

Nick Willets, the UNC Young Democrats president, began to question what – and who – defines political leadership.

Every Tuesday evening, Willets transforms an academic building on campus into a hub of political energy, rallying members of the Young Democrats for another engaging meeting.

One week, members might decorate voting cards over donuts; the next, they're squaring off in a game of political Jeopardy.

"We're trying to make sure we bring people some fun while advancing politically this year through canvassing and all the basics in the world of politics," Willets said.

Fellow Young Democrats member Micah Mangot said Willets plays a specific, curated Spotify playlist at the meetings each week.

"He is a huge Sarbina Carpenter fan," so it was no surprise to Mangot that Willets played her new album at a meeting recently, she said.

For Willets, social media plays a central role in the way politics is consumed by his generation.

Many once believed Gen Z would usher in a new progressive era, inspired by movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter that dominated social media. Former U.S. presidential candidate Kamala Harris launched her campaign with a Charli XCX Brat-inspired aesthetic and support from high-profile celebrities like Taylor Swift and Beyoncé — figures whose cultural influence strongly resonates with many young voters.

But in the years since, algorithms have splintered online spaces, revealing a generation more politically divided than the headlines suggested. The 2024 election results suggest that Gen Z's progressive enthusiasm hasn't yet translated into measurable political change.

Willets recalls the day after the election as one that felt off; the mood on campus was subdued, the usual energy replaced by quiet uncertainty. Living in a blue enclave, he said, made it difficult to accept what so many others envisioned for the country. The outcome felt distant from the values and conversations that surrounded him.

"I think one of the big themes is that we're living in a world where information is so easily accessible – you can find anything you want," he said, noting how algorithms and a fractured media landscape shape what people actually see.

Nick observed a trend among men his age toward more conservative politics, a shift he attributes partly to the influence of political podcasts and social media. His own views don't align with that pattern.

He embraces politics with a fan-like enthusiasm, embodying the spirit of celebrity endorsements and bringing the same excitement one might expect from a devoted music or sports fan. His approach blurs the line between politics and pop culture, making his engagement feel more like fandom than partisanship.

As an avid user of TikTok, Willets remembers seeing edits of Kamala Harris set to 'That's So True' by Gracie Abrams. The videos, blending political imagery with catchy music, reflected the way social media increasingly shapes political narratives, making politics feel more like pop culture than ever before.

Many people are drawn into the political field because of their passion for certain subjects. Whether it's economics, social justice or environmental issues, these interests often spark a desire to influence change and shape policies that align with their values.

Willets' interest in politics was sparked by a television show.

More specifically he was bothered by the idea that a reality show personality would be considered a viable candidate for the U.S. presidency.

To him, President Donald Trump was the 'you're fired' guy from 'The Apprentice' — a celebrity, not a politician.

“He was good at reality. He was funny,” Willets said.

Ten years ago when Trump made his entrance down the escalator and shifted from entertainer to political figure, Nick said it clashed with his vision for the future of the country and sparked a deeper interest in politics.

The outcome of the 2016 presidential election pushed Willet into the political sphere, awakening a sense of civic duty and a desire to advocate for justice and equity. Now, as a senior student, he is preparing to enter the field of law, determined to become a voice for those who are often unheard and to help shape a system that reflects the values he believes the nation deserves.

Willets was born and raised in Apex, North Carolina and had his sights set on studying at UNC-Chapel Hill, where both of his parents went to college. But he didn't get in.

He began his college journey at Appalachian State University then transferred to Chapel Hill for his sophomore year.

During his first year at UNC-CH, he was introduced to UNC Young Democrats through a family connection — his cousin. What started as a casual involvement quickly grew into a passion, and by his senior year, he found himself leading and organizing hundreds of undergraduate students in the political sphere.

Sloan Duval, former UNC Young Democrats president, said Nick brings an energetic approach to politics and stays enthusiastic even about the “boring” tasks.

Willets said that running a large organization can be stressful, but at the end of the day, it's rewarding to make an impact.

Most of Willet's closest friends are involved in the organization, and even his brother attends the weekly meetings. Willet has a playful side, often calling his brother a 'clown' in jest.

At the meetings, it's hard to get a word in with him, as he's usually kept busy by questions from the other members.

One of his friends from the organization describes him as “very knowledgeable.” Willets can tell you the state representative district number off the top of his head. He's also known as the “chauffeur,” frequently driving members to meetings and events.

Now, as he prepares to enter law school, Willets is determined to become a voice for those who are often unheard.