

Activist groups struggle to recruit Millennials

By Callie Byrnes

Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, you name it—Gail Shafton has tried it all. But none seem to work when it comes to recruiting young adults.

“In general, younger people do not affiliate with quote-on-quote organizations,” said Shafton, a member of the Kansas Group Executive Committee of [the Sierra Club](#), an environmental activist organization. “They also absolutely, adamantly avoid the word ‘environmentalist’ or anything that’s got the word ‘environmental’ in it.”

The lack of interest in activist causes by younger adults is a widespread problem. As activist groups have attempted to recruit younger people into their organizations, it has become apparent that Millennials are part of a new generation of citizens that do not engage civically the same way that generations from the past have, according to a report by the [Pew Research Institution](#). Activist organizations have taken the backseat for Generation Y.

It’s no surprise these organizations are trying harder to target younger people. Amy Bell, the state coordinator for the [Kansas National Organization of Women](#), said that young people are crucial to activist organizations, and not only because they’re struggling to find enough volunteers handle all of the roles within the groups. She said that young people are crucial for shaping policies in the present and the future. According to a study in [Adweek](#), Millennials comprise a large chunk of eligible voters in the US. In fact, by 2020, they’re expected to make up 40 percent of them. But during the 2014 midterm election, [International Business Times](#) reported that the Millennial turnout was estimated to be only 21.3 percent, a number lower than what some experts expected.

“When people join organizations less, they vote less, too,” said Mark Joslyn, associate professor of political science at the University of Kansas. “The connection to the community is important. It’s always been somewhat weaker in young people, because you’re moving,

you have a lot more obligations, you're in college, you might be away from home. You're just not connected in the same way that other people are."

Shafton says that marriage and work are both priorities that younger people often focus on, especially in the face of college loans and debt. Civic engagement is often left on the backburner, which may be why **Millennials are more detached** from political institutions than other generations.

However, despite other obligations, young people aren't completely disconnected from activism. Amanda Beals, the global health organizer of **RESULTS**, says that this activism isn't dead within young groups of people. Social media and the Internet allow young people to easily spread activist ideas and sign online petitions in a fashion that Beals calls "one-click activism." She said that while this new form of activism isn't completely useless, it often doesn't lead to clear results that organizations are aiming for.

Young people are also taking part in widespread social movements. They made up a large number of the protestors during Ferguson protests and were integral in sexual assault awareness on campuses nationwide, though Craig Wolfe, the communications director for the Kansas chapter of the Sierra Club, said that these causes are often popular for a short while before the next social movement takes place. This was one key problem that the Sierra Club faced when reaching out to younger people.

"We're down to the nitty gritty," Shafton said. "Our daily battles are going to state legislatures and suing about laws that are already in place. It's all about stuff that's been done already. No one's going to march for the polar bears."

However, if activist organizations aren't able to recruit younger people to their causes, Erin Heger, communications and advocacy organizer at **Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri**, said that organizations may face even bigger problems in the future.

“If we aren’t able to bring young people on, we kind of lose the future of the movement,” said Heger. “If we aren’t continually building up that base of people to take the charge, we aren’t going to have people to go to when we need to elevate certain policies, so it’s kind of crucial that we recruit young people to carry on the mission.”

Heger said she isn’t discouraged yet. While organizations have struggled to find young people to join their ranks, Heger believes that the key is using tools that are popular among the younger generations, such as social media, to cater toward young adults’ needs. For Heger and Bell, this means providing internships and opportunities that offers real life experience that young people can add to their resumes. Bell said that she hoped these opportunities would help encourage young people to reach out to their communities and help make a difference.

“It’s important to join these organizations because our parents’ and grandparents’ generations have completely thrown us under the bus,” Bell said. “They are not looking out for us, and our government is slipping out of our hands more and more every day, and no one else is going to help us.”