



After the Fact | The Next Generation of Lawmakers: Young, Scrappy, and... Bipartisan?

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TRANSCRIPT

Layla Zaidane, president and CEO, Future Caucus: That's what the American people want to see. They just want to see people being responsible. And maybe it's ironic that in this case it's the youngest members of the legislature who are really answering that call.

Benny Martinez, host, "After the Fact" podcast: You just heard from Layla Zaidane, who was telling me how a new movement among younger lawmakers looks to bridge partisan divides and rebuild public trust in democracy.

And Layla knows a thing or two about this. She's the president and CEO of Future Caucus. That's a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization committed to activating these young legislators all across the country to reach across the aisle and collaborate on bipartisan policy solutions.

And their model is working. Lawmakers who are members of a Future Caucus in their state are 24% more effective than their peers. That's according to a recent study from the Center for Effective Lawmaking.

With America's 250th birthday coming up, I caught up with Layla to learn more about what young lawmakers are doing differently to work together, reasons to be hopeful for our democracy during polarizing times, and some of the challenges that keep them from staying in office—outside of losing an election, of course.

Benny Martinez: Future Caucus started in 2013 with millennial in the name, which I can relate to, you know, I'm a millennial myself. But 10 years later you rebrand to help encompass a younger cohort of lawmakers. So, walk me through that transition, and humble me a little bit because I still feel like the young guy in the room and maybe not so much anymore.



Layla Zaidane: Well, young is all relative, so it just depends on the company you keep. And in Congress you can be, you know, quite far into your 40s and still be by far the youngest person in the room.

And that's how this work started. It was 2013, and our founder at the time looked around and saw that the government was shutting down. People weren't able to agree on how to move forward. Really important policy ideas that were impacting our generation, younger people, things that impacted jobs or the environment, or higher education. And the team of founders just said, enough is enough. We can't afford to wait.

Millennials cannot afford to hope that Congress gets its act together and starts figuring out how to get things done and work across the aisle and like put their differences aside for the good of the American people. It's time for millennials to take charge. And so out of that sense of agency was born the first ever bipartisan caucus in Congress, open to anyone 45 years old and younger, Democrats, Republicans who came together, not because they were all Democrats or all Republicans, but because they were all young.

And that shared generational identity became a really powerful binding force that got people to the table and then kept them at the table talking about what they had in common and things that they could work on. And that's really the mission of Future Caucus today. How can we help connect the youngest members of the legislature, sort of the rising generation of elected leaders, to solve today's problems, to transcend political polarization, and actually get stuff done.

We launched in Congress, as I said, but very, very quickly spread to state legislatures. And so today we're so proud to have a state Future Caucus chapter in 36 different states, each one led by a young Democrat and a young Republican. And our job is to help them see each other as people, see each other not as the enemy, but as a fellow problem solver. And then to build the infrastructure and support systems that allow them to lead. And really every state chapter looks different from one another, but the thing that they share is that they're all committed to doing what it takes to work together to get to know each other as people and to ultimately govern effectively.

Benny Martinez: Yeah, govern effectively is key, right? There's governing, and then governing effectively. I think is what a lot of constituents are looking for in their representatives, and it's indicative in the research. I mean, according to Pew Research Center, a third of people in the country have favorable views of Congress. I mean, unless you're talking about baseball, that's not so hot.

So, tell me a little bit about how this younger generation builds trust.



Layla Zaidane: Yeah. And I'll say that's surprising to me. I didn't know that it was as high as a third of people have favorable opinions. So, what are young people doing differently? I think what we discovered is there really is, I think, something special about millennials and Gen Z-ers who have grown up in a completely different economic context. I think the strength of our institution seems to have declined quite rapidly. We've seen global instability, financial instability, housing instability. The maybe silver lining of it is it allows more openness in thinking about what might be possible.

And so, I think for younger lawmakers who are coming in, right, they're bought into the fact that we can make change. And they sort of have this superpower where they're not so entrenched or calcified into how things have been. And that is such an asset when it comes to imagining how things could be.

So, when you channel that to the types of policies that younger members could be working on, I think, it does two things. One, it puts at the table things that younger people maybe care about, things like housing, right? That if you own your home and you bought it back in 1955, you don't really care as much as somebody who's struggling to afford rent and pay for childcare. So that builds trust to see that their needs and priorities are reflected in the things that government is tackling.

