

# Why It's Time For Conservatives To Use Pop-Culture Messaging



Throughout the presidential campaign, conservatives regularly chided President Obama for ducking media venues where he would likely be asked substantive questions about serious issues. He ignored their criticism and spent his time sharing his iPod playlist with MTV, calling morning zoo deejays on local radio stations, and

basking in the fawning adulation of the ladies of *The View* and David Letterman.

It seemed undignified for a sitting president to so regularly present himself as a celebrity rather than a leader, and let's face it...It was (and it continues to be). Yet, there was a method to the madness that went beyond Obama just wanting public exposure without having to answer questions about the economy and Benghazi. He understood a reality that many conservatives found themselves not prepared to accept during a time of grossly incompetent leadership and deep economic turmoil: Even when the country's on fire, there is a large, unengaged portion of the American public that hasn't a clue what's really going on around them. And sadly, *they* are the ones who ultimately decide elections.

These people don't get their news from news organizations or even propaganda arms posing as such. They live in the microcosms of their own personal lives and *absorb* their news from whatever over-simplified messages happen to trickle down to them through the pop culture world. Thus, they often fail

to draw a link between the challenges they face in life and the decisions being made by their elected leaders. They base their vote not on ideology or issues, but rather the candidate they find the most personally appealing.

So, as much as many of us mocked the president for weaseling out of situations where he would be challenged, it's hard to deny that the strategy paid off for him. And really, it shouldn't have been that much of a surprise. Celebrities have always transcended politics.

People like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, and Al Franken had no previous political experience prior to winning top offices in state-wide elections. In Schwarzenegger's case, he was able to win as a Republican in one of the country's most liberal states – not because of anything he said or did on the campaign trail, but because he was *The Terminator*. There was recently a lot of buzz behind the idea of actor Ben Affleck running for the open U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts, merely because in recent interviews, he's demonstrated a level of political knowledge equal to that of the average basement blogger.

There is unearned yet immense power that comes with being a pop-culture figure. Being a celebrity is a tremendous advantage when it comes to connecting with the public. People are always more instinctively inclined to throw their support behind someone whose work they recognize and enjoy, even if that work is fairly meaningless to their lives.

A big problem for conservatives, when it comes to pop-culture, is that Hollywood has long been hostile to their ideology. Conservatives are often the villains in their movies, the targets of mockery in their television shows, and the recipients of their award-ceremony, self-righteous censures. Thus, the Republican Party has long steered clear of that branch of the media, electing instead to fight exclusively on battlegrounds where substance is valued over style.

That needs to change.

With an American public that is unengaged now more than ever when it comes to real, serious issues that affect their lives and their futures, conservatives can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines when it comes to environments that make them uncomfortable. People on the right often talk about how they need to take a more important role in combating the liberal influence of college professors and other academics pushing their ideology on our youth. How can the same not be true about the pop-culture world? It's far more influential on young people (and not-so-young people) than pony-tailed lecturers.

Conservatives need to find ways to embrace this area of the media, navigate it, and funnel their message down to the public through the mechanism of entertainment. No one's saying it will be easy or have an immediate impact. After all, it's a world that's been largely saturated with liberal activism for decades. But it *can* be done.

The drive should start with promoting simple awareness, and it shouldn't be overtly partisan.

A good way to get the ball rolling would be to begin treating the deep challenges our country faces as *causes* rather than as issues. Issues are boring. Causes are more intriguing, aren't as toxic, and command a greater sense of urgency – especially when you put a little *star power* behind them.

Imagine a series of television commercials, in the format of public service announcements, featuring actor Vince Vaughn. I'm using Vaughn as an example because he's one of the few, outed fiscal conservatives in Hollywood. He's also an immediately identifiable celebrity who audiences have an affection for. In his trademark comedic, dapper style, Vaughn throws out some metaphorical explanation of how screwed up our nation's spending problem is, and how that problem affects

each and every one of us. The presentation should be simple, but it should also get across a point that people can relate to – much like the *Apple vs Microsoft* commercials from a few years ago, or the “this is your brain on drugs” campaign from the 1980s. The series could expand to cover over-regulation, over-taxation, and more. They should be aired not on cable news networks, but during some of the popular, prime-time reality shows.

