

Opinion

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# I Went to Florida to See the 31-Year-Old Candidate Thrilling Gen Z. We're in Trouble.

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Damon Winter/The New York Times

Last week, James Fishback, a 31-year-old running for governor in Florida, was speaking to a packed house at the Queens Harbour Yacht and Country Club in Jacksonville. Every one of the room's almost 100 seats was taken, and people were standing several rows deep around the perimeter, with more listening from the lobby outside. The crowd was mostly male and very young; several attendees told me they were in high school. A few wore the "America First" baseball caps popular with followers of Nick Fuentes, the influential white nationalist troll.

Slight and bespectacled, Fishback has a geeky charisma and the verbal dexterity of a former competitive high school debater. His policies are a mishmash of extreme conservatism and economic progressivism; nationalism tinged with socialism, if you will. He believes that Florida's gun laws are too strict, its abortion laws are too lax and its public

teacher pay is too low. He's called for a 50 percent sin tax on OnlyFans creators and \$10,000 [grants](#) to high-performing high school graduates to buy homes or start businesses. Though he's the son of an immigrant — his mother is Colombian — he wants a total immigration moratorium.

Most of all, Fishback has made contempt for Israel and its American lobby a centerpiece of his campaign, constantly reminding audiences how much America spends on Israel while its own needs are ignored. He often calls Byron Donalds, a Black Republican congressman who is the front-runner in the governor's race, "AIPAC Shakur," a play on Tupac Shakur. Appearing on Tucker Carlson's show in January, Fishback described the "sexual, sadistic" pleasure that pro-Israel donors get in forcing America to "bend over" for a foreign country. Carlson endorsed him and wrote, "Pretty soon, all winning Republican politicians will talk like this."

After Fishback's hourlong speech, a young guy stood up to ask how he could trust the candidate to keep his promises, especially when it came to refusing money from AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Fishback claimed that three weeks prior, a donor had offered his PAC \$500,000 if he would disavow Fuentes's supporters. "I hung up the phone because I will never disavow patriotic Americans," he shouted, to whoops and applause.

Fuentes's ideology is a sneering, adolescent sort of Nazism. As he said on his podcast last year: "Jews are running society. Women need to shut the [expletive] up. Blacks need to be imprisoned for the most part." In Fishback, Fuentes's followers — often known as groypers — have a candidate who is serious about representing them.

It turns out that there are a lot of Gen Z men who have been waiting for a candidate like Fishback to come along. The Jacksonville event was hosted by the Greater Intracoastal Republican Club, which regularly brings Republican candidates to speak. The group's president, Laura Collins, seemed somewhat amazed by the turnout. "I was surprised to have so many young people," she told me. "This is the most people that we've had for any candidate."



Damon Wilson/The New York Times



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Fishback is extremely unlikely to ever become governor of Florida. Most polls show him with 5 percent or 6 percent of the vote, and as of January, he'd raised around \$19,000, compared with more than \$45 million by Donalds, who has Donald Trump's endorsement. He may not even be legally qualified for the office, since Florida law requires governors to have lived in the state for at least seven years, and Fishback registered to vote in the District of Columbia in 2020.

But anyone concerned with the escalating extremism of the young right should be paying attention to his campaign and the enthusiastic crowds it's drawing. More than any political candidate yet, Fishback has managed to bring the paranoid, transgressive, meme-drunk spirit of the right-wing internet into the real world. Chris Rufo, a conservative operative who played a major role in Ron DeSantis's war on wokeness, is no fan of Fishback, but said that "he's demonstrated a pretty sophisticated method for turning a campaign with no budget, a skeleton staff, into the most talked about campaign in Florida politics."

Fishback is tapping into an increasingly radicalized generation of Republicans. In December, the conservative Manhattan Institute [found](#) that 31 percent of Republicans under 50 identify their *own* views as racist, and 25 percent say their views are antisemitic. For those over 50, it's only 4 percent for each. The same survey showed that a majority of Republican men under 50 think that the Holocaust either didn't happen or was exaggerated.

Last week, College Republicans of America appointed a new political director, Kai Schwemmer, who is a Fuentes crony and Fishback admirer. "James fishback has trustworthy physiognomy, Byron Donalds' on the other hand is deceitful and suspicious," he [posted](#) on X. Fishback doesn't represent the mainstream of the Republican Party today, but he's showing us one vision of a post-Trump Republican future.

**After Fishback's speech**, I met Jeremiah Kimmell, a 22-year-old wearing one of the blue "America First" baseball caps common to Fuentes's movement, and Charles Metcalf, 20. Kimmell runs a land-clearing business but sees little prospect of an independent adult life. "We live with our parents," he told me. "We don't see any end in sight, in that we're not going to own a home. Something has to change."