And then two, I think there's less of a need to just play partisan games and more of an urgency to work with whoever you might need to work with in order to get things done. And so that means that you're building potentially strange bedfellows or interesting coalitions of people from different political parties or maybe even within your party—like different factions of the same party, geographies, urban, rural—because you don't feel so constrained to how things have been because you've seen that doesn't always work. That has made working with this generation of elected leaders feel really, really special and opens up a whole world of possibilities about what that looks like really at scale.

Benny Martinez: They're choosing to legislate differently because they've perhaps seen what hasn't worked, in terms of, you mentioned this yourself, like the gamesmanship that can sort of take over any issue that's being debated. Is that among the different things that younger lawmakers are doing to rebuild the trust of the public?

Layla Zaidane: When you start to diversify those kinds of real-life experiences that are represented inside the halls of power, people start to feel like it's not so removed, but actually that it's full of people who understand you and who care about what happens to you. And having that kind of, again, like socioeconomic diversity, types of jobs that you've had, types of living situations, whether you have small children or are caretaking for an aging parent. America's full of people who have lots of different



life scenarios. And so, I think when you only have people who are like in their 60s and were lawyers and wealthy, then you don't have that same feeling that it is a true, diverse democracy that really represents the things that you care about.

Benny Martinez: Yeah. Not, not such a novel idea. Right? A representative body that's representative of the people that they serve, age notwithstanding.

So, let's talk a little bit about bipartisanship. We obviously know that one party governing and legislating sort of unilaterally can't always be effective. So, talk a little bit more about how Future Caucus sees bipartisanship and how these younger leaders are sort of embracing that.

Layla Zaidane: Yeah, I think for us, it really comes back to relationships. It is super, super hard to come from entrenched polar-opposite positions and then just decide like, OK, we're going to do something together.

But what we found is it is possible to get people who are on polar-opposite sides of an issue to find something they agree on. Maybe it's not like that issue, but something else. Maybe it's just, you know, like, who their favorite golfer is. And that like tiny little off ramp from polarization superhighway allows them to find other things that they might want to do together. And so, a lot of what our work is at Future Caucus is creating those opportunities for them to see each other as humans.

In Kansas, they got together and they actually went ax-throwing. Not at each other, at a target, but the activity was just like a fun way to like blow off some steam, to do something different. Fast forward, you know, a few months down the road, they were getting a piece of affordable housing legislation signed by the governor that probably would never have happened if they hadn't just built those relationships.

And I think that's what the American people want to see. They just want to see people being responsible, somebody showing up to be the adults in the room. And maybe it's ironic that, in this case, it's the youngest members of the legislature who are really answering that call.

Benny Martinez: Being innovative is key to being successful in any variety of work that you're trying to do. So, I'm curious, from your experience and your interactions with some of these young lawmakers, how have you seen them be innovative in that approach to be bipartisan, to develop those relationships?

Layla Zaidane: Yeah, well, you know, there's I think a few different ways where that you can be innovative. It's actually pretty countercultural to say instead of just getting down to business on the nuts and bolts of a bill, I think the best way for us to solve a problem is actually for us to not talk about policy at all. Right? So, the ax-throwing



example, we've had people do book clubs, host dinners. Food is actually a really great way to build a relationship.

Benny Martinez: Who doesn't like food? Right?

Layla Zaidane: Who doesn't like food? Totally. It turns out politicians are just like us.

But younger lawmakers are able to maybe think about some of like emerging technology or new ways of operating that the legislature hasn't thought about. And so, I think that's innovation right there.

The other thing that I think is innovative among a lot of the members that we get to work with is an innovative use of power. We can talk about bipartisanship and civility, but if you ignore the dimension of political power, then it sort of is like theoretical, right? It's not actually how do you operate in the real world.

One example that I'll share. Two members in a state had gotten to know one another, become friends, built a real level of trust. And together, they decided that they were going to advance a harm reduction bill that included a pretty controversial clause in it about needle exchanges. It was going to be almost like a nonstarter among some of the more conservative members of the party.

And so, the two of them decided that they were going to be creative. They talked to a lot of outside interest groups, advocacy groups, and sat down with the police union and discovered that 1 in 3 police members would be injured by a needle-stick injury in the course of his or her career. And so, he was able to position this bill as something that would actually support police officers and got their endorsement. And together they were able to then, you know, bring on more support because of that and ultimately pass the bill.