It sounds overly simplistic, but I would argue that something like that can do far more to attract low-information voters to a commonsense, conservative viewpoint than thirty minutes of Paul Ryan using a laser-pointer on color-coded charts. That’s no dig on Paul Ryan. I have a huge amount of admiration for him and his dedication to sparing my kids from paying the crippling price for my generation’s spending addiction. But the sad reality is that his efforts only appeal to people who already give a damn. Many people don’t – more due to being clueless than selfish.

It’s the *clueless, unprincipled* vote that conservatives can no longer afford to concede to the Democratic party when it comes to elections. These people are sway-able, and they’re prime for a wake-up call. *Dumbing down* the conservative message through the pop-culture world may just be the way of doing it. If commonsense conservatism is given a mainstream makeover, and starts shedding its curmudgeonly stigma, the tide may begin to shift when it comes to close elections.

Public awareness commercials would merely be a good starting point. The message should expand to FM radio, SmartPhone apps, movie audiences, and beyond. We’re talking about a cultural shift, and if wealthy, conservative donors truly want to make a difference in public perception and support, they might want to consider backing such a shift rather than just the politicians themselves.

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# Why the Pop-Culture President Won't Re-Energize the Youth Vote

✘ I didn't vote in the first two presidential elections that I was of age to participate in. Why not? Well, the truth is that I simply didn't care. I didn't think it really mattered which candidate won the presidency. To me, elections weren't worth the time to stand in a long voting line and cast a ballot. I had better things to do. There was always new music to buy, movies to see, and concerts to go to.

Like many people in their early twenties, I lived in a bubble of self-interest. Political news and current events were the last things on my mind. Life was more about keeping myself entertained. In college, I could have told you which videos were in regular rotation on MTV, who was scheduled to appear on David Letterman's show on any given weeknight, and everything about the upcoming summer blockbuster movies. Yet, I couldn't have for the life of me told you what was going on in Somalia with *Black Hawk Down*. I hadn't a clue the meaning behind terms like *Whitewater* and *Don't Ask Don't Tell*. I wasn't even entirely sure who Newt Gingrich was, other than that he was portrayed occasionally by Chris Farley on Saturday Night Live.

Yes, I was so indifferent to the world around me that I had no reason or motivation to weave myself into the fabric of our democratic process. Pop-culture was far more important to me.

I don't believe my experience was all that unique, and I really don't think it's all that different than today's

youthful mindset. Yet, just three and a half years ago, there was a man who managed to do something miraculous and energize the youth vote in his favor. Then U.S. senator, Barack Obama, enchanted our young Americans with his energy, glowing speeches, charm, and charisma. His campaign presented an image of him that young voters thought was cool and stylish. America found him to be fresh and entertaining. Sure, they might have not completely understood what all he was about as a candidate, but they knew they wanted to be a part of the spectacle at a time of war-weariness and Bush fatigue.

The youth vote and their grass-roots efforts were instrumental in handing Obama a historic victory. It's the precise reason the president is still courting the pop-culture crowd. He's appearing on late night talk shows to yuck it up with hip comedians. He's offering up dinner with actor George Clooney as a fund-raising incentive. He's been touring college campuses and serenading audiences with Al Green songs. It's clearly important to his campaign that he keeps that "cool" factor going strong, and frankly... it makes perfect sense politically.

Obama does very well on that platform. It earns him *style points* with a portion of the electorate that otherwise wouldn't care all that much about politics or the state of the country. It drives Republicans crazy, not just because they sometimes find the appearances to be unbecoming of a president (a legitimate complaint that I happen to agree with), but because they also know that it's a stage where they simply can't compete with the president.

Republicans, for the most part, just aren't all that cool. And let's face it... The entertainment media isn't compelled to help them appear as such. Hosts will never embarrassingly fawn over Mitt Romney on entertainment talk shows the way they do with President Obama. You'll never hear a comedian like Jimmy Kimmel declare that it's "hard to make fun of" *any* Republican, like he recently said about President Obama.