Fuentes, he told me, "gave me a political consciousness." Then he discovered Fishback on social media and signed up to volunteer as a county chair, his first foray into politics. Kimmell insisted he has nothing against Jews — "I love everyone," he said — but he deeply resents American aid to Israel and laws that tar criticism of the Jewish state as antisemitic. He was indignant at having to certify that he wasn't boycotting Israel when bidding on a state contract.

At Fishback events, it was easy to see how laws meant to quash anti-Israel activism have backfired, particularly among young men who've come of age in a conservative movement that treats demands for greater linguistic sensitivity as woke tyranny. When they're ordered to watch what they say about Israel, it only imbues attacks on Zionism with subversive excitement. "Just like whenever you're being raised up and your parents say, 'Hey, don't do that,' it makes the kid want to do it even more," said Metcalf.

Given everything Israel has done to earn the world's opprobrium, it isn't always easy to determine the line between legitimate criticism and antisemitic demonization. Wherever that line is, though, Fishback seems to delight in crossing it. Like Carlson, he often performs a slick two-step routine when it comes to Jews, baiting them and then acting affronted, even incredulous, when accused of bigotry.

At a campaign stop at the University of Central Florida last month, Fishback referred to the junk in school cafeterias as "goyslop," a far-right [term](#) for unhealthy food that Jews foist on non-Jews. When I spoke to him before his Jacksonville rally, he insisted it was just a harmless joke. "As President Trump rather eloquently said, we do a little bit of trolling," he told me.

For a decade now, Trump has shown that trolling gets attention, which is one of the most invaluable commodities in modern politics. There have always been extremists at the edge of conservative politics, congeries of Nazi sympathizers, neo-Confederates, theocrats and militia types. Traditionally, the Republican Party's relationship to these far-right figures has been an uneasy mix of pandering and embarrassment. One of Trump's innovations was to dispatch with all shame, reveling in the energy born of smashing taboos.

In Trump's Republican Party, Hitlerian language about immigrants and minorities has become routine. (Just this week, the MAGA congressman Andy Ogles [wrote](#) on X, "Muslims don't belong in American society.") It shouldn't be surprising that young conservatives, raised in a movement that celebrates cruel provocations, don't see antisemitism as off limits. "I think it's unfortunate, but the algorithm right now on the right, and the young right in particular, rewards conspiracy, antisemitism and ideological slop," said Rufo.

No one can say for sure how much social media shapes its audiences' prejudices as opposed to simply catering to them. What's clear, however, is that it's a boon to Fishback's style of politics. He engages in stunts, joining Tinder to lobby the women he matches with and beefing with the popular OnlyFans model Sophie Rain. He hurls racist taunts at his enemies, writing that Don Lemon, who was arrested after reporting on a protest in a Minnesota church, is "lucky he's not getting hanged in the public square." And he presents himself as one of the few Republicans bold enough to take on Zionist power.

Almost all of the people I met at Fishback events said they learned about him on Instagram or TikTok, except for an older woman who attended the Jacksonville rally at the urging of her grandson in Kansas. Like most political observers, I knew there were lots of frustrated, epistemologically unmoored and extremely online young people out there; it's why influencers like Fuentes have such significant audiences. Still, it was slightly uncanny to meet so many of them in the flesh, like comment threads come to life.

The day after the Jacksonville rally, Fishback went to St. Augustine, where he spoke from the bed of a pickup truck to about 100 people in an asphalt lot. As he often does, he drew elliptical links between Israel and the Jeffrey Epstein sex trafficking scandal. Someone recently asked him, he said, if he thinks Israel has a right to exist. "I believe that American *citizens* have a right to exist in their country without being replaced, without being trafficked, and without being sent to war and distorted and converted by foreign powers," he said.



Damon Winter/The New York Times

When Marco Rubio all but admitted last week that Israel had dragged America to war with Iran — before trying to walk his comments back — it was a gift to Fishback, who presented it as confirmation of his assertions about malign Israeli influence. Unlike most Republicans, he isn't shy about criticizing Trump for starting the war, demanding that he publicly explain his objectives and plans for getting out. But Fishback puts most of the blame for the conflict on Israel.

“Israel roped us into this war because they are too cowardly to fight for themselves,” he said in St. Augustine. “If they were so convinced that Iran was a threat, they could have done it themselves, but they want to spill our blood, our treasure, spend our money.”

After he spoke, I met Ashton Rozar, a polite 20-year-old sign language interpreter, who told me it was his first-ever political rally. His ideological awakening, he said, came when Kanye West published a list “of names of Jewish people who are in control of banking systems and stuff like that.”

