
College group reaches out to moderate Republicans

Republican Youth Majority supports abortion rights and is environment-friendly.

By Steve Goldstein
INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — The struggle for the soul of the Republican Party has trickled down to the nation's college campuses.

Just months after the Republican National Committee withdrew funding from its "official" college auxiliary after the youngsters took a sharp turn to the right, campus moderates see an opportunity.

An abortion-rights group, the Republican Youth Majority, is trying to find moderate Republicans among Generation Xers who think more like Arlen Specter and Pete Wilson and less like Phil Gramm and Patrick Buchanan.

Republican Youth Majority's leaders claim chapters at 44 schools around the nation, including Penn State, Rutgers, George Washington and Stanford.

The goal of the year-old group "is to provide a home for pro-choice college Republicans," said Richard Wheeler,

its 24-year-old managing director.

Republican Youth Majority also takes a pro-environment stance that differs sharply from the property-rights tack of conservatives. "We must preserve our natural resources for future generations," says the group's mission statement.

RYMers don't exactly hug the trees, but they do look upon them affectionately.

Nicole Schlinger, on leave from her junior year at Syracuse University to serve as RYM's national chairman, said that "the founding principles of the party — individual freedom and personal responsibility — are what appeal to most Republicans, not the Pat Buchanan rhetoric."

Among the members of RYM's national advisory board are two presidential contenders, Sen. Arlen Spec-

See **GOP** on A6

Republican candidates for president work on their conservative stances as they unite against Dole. **A4.**

Group is seeking moderate Republicans

GOP from A1
ter and California Gov. Pete Wilson. Invitations to join the board have also gone to Gov. Whitman in New Jersey and Gov. William Weld of Massachusetts.

"This is the wave of the future," Specter said of the youth group. "Young people are dedicated to less government — and choice is consistent with that position."

One RYM goal is to have chapters on 100 campuses by the end of the year. Another is to become officially recognized by the Republican National Committee, whose chairman, Haley Barbour, said Thursday he had not heard of the group.

Barbour said that, in general, he welcomes any new groups of Republican supporters.

The question raised privately by other committee officials is whether a new group will exacerbate divisions in the GOP, where moderates are wrestling with high-flying conservatives over the party's 1996 platform.

"We don't think we're a group out to create divisiveness," said Schlinger, who is majoring in economics and policy studies. "We are trying to bring people back into the fold who may have felt alienated."

The Republican National Committee itself felt alienated enough from its official auxiliary, the College Republicans, to kick it out of its Capitol Hill offices in January and withdraw \$120,000 in annual support.

CR, as the group is known, is pro-

gun, anti-abortion, anti-gay rights and generally very conservative. The chairman of CR's national committee, William Spadea, rejects the "big tent" philosophy of the Republican National Committee.

"There is an ideological war going on for the soul of the party," Spadea declared after being booted.

Republican National Committee officials thought CR was out to undercut it, though, and accused the youth group of disloyalty after its bimonthly newspaper, *Broadside*, published an article calling for a

third party and ran a paid ad that bashed former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

"The founding principles of the party... appeal to most Republicans, not the Pat Buchanan rhetorical."

Spadea insisted that the party should be anti-abortion and not be forced to exist with abortion-rights advocates under any tent, big or small. He said the Republican National Committee was kowtow-

ing to the 3 W's — "liberal" Republicans Weld, Wilson and Whitman. Regardless of the spat with the party, his group, which claims 40,000 members on 800 campuses, doesn't see the Republican Youth Majority as a campus threat.

"Most of the students joining the Republican Party are joining with conservative ideas," he said from his organization's new offices in Vienna, Va. "The country is moving to the right."

But Youth Majority leaders question how far that shift will go, and say they want to provide an alterna-

tive to CR and Young Republicans, a conservative post-graduate group. "Our members don't want to belong to an intolerant organization," said Schlinger.

Spadea scoffed. "Someone setting up an opposition group will just make our job a little easier by giving us a target to shoot at," he said.

The target operates out of a tiny Capitol Hill office, has no paid staff, and raised less than \$15,000 last year. Still, it is beginning a recruiting drive and expects the summer will provide members from among the legions of collegians who come to Washington to intern for members of Congress.

Republican Youth Majority wants to change the GOP platform calling for an end to abortion to "reflect the sentiment that the American public is anti-abortion but pro-choice," and remove government from the equation.

Seeking to broaden its appeal beyond the abortion issue, the group reformed last year after being founded in 1992 as the College Republican Coalition for Choice.

Republican Youth Majority's members include folks like Chris Mergerson, who is organizing a chapter at the University of Maryland. Mergerson, a Virginian, describes himself as Christian and pro-life.

"Even though I'm pro-life, I'm turned off by hard-core conservatives who are not open-minded," said Mergerson, 18. "I think RYM is the

core of true Republicanism."

Mergerson said that "religious conviction is not an excuse for extremism."

Schlinger, 20, said that a commitment to personal freedom set her apart from the arch-conservatives and that she was not the type to be deterred by Spadea's comments.

As valedictorian of the Class of 1992 at Chester (N.Y.) High School, Schlinger noticed that a Presbyterian minister was scheduled to open graduation ceremonies with a religious blessing.

Three days before commencement, Schlinger went to see the school principal to bring a copy of a newspaper article about the Supreme Court ruling in *Lee v. Weisman*, which barred public schools from sponsoring prayers at graduation ceremonies.

"I told the principal he should read the article and reconsider the minister's participation," she recalled.

The principal said that programs had been printed and that the ceremony would go ahead as planned.

Schlinger replied that she had two plans for the ceremony. One was to read the original valedictory speech she had written.

The other was to read the newspaper article about the Supreme Court decision.

On commencement day, there was no prayer. The principal told students and parents that the minister was unable to attend the ceremonies.