OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST

GIUSEPPE DIMASSA

Are Yale students adults?

The News recently quoted Diego Victoria '27, a friend of mine and the vice president of Yale's Turning Point USA chapter, arguing in support of the Yale administration's approach to negotiations with the Department of Justice. In his words: "you know when you're a little kid, and then your parents have grown-up problems that only they know how to deal with, and you're kind of out of the picture? It kind of feels like that right now: we're the little kid, and the administration are the parents." Ouch.

The irony is that Yale has tried this approach to leadership before — and it wasn't exactly a success. In 2015, Yale's Intercultural Affairs Committee sent a pre-Halloween email asking students to avoid "culturally insensitive" costumes. Erika Christakis, then the associate head of Silliman College, critiqued the missive in a separate email to the Silliman student body, arguing that it "implied control over college students." Factions formed along a similar question to the one we're debating today — is the top-level administration's judgement sufficiently more competent and trustworthy than students' judgement to merit deference?

Two groups of students apparently thought so, calling for Christakis's removal as associate head of College. On the other side, 49 Yale faculty members signed an open letter defending Christakis, explaining that they saw the dividing line of the dispute as whether "monitoring and criticizing such expression should be done in a top-down manner."

Even prominent libertarian and conservative organizations came to Christakis's defense. On the libertarian-leaning side, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education — or FIRE, whose executive director spoke at the Yale Political Union in 2024 — re-published an op-ed statement by Christakis originally written for the Washington Post. The conservative Wall Street Journal opinion columnist Roger Kimball GRD '77 '82 called students "crybullies" precisely because he expected them to self-govern better rather than rely on administration to shield them from uncomfortable views. Three months after Halloween, in an interview with The New York Times, Christakis questioned whether we should "be talking more transparently about when it's appropriate for administrations to insert themselves into issues that arise in students' lives."

The disputed question in 2015 — are students children? — is back up for dispute in 2026. It's true that the stakes are vastly greater this time around. Moreover, it's theoretically possible to allow different people to adopt different standards of Halloween costumes; it's impossible for Yale to make separate consent decrees for every student. Still, recall what Victoria argued: students are little kids whose views don't even deserve to be considered. It's a hardline view, and the opposite of what Kimball supported back in 2015.

What explains this radical turnaround in ideological positioning in the course of barely a decade? In 2015, conservatives were insistent that Yale children act like adults and accept responsibility. Today, Victoria claims the opposite. Why?

Political Economy gives us a critical toolkit. A solid body of literature in political science, including recent game-theoretical work in political science research and methods, models political devolution as a response to political power. It found that parties tend to support decentralized political authority if they think that their party is likely to lose an upcoming election, face difficulty in implementing policy, or partisanship is high. If national-level governance seems unlikely, it makes the most sense to simply cut losses and try to win local or state-level elections. By comparison, a party in control of national offices tends to oppose devolution.

Victoria's opinion is not hypocritical — he wasn't a student during the Halloween controversy — but his stance illustrates that the internal politics of Yale have changed dramatically over the last decade.

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In 2015, conservative elites had good reason to suspect that the Yale administration wasn't amenable to conservative interests. Consequently, "devolution," in the form of greater student trust, autonomy and adulthood, was the most probable path to at least some conservative-coded victories.

Today, however, Yale's conservatives are facing an inverse situation: a solid change of a long-term McInnis presidency, high on-campus polarization from TPUSA to Stand Up for Yale and relative ease in implementing national policy — just sign a consent decree! Thus, the game-theoretical optimal equilibrium for conservative-leaning students is widespread deference to the administration. Ultimately, Diego's argument raises an important point: views of students' adulthood are often secondary to broader political goals. In 2015, when it suited conservatives, we were adults; now we're not. Adulthood for Yale students, just not when it threatens conservative political interests.

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STAFF COLUMNIST

SULLIVAN HO

Focus on catheters

What should you be working on?

If you believe recent tweets, sorry, posts on X, maybe you should work on AI safety. Democratize Yale thinks you should reshape universities in the image of "shared governance." Aristotle wants you to pursue eudaimonia.

But what does any of that actually mean?

If you listen to the problems Yale students want to work on, everything's really big. "Forwarding pro-social causes." "Reshaping educational initiatives." "Advocating for underrepresented communities." Yale students clearly want to change the world. But for some reason, they're only able to talk in vague generalities.

Have you ever thought about the correct way to insert a catheter?

Hopefully not. After all, it'd be a waste of time — Peter Pronovost already figured it out. In 2001, while at Johns Hopkins, he developed the procedure for inserting catheters to minimize the risk of infection. The solution was relatively simple, just a standardized procedure jotted down on a random scrap of paper. Over the next decade, infections from catheter-induced infections fell by 58 percent.

Or take the seatbelt. A less sexy invention is hardly imaginable. Not only is the seatbelt boring, but in its original form it wasn't even particularly good at saving lives. That is, until Nils Bohlin replaced the hip-to-hip design with the current three-point design, which could be easily attached with one hand. Usage rates spiked, and this marginal development of the world's unsexiest invention is attributed with saving over a million lives.

Neither of these improvements are particularly cool. They are not discussed in Plato's Republic or on NBC. They will probably not win you a Rhodes. But they work. This is how the world gets changed. If Yale students are serious about making an impact, they should go to the margins. They should focus on catheters.

Marginal solutions work exactly because they are ignored. Healthcare and food stamps and industrial policy have already been colonized or lambasted by the relevant political parties. These days, bipartisan policy only gets passed on something as dry as licensing requirements for micro-reactors.

