



Ken Cuccinelli Just Does Not Understand Millennials

Gurwin Ahuja October 15, 2013

In the 2012 elections, Millennials proved themselves as a pivotal voting bloc across the country. In Virginia, young voters made up one-fifth of the electorate,¹ 61 percent of whom voted for President Barack Obama.² In Virginia and across the country, this powerful cohort of Millennials faces unique challenges. Economically, young Virginians are dealing with crippling student debt from rising college costs and, in some cases, are not receiving adequate wages or securing good jobs. They are facing a broken immigration system that penalizes undocumented youth raised in this country, and they are lacking common-sense gun laws to protect their communities. Because of these challenges, the outcome of this fall's gubernatorial race is critical for Millennials in Virginia, and candidates must work to understand and address the problems facing them.

With Election Day around the corner, and after two debates and months of campaigning, gubernatorial candidate and Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli has shown that he just does not understand the problems of Virginia's young people. Instead of advancing common-sense policies that will make Millennials in Virginia economically competitive, reforming our immigration system, or reducing gun violence, Cuccinelli has focused his attention on promoting policies that discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, students and limit reproductive rights.

This issue brief explores how Cuccinelli's policies and views will impact Millennials, and outlines his stance on six key issues that affect young Virginians.

Minimum wage

The minimum wage in Virginia is currently benchmarked to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. However, this wage has not kept up with the cost of living: In 1968, the federal minimum wage was \$1.60 per hour. If the federal minimum wage had kept up with inflation, it would be \$10.50 today.³ Research conducted by the Economic Policy Institute shows that increasing the minimum wage to \$9.80 in Virginia would benefit 86.3 percent of workers under age 20. This increase would help an estimated

647,872 young Virginians.⁴ A minimum-wage increase could help a high school student save for the increasing price of college, alleviate some of the pressure on a young person who has to work to support their family, or assist a current college student who has to work two minimum-wage jobs to cover the costs of tuition.

But Cuccinelli does not support increasing the minimum wage. He says that doing so “reduces the opportunities at the lower end of the [income] scale.” According to Cuccinelli, “Businesses do not have money growing on trees. I want everyone to make enough to live on, but we also want them to have a job.”⁵ This seems like a sensible point. But when you look at the facts, his argument falls apart.

Evidence shows that a minimum-wage increase would not hurt businesses, but rather would help Virginia’s economy grow and create more jobs in the state. In fact, recent studies have shown that when states increase their minimum wage—even during periods of high unemployment—they experience “job growth slightly above the national average.”⁶

Businesses can also afford to raise wages. Large corporations—not small businesses—employ two-thirds of low-wage workers in the United States. This is important because most big corporations have recovered from the recession and can afford to pay their workers more.⁷ A higher minimum wage makes sense for young people, business owners, and Virginia’s economy.

Higher education

The cost of higher education in Virginia has been rapidly increasing, and meanwhile state support has been decreasing.⁸ Since Gov. Bob McDonnell (R) has been in office, the state’s higher-education spending has declined by 12 percent and net tuition has increased by 38 percent. In fact, net tuition increased 22 percent just from 2011 to 2012.⁹ Due to declining state support and rising tuition, key programs such as AccessUVA—a need-based financial program at the University of Virginia—are being cut. Cuts to aid programs such as these will price too many Virginians out of an education. Stephanie Montenegro, a student quoted in *The Washington Post*, will be graduating in the spring; since her mother barely makes \$23,000, she would never have been able to attend the University of Virginia without AccessUVA.¹⁰ Thus, state policy on higher-education access is critical for students in Virginia.

To address rising costs, Cuccinelli has actually proposed reasonable higher-education policies, such as increasing tuition-assistance grants, locking in tuition rates for students for four years, introducing “\$10,000 degrees,” and increasing work-study programs. He should be applauded for his proposals and efforts to ensure that the cost of higher education does not price out middle-class families.¹¹ Yet Cuccinelli also made it clear in a Google Hangout town hall that he would also like to continue Gov. McDonnell’s

higher-education policies. How can Virginia's students trust Cuccinelli's proposed higher-education policies if he also advocates for continuing Gov. McDonnell's harmful policies that have made college more expensive?

LGBT rights

Despite the fact that 74 percent of young Virginians are in favor of marriage equality,¹² Cuccinelli has made it clear that he believes same-sex relationships are immoral, once saying that homosexuality “brings nothing but self-destruction, not only physically but of their soul.”¹³ Unfortunately, Cuccinelli's narrow-minded and homophobic position has not been limited to incendiary rhetoric. He has promoted policies with the specific intent of discriminating against LGBT youth.