He described a sense of helplessness in the face of the obscene corruption he learns about online, particularly around Epstein, and said he often struggles to discern truth from falsehood, especially given the proliferation of A.I. In Fishback, he saw a seemingly credible source — a real-world politician — whom he could count on to help anchor his suspicions in facts. “Fishback is the guy that everybody’s using for proof,” he said.

**Ironically, given how** Fishback is benefiting from the young right’s groyper turn, he’s a latecomer to anti-Israel politics. In 2023, he called Bari Weiss’s book “How to Fight Anti-Semitism” the best he’d read that year. The next year, he blasted Joe Biden for not being tough enough on Iran, which he said was funding proxies that “attack the Jewish state, and that is unacceptable.”

When I asked Fishback how his views had shifted so drastically, he paraphrased Ernest Hemingway on bankruptcy, saying, “They changed gradually and then suddenly.” He was disturbed, he said, at “seeing free speech rights erode” over Israel. Then came Israel’s [bombing](#) of the Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza last July, which Fishback, a conservative Catholic, called “the crossing of the Rubicon.”

It almost doesn’t matter whether Fishback’s conversion was sincere; more important was that it was opportune. He had been attempting to make it in conservative politics for years, efforts that have exploded in scandal and litigation. In the ultranationalist right, he found a growth market.

In 2019, Fishback founded the high school debate program Incubate Debate, an alternative to the National Speech and Debate Association, which he claimed had been subverted by woke judges. “That’s why you rarely see students present arguments in favor of capitalism,

defending Israel or challenging affirmative action,” he [wrote](#) in a viral 2023 Free Press article.

But by the time that article came out, as NBC News would later [report](#), one of Florida’s largest school districts had cut ties with Fishback, claiming he’d started an inappropriate relationship with an Incubate Debate student when she was 17. They moved in together when she was 18, and she’d later seek a restraining order against him, though a judge denied her request. Fishback denies any wrongdoing.

Fishback also spent the last few years locked in litigation with a former employer, the hedge fund Greenlight Capital, which accused him of stealing confidential information and publicly inflating his job title, among other allegations. In September, he agreed to pay the hedge fund’s legal costs.

Just before leaving Greenlight, Fishback had formed his own company, Azoria Capital. In 2024, he started a new anti-woke fund to great fanfare at Mar-a-Lago. It collapsed months later. In January, a Florida judge ordered Fishback to surrender Azoria Capital stock certificates and luxury purchases to the U.S. Marshals Service as payment on the \$229,000 he owes to Greenlight. His Tesla has also been repossessed.

Now he has reinvented himself as a populist opponent of Wall Street, Israel and Big Tech, making his financial troubles part of his pitch. “I’m not rich,” he said in a December video, adding, “I have student loan debt, credit card debt; my car was repossessed months ago.” Then he laid into his “billionaire ex-boss” and said, “No one should be elected Florida governor by how much money they have in the bank, but how much fuel they have in their heart” to fight for Florida families.

Somehow, his pivot appears to be working.

After Fishback’s event in Jacksonville, he went to a local Waffle House, part of a Waffle House tour he’d promoted on Carlson’s show. When I arrived, a few minutes after he did, young people were swarming the place. (The next day, Waffle House would ban him.) I couldn’t push through the throngs to get into the restaurant, so I hung out with the crowd milling about outside. There I met 23-year-old Leicee Guiou, who told me, “This is the first thing I’ve ever really shown up to since the Black Lives Matter protests.”



(Samuel Walker/The New York Times)

Guiou, a case worker for foster children, is a registered Democrat and a “big Zohran Mamdani fan.” But she said she’s considering changing her registration so she can vote for Fishback in the primary. She’s drawn to his promise not to take money from AIPAC and to his insistent emphasis on affordability. Guiou said she and her fiancé have to live with roommates because rent is so expensive and homeownership unachievable.

She told me that she listens to Fuentes sometimes, and some of what he says makes sense to her. “I would say that there are some things that he speaks for that I agree with, especially about things not being affordable, about the elites purposefully keeping the general population under their control by pricing us out of things that should be considered basic needs,” said Guiou. And she listens to Candace Owens, who has lately been accusing Charlie Kirk’s wife of complicity in a Zionist plot to murder him. “My politics are kind of confusing, right?” she told me with a laugh.

Of course, these are confusing times, especially if you’re young and have grown up in a country heaving from crisis to crisis, processing national breakdown through the schizoid pulses of social media, understanding that something has gone horribly wrong but not how or why. In this environment of hysteria and decay, a podcaster or a politician can go far by promising to unmask the dark forces responsible for it all.

“I think that most of the older generation in the Republican Party don’t like him, simply because they think that his policies are too extreme,” Rozar, the sign language interpreter, said of Fishback. “But Gen Z likes him so much because he has those extreme policies.”

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