And I think just thinking creatively around strange bedfellows. That's the name of the game today is like, how do we sort of operate outside of like the traditional places where we might see support and actually build the power to get something over the finish line.

It's been really fun and refreshing to watch this generation of lawmakers operate a little bit differently.

Benny Martinez: Can you talk to me about what challenges young lawmakers are facing—obviously at the federal level, but as you get into states, I imagine it's different to govern at the state level than it is at the federal level—and some of the obstacles that they're having to overcome?



Layla Zaidane: Yeah. And I think one thing I have learned doing this work is just how different being a state lawmaker is than being a federal lawmaker, right, a member of Congress.

And maybe that's obvious to everybody listening to this podcast, but I think a lot of people imagine that if you're a state legislator, you have a team, you have a staff, you make enough money to buy your house and you know, maybe support your whole family, just like a member of Congress does. You're making six figures. The reality is the average state lawmaker earns about \$20,000 less than the average American worker. Most lawmakers are actually working a second job just to make ends meet.

In a place like Georgia, there's one staffer for every eight lawmakers. So, you have one-eighth of a person to help you do things like answer constituent phone calls or organize town halls that allow the public to engage with you. You're kind of an entrepreneur having to do it all yourself, not to mention, right, reading all of the policy and doing the research to understand the pros and cons on any given bill.

And then the last thing, and I think everybody, right, across the country has seen this, the increase in political violence has been a real chilling effect, both in terms of new people running for office and also people now making sort of the calculus of I'm not getting paid well, I don't have the resources at work to do my job well, and it's just not worth it.

And so there are a lot of barriers, I think, to recruitment, but really the retention of great talent. We ought to be doing everything that we can to make these state legislatures a place where decent people can serve. And the reality is right now, we've made it really, really difficult for the average person to do well in these environments.

And so, we've done a lot of work at Future Caucus to try to sound the alarm bell around this and share some thoughts on what we think might be some real solutions.

Benny Martinez: My favorite state, my home state, New Mexico, I don't think even residents of New Mexico realize that their elected officials don't make any money.

Layla Zaidane: Zero dollars a year. I mean, I think as a country we should do better if we want to demand the amount of like thoughtfulness that I think goes into solving these like really complex, complicated problems that our neighborhoods and communities and states deal with.

Right now we're seeing Supreme Court cases push more legislating to the state level. Congress' inability to operate is pushing more responsibility onto the state



level. And those are the people who are most underwater and most unsupported to rise to the level that we need from them.

It seems kind of counterintuitive in this moment where people are so mad at politicians to say, “Actually, we should pay politicians more. We should give them more support.” But that actually could be the thing that unlocks a real ability to be effective, to govern responsibly, and to get some really important legislation done that helps people all across the country.

Benny Martinez: Hearing you talk about it is cause for optimism from my end. I'm curious, in the work that you're doing with all of these young lawmakers, is there a sense of optimism, not that we return to a sense of normalcy, but return to a sense of governing again?

Layla Zaidane: What is most visible about our politics is when it doesn't work. And so that becomes what we think of when we think of politics. I feel hopeful because I am seeing two things happen at the same time.

One, more young people run towards the fire, right? They are saying put me in. I want to be a part of making things better.

And then the second thing is, once they show up, once they win and actually start to serve, we're seeing real evidence that they are actually transcending the polarization that we're led to believe is ubiquitous. And we're seeing them pass more bipartisan legislation than their older counterparts.

We just actually did a study with the Center for Effective Lawmaking, and they were able to run a historical analysis of all state lawmakers over several sessions, and then they pulled out Future Caucus members and found that young members and Future Caucus members are 24% more effective than their peers.

And so there's like real hard proof that doing this work, building the relationships, and then actually trying to do things differently is leading to productive outcomes, to bipartisan outcomes, things that are going to be durable and maybe be a little bit of a buffer against some of the pendulum swings we're seeing right now.

So more young people doing it, they're doing it better. Like, what more could you want? I'm very hopeful. I feel very optimistic.

Benny Martinez: Hearing you and the enthusiasm you have talking about this does inspire hope for me and hopefully it does for the folks tuning in to the podcast.



Hope is indeed contagious. But my key takeaway? Age is relative. At nearly 40, I take some comfort knowing I might still be the youngest person in the room.

Anyway, thanks again for listening. If you enjoyed the episode, drop us a line or leave us a review. You can also visit pew.org/afterthefact to learn more.

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For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Benny Martinez, and this is "After the Fact." Until next time.