One of Cuccinelli's first actions as attorney general was to urge public universities to end their sexual orientation nondiscrimination policies, which protect students and employees on campuses and help attract top students and faculty. Vincent F. Callahan Jr., a former Republican member of the Virginia House of Delegates, called Cuccinelli's anti-LGBT policy “reprehensible.”¹⁴

Earlier in his career, as a state senator, Cuccinelli opposed a bill that allowed private companies to voluntarily provide health insurance benefits to employees' domestic partners because it might benefit LGBT couples and, he said, could encourage homosexual behavior.¹⁵ He argued, “The incentives I am opposed to that this bill would put into place far outweigh the economic benefits to the state.”¹⁶ Cuccinelli essentially said that it was more important to stop LGBT couples from receiving health care than the economic benefits that the state could receive by allowing employers to expand access to health insurance. Cuccinelli has gone out of the way to discriminate against young LGBT students and workers who just want to get an education and provide for their loved ones.

Reproductive rights

On the issue of reproductive rights, Cuccinelli is simply dishonest. Although Cuccinelli said at a town hall that he does not “think government should be doing anything about birth control” and that “government legislation shouldn't address contraception,”¹⁷ he supported legislation to limit access to contraception and defund Planned Parenthood.

As a state senator, Cuccinelli co-sponsored a bill that would adopt a so-called “personhood amendment” to the state's constitution.¹⁸ This amendment defined personhood as beginning at the moment of fertilization and would have resulted in banning common forms of contraception. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has strongly

opposed such personhood laws because they prohibit the most reliable form of contraceptives—intrauterine devices—and could put a woman’s life in danger because physicians would not be able to terminate life-threatening pregnancies.¹⁹ The measure was so extreme that it was not even supported by all the Republicans in the General Assembly.²⁰

In addition, Cuccinelli has supported Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider laws, which could result in the closing of clinics that provide abortion care due to restrictive and unnecessary building modifications and upgrades, as well as crisis pregnancy centers, which mislead women about their reproductive health options. How can Virginia’s Millennials trust a candidate who is simultaneously espousing limited government while advocating for big government policies that interfere with women’s personal medical decisions?

Gun violence

Gun violence disproportionately affects young people. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, approximately 68 percent of gun homicide victims and 78 percent of gun homicide offenders were under the age of 35.²¹ Virginia, in particular, knows the horrors of gun violence and its impact on young people; the deadliest mass shooting by a single gunman in American history happened at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. Seung-Hui Cho, a mentally ill student, killed 32 people and wounded 17 more that day.²² While the Virginia Tech shooting is a well-known instance of gun violence in Virginia, the state has been plagued daily by gun violence and lacks adequate laws to deal with this issue. A report from the Center for American Progress shows that of the 50 states, Virginia is the 19th-most prone to gun violence, including overall firearm deaths, aggravated assaults with a firearm, and firearm deaths among children.²³ The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence also gave Virginia a “D” based on the strength of its gun laws.²⁴

Instead of trying to strengthen Virginia’s gun laws to ensure that the mentally ill and criminals do not have access to firearms, Cuccinelli has focused on preserving the status quo. He has even opposed common-sense measures such as requiring background checks at gun shows. Under current law, federally licensed firearm dealers are required to administer a quick background check on all gun purchasers. This short procedure keeps guns out of the hands of the mentally ill and criminals. Sales at gun shows, however, are exempt from running background checks.²⁵ This loophole in the law, called the “gun-show loophole,” has been cited as a factor in numerous deadly shootings, including the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999.²⁶

Requiring background checks at gun shows has broad support from Millennials. In the wake of the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, 81 percent of young people and 88 percent of all Americans supported requiring background checks at gun shows.²⁷ Despite high levels of public support, Cuccinelli still refuses to acknowledge that simple measures to keep guns out of the hands of criminals is smart, common-sense

policy. If Virginia adopted a policy of background checks on all gun sales, which would prohibit people similar to Seung-Hui Cho from purchasing firearms, it could prevent such tragedies.

Immigration

A nationwide majority of Millennials supports the bipartisan immigration bill that passed the Senate.²⁸ Seemingly in agreement with America's young people, Cuccinelli told a bipartisan crowd during the first gubernatorial debate that he strongly supports immigration reform and that he was moved by a naturalization ceremony. "I want very much to see some sort of compromise reached in the area of immigration," he said. "This issue needs to be resolved ... in a way that's favorable to expanding our economy in America."²⁹

His callous actions on immigration as an attorney general and a state senator, however, have not matched his moderate tone during the campaign. Cuccinelli specifically proposed immigration policies that would drastically change the lives of young immigrants in Virginia. In 2008, as a state senator, he sponsored a bill that would strip U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants of their right to citizenship³⁰ and, before changing his campaign website, he highlighted his opposition to in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants.³¹

Conclusion

Millennials in Virginia have proven a crucial constituency for candidates who are serious about holding higher office. In order for Ken Cuccinelli to win this fall, he needs to relate to Millennials and promote policies that will help solve the historic challenges they face. But instead, he has focused his attention on proposals that could make their problems worse or has taken extremely unpopular positions that are contrary to most Millennials' values. With Election Day around the corner, Cuccinelli has conclusively proven that he just does not understand Millennials.

Gurwin Ahuja is a Policy Advocate for Generation Progress Action.

Endnotes

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