My advice to Mitt Romney would be not to even bother challenging President Obama in the court of coolness. He shouldn't go on Saturday Night Live. He shouldn't emulate the John Kerry of 2004 by wind-surfing, riding motorcycles with a leather jacket on, and throwing the old pigskin back and forth with his vice presidential running mate. He shouldn't submit a video clip for the American Idol audience.

I say this for two reasons: First of all, it won't work. Secondly, it's not going to matter because the pop-culture/youth vote will not turn out for Obama the way they did in 2008.

In November of 2008, the economy had just begun spiraling downward. Its lasting effect on the country was unknown not just by young America, but across the board. People knew it was a bad situation, but they didn't have an understanding of how directly they would be impacted. Up until then, the biggest campaign issue was the Bush administration's handling of the War on Terror – a topic that struck a chord across college campuses as part of the youthful idealism of anti-war sentiment. That demographic viewed Washington as a group of war-mongering, oil-thirsty, stuffed shirts who didn't have their best interests at heart. This caricature not only hurt the Republican Party, but it also hurt Hillary Clinton who was weary of the hypocrisy she would surely be accused of if she took an anti-war stance following her strong support of military action in Iraq.

This opened the door for the outspoken and energetic Barack Obama who told young Americans what they wanted to hear. The Illinois senator was so new to national politics that he couldn't be held accountable for the decisions made by previous congresses in the prosecution of the war. His competence on the microphone, irresistible charm, and million dollar smile let him be whatever young America wanted him to be, and they gave him their unconditional support.

Three and a half years later, the country has changed dramatically. The same people who walked through neighborhoods and campuses for Obama and volunteered tirelessly for his campaign have their college degrees but they don't have careers. They're living at home and working as waiters and waitresses because they can't find anything better. They're watching their parents' family-businesses struggle to stay afloat. Those still in college are being sat down by their mother and father and told they're going to have a hard time continuing to pay their tuition.

The realities of this stagnant economy are being felt by young America. The facts are staggering, as a recent ad from American Crossroads pointed out. Half of recent college graduates in this country are now jobless or underemployed. A report last year stated that 85% of them had moved back in with their parents. Student loan debt in this country exceeds one trillion dollars. Even if young adults in this country don't understand the underlying causes of these problems (and frankly, I don't think they do), they do understand that their president has been in office for nearly four years and their situations have not improved. No number of late night guest appearances, campus rallies, and comedy skits is going to change that.

One would think that young voters would be fed up with the situation and demand a new direction, but I really don't think Mitt Romney will be on the receiving end of a mass exodus. Sure, he's in a good position to sway at least *some* of them over. He can do so by spreading the message that he's not running for president to dazzle them with his charm or be their friend, but rather to restore an economy that lets them rise to their potential. In all likelihood though, young America won't defect over to Mitt Romney's side of the aisle. They'll stay home.

You see, most of that generation perceives the presidency of George W. Bush as a complete and utter failure. They were

taught by the media and their college professors for years that Bush essentially ruined our country. When Barack Obama came along, he became their savior – a larger than life superhero who would bring peace to the world and restore international respect for our nation. He woke up young Americans and got them engaged.

Yet, even the most optimistic of Obama supporters have now come to the realization that things have not changed for the better, even if they won't admit it. So, if President Obama can't make things different, no one can. That's how I believe they look at it, anyway. And with that mindset comes complacency – the same kind of complacency that I experienced in the early 90s because I didn't think elections mattered.

A good portion of young America will stay home in November, not as a protest vote against the president, but because they've accepted the *new normal* as a long-term inevitability that no president can change. They've entered the real world, but to them it's become an extension of the world they knew before they graduated. The bar for success has been set so low by President Obama that getting used to falling short of their potential could become an almost acceptable outcome.

If that's true, it's a bad sign for our culture, but possibly a gift for the Romney campaign.