Young Voters Say They Feel Abandoned
By DAMIEN CAVE

MIAMI — Two years ago, the University of Miami could not get enough Barack Obama. The campaign rally he held here felt like a rock concert, his face appeared on T-shirts all over campus, and pro-Obama volunteers registered 2,000 new voters.

Meetings of the College Democrats that attracted 200 people in 2008 now pull in a dozen. New voter registration is way down, too, and free posters of President Obama — once “the Michael Jordan” of politics, as one freshman put it — are now refused by students.

“It’s not the fad anymore,” said Jessica Kirsner, 21, a junior from Houston and vice president of the College Democrats. “It’s not the fad to be politically knowledgeable and active.”

This was not what Generation O expected Mr. Obama won two years ago with 66 percent of the 18- to 29-year-old vote, a historic proportion. Americans under 30 also worked on campaigns at a greater rate than the general population did for the first time since 1952, or possibly even earlier, according to the National Election Studies.

Now, however, former Obama volunteers nationwide say that they and their former colleagues are less involved and more ambivalent. Experts say the usual midterm effect, in which young voters are especially likely to disengage, has combined with an unexpected distance that has arisen between Mr. Obama and many young constituents. While most of them still view him more favorably than their parents or grandparents do, various polls show that the youthful passion that led to action has not been sustained.

“They were emotionally invested,” said Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. “Somehow that should have been turned into, for Democrats, a revival of progressive policy, and in a neutral way, a revival of democracy starting with young people.”

“So far, it hasn’t happened,” he added.

Many young Obama supporters and volunteers said they had hoped to play a bigger role with the Obama agenda. The campaign had given them structures, for taking off a semester to
train and then work in a campaign office, for example. In nondescript towns all over the country, they were the public face of the campaign, as they helped turn undecided voters into sure things.

They also played a prominent role in independent movements that sprouted online, like the Great Schlep, which pushed young people to talk about Obama with senior citizens. And Facebook helped pull the threads together.

Post-inauguration, no equivalent ecosystem has emerged. Some former volunteers said that was inevitable, because governing is inherently less inspiring than a campaign. “In front of a desk isn’t as good as in front of 100,000 people,” said Alex Riehm, a graduate student at George Washington University who canvassed for Mr. Obama at the University of Florida.

Others, though, said the administration or Organizing for America, the group that grew from the Obama campaign, could have done more. Why didn’t Mr. Obama, who appeared on “The Daily Show” this week for the first time since taking office, go there more often, they asked? Why did he seem to refocus on young people only in the last few months, with campus rallies? The health care debate seems to have been where the momentum was lost. Even though Organizing for America held campus “teach-ins” with experts to explain the legislation, all the talk about Medicare led many young people to feel alienated and ignored by the president.

Younger voters said older ones seemed to become the priority. “He made young people feel important, then he got into office and there was no one talking to us,” Ms. Kirsner said.

Indeed, a look back at e-mails from Organizing for America as health care legislation developed does show a general approach that did little to focus on young people. E-mails dealt with telling supporters what to say, rather than asking for input — and as a result, many young people said, they stopped reading them. Ms. Kirsner, while acknowledging that young people could have done more themselves, said it did not have to be that way. At a campus cafeteria called the Oasis, she and two other members of the College Democrats offered suggestions that could have helped keep young people engaged.

They included a printable wallet-sized card with reasons to support a complicated policy like the health care overhaul; regular audio or video addresses from the president, specifically for young supporters; and a youth ambassador — someone well-known, like the actor Kal Penn — who would travel to colleges and keep in touch with the views of young people.

A greater degree of focus on the young, the University of Miami students said, would have helped break through the talking points being offered by Republicans. Even on mostly liberal
college campuses, the arguments against Mr. Obama have become more common. “The other day, they were blaring Rush Limbaugh in the breezeway,” said Gaurav Dhiman, 20, president of the College Democrats.

Mik Moore, 36, a creator of the Great Schlep, said that he too had found less energy and less creative communication among Obama supporters who were active two years ago. He described a recent meeting in Los Angeles with about a dozen young professionals who were trying to come up with messages or approaches that resonated and got people talking about progressive policies or the administration.

Only one emerged: when Stephen Colbert made a mock appearance before Congress to talk about immigration.

“If you don’t have that creative assertive energy out there, it’s reflective of the level of the engagement that people have over all,” Mr. Moore said. He described the mood among former Obama activists as disappointment and despair: “Disappointment that more didn’t happen, and despair that even if you have a large majority in Congress, there’s tons of stuff you can’t get done and the stuff you can get done may not be what you want.”

He hesitated to blame the president, who he said was obviously busy trying to govern.

Lynda Tran, a spokeswoman for Organizing for America, said that Mr. Obama “was busy, frankly, dealing with digging us out and making sure we didn’t fall into another Great Depression.”

Ms. Tran said that the president had once again made young people a priority with the midterm elections.

Last Thursday night, he even joined a conference call with members of the College Democrats around the country to encourage them.

But the impact, so far, seems to be limited. In 2008, the College Democrats at Columbia University drove 130 students to Virginia to canvass for voters in a state that Mr. Obama barely won. On Friday, the group organized a trip to a swing district in Pennsylvania. Eighty people said they would go; 68 showed up.

“People were infatuated in 2008,” said Maddy Joseph, 20, a member of the group. “The reality has set in, and that’s frustrating for a lot of people.”

Catharine Skipp contributed reporting from Miami, and Andrew Keh from New York.