

At one Kentucky bar, young Republicans wrestle with their disappointment in Trump and their party



AP PHOTO/JESSE BEDAYN

Republican State Rep. TJ Roberts, 28, talks during a meeting of young Republicans at a bar in Covington, Ky., Saturday, May 2.

BY JESSE BEDAYN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

COVINGTON, Ky. (AP) — On a recent evening in northern Kentucky, over a dozen young Republicans gathered with beers and brightly colored cocktails at a bar called dEcORa, its neon interior as eccentric as its capitalization, ribbing each other and picking apart the presidential administration they welcomed with high hopes last year.

By now, their enthusiasm for Donald Trump had curdled into frustration.

“I absolutely do not regret voting for Trump in 2024,” said Nathaniel Showalter, 34, who sat in front of a concrete pillar covered in spray paint. “I can’t wait for him to get out of office.”

What poured out that night under the bar’s low lights was a sense that the Republican establishment — which they initially applauded Trump for disrupting, but which some now see him sustaining — had forsaken them. That festering feeling has widened a generational gap between younger and older conservatives as the party slowly begins to consider a future without Trump in charge.

The crew at the bar see Trump’s war with Iran as a betrayal of his campaign promises. They are living in an economy that appears as shaky as it was before his inauguration. And they mourn the assassination of Charlie Kirk, the 31-year-old conservative activist they viewed as their lone spokesperson with influence in the White House.

The defeat of Republican Rep. Thomas Massie — who had earned a younger and anti-establishment following while feuding with Trump — in Tuesday’s primary cost them

one of their strongest allies in Congress.

“There seems to be a concerted effort to keep the next generation out on the right,” said TJ Roberts, the group’s lanky leader. A 28-year-old state representative, he was the only one at the bar wearing a suit. “There’s this sense of entitlement among the establishment on the right. ‘Well, I’m better than the alternative.’ Well, sure, but a stomach flu is preferable to stomach cancer. I’d rather have neither.”

Roberts convenes the group every month to talk politics, this time with The Associated Press, and he feared that young people like those gathered at dEcORa were “going to live a shorter, less prosperous life than your parents.”

“We have to make sure that young Republicans have a voice in Washington, D.C.,” he said.

IT’S WHY WE NEED A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP

The boisterous group, all men in their 20s and 30s, crowded around a low table painted with kaleidoscope art. They made ribald jokes and debated each other, sometimes slipping into impressions of Trump or conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

Although views of Trump’s presidency aren’t uniform — some like his second term more than others — they were all animated by anger over the war with Iran.

To many in this group, Operation Epic Fury is not just “a complete betrayal of his promises,” as Michael Gartman, 32, put it. It’s evidence that their voices have been drowned out by the political establishment, defense contractors and megadonors who they see as pushing Israel’s agenda.

Logan Edge, a 30-year-old gun lobbyist who sported a Hawaiian-style shirt and Lincoln-esque beard, mimicked Trump talking about Miriam Adelson, the billionaire who Trump once said advised him on Israel.

“Oh Miriam, she’s over there, she loves Israel, maybe more than America,” he said.

He dropped the president’s intonation and said, “You can’t piss on my shoes and tell me it’s raining.”

Across from Logan sat Andrew Cooperrider, a 33-year-old who hosts a conservative podcast about Kentucky politics, and his son, 14-year-old Leo. The teenager aspires to be an underwater welder and suggested to his father that he could get training by enlisting in the U.S. Navy.

“And I said absolutely not,” the elder Cooperrider said, “not with everything going on, my son is not getting into the military right now and go fight these wars for these psychopaths.”

“Thank you!” someone shouted, as Cooperrider added that Leo can pursue the trade outside the military.

Edge jumped in, saying that he and his father, who served in Desert Storm and Iraq, had visited Arlington National Cemetery.

There’s a phone app that can guide you to specific grave sites, he said, his voice deepening with emotion. “And me and my dad spent the day finding his friends. And it was very emotional, very tough. And you can get on the Metro and go to the next Metro stop and the first thing you see is Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, and I said to my dad, ‘Look what you’re about to see.’”

Edge paused. “It brings tears to my eyes,” he said,

pushing his chair back and dropping his gaze from the group. Roberts leaned over and asked if Logan was OK.

“Why do my friends have to be over there?” said Angel Figueroa, 27, who served in the military and knows people based in the Middle East right now. “It would devastate me to see one of my friends getting bombed one day and what, I have to see their box now?”

Most thought a military draft was unlikely. But Elijah Drysdale, 27, who wore a backward cap over a red-haired mullet, said the fact that it’s even become a discussion “speaks volumes to me, and it’s why we need a change in leadership.”

HE BROKE A LOT OF HIS PROMISES

Although Roberts has concerns about the Republican establishment, he was a rare member of the group at dEcORa who was pleased with Trump’s second term. He argued that the party “under President Donald

Trump is without doubt the best Republican Party I have seen in my entire lifetime, the old order is dead.”

“It’s dying,” someone interjected.

“No, it’s gone,” Roberts retorted. “Trump shifted the culture so well that these conversations you’re hearing right now, this would be unacceptable in the Republican Party of 2014.”

Now, Roberts said, there is more willingness to oppose foreign military entanglements, corporate bailouts and aid to foreign countries such as Ukraine and Israel. The party had also drawn a harder line on immigration, which those gathered have applauded.

“I do think Trump started the (establishment’s) downfall, I think it’s only being kept alive now by him,” said the elder Cooperrider, citing Trump’s endorsement of U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and his opposition to Massie.

John Wardrop, a 24-year-old wearing a short-sleeve button-up tucked beneath a big belt buckle, said “we could do a whole lot better.” He argued that there was hope for some in the administration, such as Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Vice President JD Vance.

“I’m actually in disagreement,” said Drysdale, who pushed back with harsher criticism of Trump than most of the group. “I think that he broke a lot of his promises.”

Any affiliation with this administration, he said, will be “a stain on your reputation. This isn’t the party that we want, this isn’t the party that we voted for, or thought we were voting for.”

Could they envision voting for a Democrat?

Henry Hecht, a 26-year-old libertarian who sipped a cocktail with a pirate flag stuck in the top,

raised a tentative hand and shrugged.

“What’s he doing here?” Cooperrider said in mock anger. “Get him out of here, somebody get the log!”

EVENTUALLY THAT CYCLE HAS TO BREAK

The sense of malaise has been compounded by the loss of Kirk, who founded the conservative youth organization Turning Point USA. Kirk seemed to have no clear heir, and Roberts said he “was kinda like a mediator, so Trump understood where young Republicans were coming from.”

The group listed several examples where they’ve felt Republican lawmakers betrayed their promises and conservative ideology, such as the extension of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and the growing national debt.

Massie fought the White House on those issues and others. Trump responded by backing a primary challenger, former Navy SEAL Ed Gallrein, who centered his campaign on fealty to the president.

Gallrein won on Tuesday, demonstrating Trump’s power over this party, but deepening frustration with his leadership in other quarters.

“We cannot really fight the left until we defeat these old, boomer Republicans,” Edge said. “The left is organized, the left is institutionalized, they’re smart, they’re tactical, they’re not a joke, they don’t play.”

“We look at our own organization on our side and say, ‘We’re a little lost,’” said Cooperrider, suggesting there was more mobilization among younger liberals.

“Why don’t right-wingers do it?” asked Hecht.

“My question is: why would you when, for so long, the right has been joking about their promises?” said Roberts.

“It creates an endless cycle,” he added. “Eventually that cycle has to break.”

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