How many laws do you think our current Congress has passed? If you ask the average disillusioned Yale student, they might guess two, 10 or maybe even 20. Not even close — it's 118. But you only ever hear about the One Big Beautiful Bill Act or the Inflation Reduction Act, no headlines on the Quantum Computing Cybersecurity Preparedness Act or the TRANQ Research Act. Even if they aren't as newsworthy, they represent victories of smart, focused people working on marginal problems. And they both passed the House and Senate unanimously.

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The gap between our awareness of these marginal solutions and reality helps explain why Yale students are so pessimistic about changing the world. If you asked the protestor-turned-consultant why they abandoned their political dreams, they'll probably say something about Congress not doing anything anyways. If you ask the climate activist why they're recruiting for investment banking, they'll tell you our rainforests are too cooked to repair. Acknowledging and then focusing on the marginal solution gives agency in an otherwise depressing political age.

When we narrow our focus, the problem becomes both more approachable to solve and more likely to have a solution that gets implemented.

But say you haven't given up. You still want to solve a big problem. Maybe you believe in Roko's Basilisk, the thought experiment that says we should all work to develop AI so it doesn't torture us when superintelligence inevitably arrives. Or perhaps you're on the other side, concerned with AI misalignment and specification gaming. Maybe you've got other big problems to solve — climate change or democracy or urban violence. All these are commendable goals, with the exception maybe of developing a super evil AI. But even here, a mind towards catheters is helpful.

That is because there is not really such a thing as a big problem. There are just many little problems we collectively assign to one big label. There will be no solution to climate change. There will be permitting reforms and innovation subsidies, shifting norms and grid investments, and then one day we'll reach into the bin of little problems labeled climate change and there'll be no more problems to solve. This is how you solve big problems — with marginal solutions.

Now go find your catheter.

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STAFF COLUMNISTS

ALISTAIR BROWNING AND GONI WONG

Why the left must debate

On Sept. 29, the Yale Political Union hosted Aaron Withe, the CEO of the Freedom Foundation, who debated for the resolution, "Ban Public-Sector Unions." It's not a popular argument at Yale. At least, that's what you'd gather from the YPU Instagram poll posted in the hours before the debate: nearly 80 percent of respondents were opposed.

Would it surprise you to learn that, at the end of that evening, the YPU voted 35-25 in favor of the resolution? The same argument, roughly as popular as herpes, won a comfortable victory. How did an initially marginal view end up sweeping the room?

It could be, of course, that Withe is simply a rhetorical phenomenon. Perhaps, purely through the powers of argumentation, he won over a broadly liberal student body. This argument would be compelling if it were true. On Sept. 29, very little cross-ideological voting occurred. The union's four right-leaning parties voted in favor of the resolution, while the Progressives and the Party of the Left stood in almost unanimous opposition. What mattered was that right-wing party members turned out — and left-wing ones didn't. What mattered, ultimately, was that conservatives showed up to debate — and progressives didn't.

So what? Maybe progressive Yalies just find praxis more important than theory. Isn't on-the-ground advocacy a better source of our time and attention than attending a somewhat pompous debate club?

It's an understandable impulse. Indeed, enshrined into the mission of the Progressive Party — the pre-eminent left-wing party at Yale — is the pursuit of practical avenues towards a progressive future. But rhetoric still matters. Persuasion still matters. Debate still matters, and it's increasingly become a practice associated with conservatism. Right-wing media built a brand for itself on the basis of its supposed debate superiority. Ben Shapiro got famous for it. Charlie Kirk built one of the largest on-campus political organizations in the country — Turning Point USA — on the idea that he could set up a tent, prop up a mic and dunk on liberal college kids. The YouTube videos and Instagram clips these provide might seem shallow, but the hits and clicks of these viral videos matter. Rhetoric is a precursor to ideology, and ideology is a precursor to action. In other words, if you want people to work on your causes, you need to win them over.

Of course, it's not fair to attribute political debate's right-wing association solely to the actions of conservatives. The language of the American left — complaints that certain beliefs are simply too objectionable to confront — is often counterproductive even to the advancement of left-wing causes. By their argument, platforming right-wing voices is tantamount to endorsing them.

But this argument ignores a simple fact: right-wing media already has a massive, outsized platform. Fox News accounted for 63 percent of the entire 2025 cable news audience. Spotify's top 10 podcasts include The Joe Rogan Experience and The Tucker Carlson Show. Conservatives have platforms. A refusal to debate won't change that — it'll only cede more territory.

The same trend appears at our university. At Yale, William F. Buckley Jr. '50, the architect of modern conservatism and one of our most prominent political alumni, had a legacy makeover in 2011 when conservative students got together and established the Buckley Institute, providing a forum for "intellectual diversity" and "free speech." The recently inaugurated Turning Point Yale chapter describes itself as pursuing "non-partisan, thought-provoking discussion." Is that really what Turning Point practices? You might disagree — but you have to make that case. In short, when progressives forswear the proverbial microphone, we only allow the conservative megaphone to subsume it.

This isn't a novel idea. The foundational Woodward Report asked Yalies to "challenge the unchallengeable." That charge was never partisan property; it belongs to whoever shows up to claim it.

So to the progressives of Yale: maybe you aren't swayed by high-minded arguments about the importance of discourse, the value of talking to those we disagree with and the necessity of overcoming a polarized society. That's fine. But even if your only interest is the advancement of your political project, well, debate is still invaluable. If you want to be persuasive, compelling and convincing, you need to persuade, compel and convince.

Because if you give up the microphone today, well, who's to say you'll get it back tomorrow?

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