate, are now on YouTube after separate appearances before Young Dems last month.

Berlon, a lawyer in Gwinnett County, traveled to Millen in east Georgia to attend a Young Democrats of Georgia retreat. Stoner spoke at the Young Democrats of Atlanta's monthly business meeting at Manuel's.

"This is the group I'm most interested in mobilizing," Berlon says in his grainy video.

Power used to be top down when the governor and other leaders were Democrats, Berlon said in an interview.

Now, as the party tries to rebuild, the reverse is true, he said. That means the Young Democrats are more important than ever.

After Berlon's appearance at the retreat, Young Dem Christopher Benson Manica, a 26-year-old computer programmer known as "angry Benson," blogged on the YD of Atlanta site that "Young

Democrats, particularly our own Atlanta chapter, have been working to shed the image of cute little kids who drink and complain.

"We're adorable kids who drink, complain and work hard like nobody's business, and we're finally getting our props!"

Manica calls the state's Republican leadership "the Christian supremacist Taliban."

"I like to speak the truth," he said, "as much as I can get away with."

In this age of Comedy Central politics, with Jon Stewart mocking elected officials and Stephen Colbert pretending to be a radical conservative, irreverence is an important part of communication. So Young Dems write snarly blogs, post amateurish videos and sell "turn left" T-shirts and \$2 koozies — foam sleeves that keep beer cold — that say "take back the state."

Stoner praised the Young Dems' hip persona, saying it works because "a lot of folks don't want to be lectured at."

Even the drudgery of door-to-door campaigning looks cool on a Young Dems video on YouTube.

They canvassed last year for Northside state House candidate Jan Hackney and, of course, recorded the experience.

Hackney ended up losing to Harry Geisinger. But in defeat was born "Canvassing with YDAtl: Much, much better than death," a jumpy recruiting video set to the music of the technopop band Daft Punk.

The video was the creation of Shelby Highsmith, 32, a graduate student at Georgia Tech. He's a Notre Dame University alum who's backpacked in Ireland, drinks Guinness and says about recruiting Young Dems, "We just need to identify those Knute Rocknes" — passionate people who won't accept defeat.


Highsmith's father is Miami U.S. District Court Judge Shelby Highsmith, an appointee of the first President Bush. Political discussion is approached with caution at the Highsmith house, but not at happy hour in Atlanta. "Somehow, the Republican Party, with its moral stances, has convinced working-class voters to vote against their own self-interest," Highsmith declared.

Young Dems are quick to say they don't consider Georgia hopelessly lost, and point to a couple of achievements. They lobbied against a Senate proposal during last year's legislative session that would have shrunk buffers that protect waterways, and the bill died in the House. More recently, businessman and Democratic Party donor Jonathan Lewis gave Young Democrats of Georgia \$250,000 to reel in voters over the next three years.

"We are playful. We are irreverent. We're having an awful lot of fun," Karp said. "But we're also making a difference."

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