

Millennials: Political Explorers



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Takeaways

Millennials have distinct ideas about politics that differ from their parents and grandparents. In particular, Millennials:

- Eschew party identity, instead calling themselves Independents;
- Are open to government solutions, even as their concerns about government efficacy grow;
- Are skeptical of big institutions, such as corporate America and organized religion;
- Diverge on culture war issues, adopting both liberal and conservative values;
- Embrace racial and ethnic diversity, including immigrants; and,
- Question American exceptionalism, instead emphasizing cooperative engagement.

Millennials have come of age in a period of increasing availability of information and expansive customization of goods and services. Their experiences have led them to an *à la carte* worldview, including in politics. They may be voting for Democrats by wider margins than Republicans, but there's no indication that they have bought the *prix fixe* menu of policy options historically offered by the Democratic Party, nor that brand loyalty to the Party will cement them as Democrats forever. Yet while Republican claims that these voters are winnable in future elections are plausible, they, too, have

been asking younger voters to agree to a multi-course tasting menu with limited options. Millennials are pragmatic—they want to know what works and are willing to take ideas from each side. They eschew ideological purity tests of the past. In short, they are winnable by both parties, if only policymakers understood and reflected their values.

Introduction

The unique experiences of the Millennial Generation have given this cohort a worldview that often departs from their elders. * The increased availability of information has empowered them as both consumers of and creators of content. The seemingly infinite range of choices in the marketplace has annihilated the perception that they must choose between a handful of set options and accept them wholesale. And their distinct experiences have resulted in political attitudes that don't map neatly onto traditional liberal Democrat or conservative Republican ideologies.

Millennials are defined here as born between 1981 and 2000.

In this report, we consider the political implications of Millennials' distinct experiences and how they shape this generation's perspective of political parties, the role of government, big institutions, social issues, racial and ethnic diversity, and America's role in the world. In time, there is no doubt that Millennials will transform politics. And neither party seems prepared for it.

I. Millennial Experiences

Empowered by Information

Millennials have been maligned for their use of and reliance on “gadgets”—whereby selfies symbolize their narcissism and oversharing on social media symbolizes their conceit.¹ But while technological changes have upended how this cohort shops, learns, interacts, and connects, the political effects of being raised in an information age are sometimes understated. If knowledge is power, then Millennials have

been empowered at an earlier stage in life than any other generation.

Consider the following aspects of the Millennials generation: nine in ten are online.² They are wirelessly connected when away from home or work (62%).³ Three-quarters of Millennials use social networking sites (e.g., Facebook or Twitter)—compared to 50% of Gen Xers, 30% of Boomers, and 6% of Silents. And 55% of Millennials check those sites daily (or multiple times per day)—whereas only 38% of Gen Xers and 37% of Baby Boomers do the same.⁴ Millennials believe technology brings them closer to friends and family (54%), with few (35%) worried that technology results in isolationism—Boomers and Silents are much more divided on this question.⁵

Generational Divides on Technology

	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer	Silent
Wireless connection when not at home	62%	48%	35%	11%
Use social networking sites	75%	50%	30%	6%
Check social networks daily	55%	38%	37%	N/A
Technology brings us closer to friends and family	54%	52%	48%	44%
Technology makes us more isolated	35%	36%	42%	44%

Source: Pew Research Center

Younger people throughout modern American history have been the most open to new ideas and products as their habits and routines have not been fully formed. But the Millennial Generation has come of age in a time of unprecedented technological change, which has allowed for the instantaneous availability of new information. When music is released, it can be downloaded instantly. Products can be ordered from anywhere. Videos can become viral in hours, often prompting a political response—as witnessed by the spread of *Kony 2012*. But it's not just that the internet allows for formal institutions to market music, goods, or movies. The availability and accessibility of the tools of modern communication make everyone a potential producer, star, entrepreneur, or political pundit.

As a result, traditional gatekeepers have been replaced for Millennials by a network of connections and options. Gone are the times when one anchor or daily newspaper was the ultimate source of information.⁶ Gone is the time when disputes over sports trivia were settled with bar brawls, a lack of directions meant stopping at a gas station, or the phone book was how you reached a friend. Now it's Wiki this, Google that, and Facebook them. These changes not only provide Millennials with information and tools in real time, but also make them into self-reliant explorers seeking out solutions from any corner of the world.

The political implications of a generation raised on information on demand are far-reaching. Millennials believe they are equipped to make informed decisions and draw their own conclusions about a range of issues. They also exhibit a deep desire for authenticity. Carefully stage-managed personalities—in politics, entertainment, or any field—may alienate Millennials who crave immediate feedback and the truth behind the mirage. Senator Cory Booker (D–NJ) may be an anomaly today—a politician who engages with constituents online and in real time—but he's likely the model for the future. Case in point: Senator Rand Paul (R–KY) recently joined SnapChat to better engage his constituents and a younger, national audience. Instant communication is already flattening hierarchical relations in the workplace and society writ large. Politics—the purview of seniority, kingmakers, and waiting your turn—is in for a big shake-up, with Millennials leading the way. Just ask Wendy Davis.

Choice and Personalization Rule

For nearly two decades, the Cola Wars signified an important divide in American tastes—you were either a Coke or a Pepsi household. But now, people can make any flavor soda they dream up in their own home—and they have the ability to buy artisanal sodas, ones with sugar cane, or flavors previously reserved for foreign markets. Millennials don't need cable or a satellite dish. They can stream what they watch on a range of devices when it's convenient for them.

The traditional “Thursday Night Lineup on NBC” is less dominant; binging on “House of Cards” at any hour of day is the new norm.

The *Economist* recently dubbed the Millennial mindset the “Starbucks” or “Meg Ryan” problem (a reference to her finicky character in *When Harry Met Sally*)—the ability to order coffee in seemingly limitless combinations, or endless customization of one’s meal (house salad BUT with the balsamic dressing AND the dressing *on the side*).⁷ Much to the chagrin of many in marketing, Millennials are much more willing than previous generations to switch even from their most favored brands if they can get a better deal or more of the features they want.⁸ Millennials don’t feel limited by brand loyalty—true in the marketplace of goods and services as well as politics.

The ability to customize their soda, or shoes, or even their entertainment experience means that Millennials want to have real input into the design process. They expect brands to genuinely engage with consumers and won’t be satisfied with simply being ignored or having someone sell them a pre-made product. Living in an *à la carte* world with unlimited options, Millennials don’t feel they have to choose between two limited choices. If they don’t like a product, think the price is too high, or don’t agree with a company’s role in society, they are likely to switch brands. Conversely, Millennials may reward good companies with a boycott or carrotbomb. For example, 85% indicated that they would be willing to switch brands and 73% to try a new brand they’ve never heard of *if* the new brand aligned with a cause they support.⁹

Political strategists often assume that once a pattern of partisan voting is established, voters will stick with their party, regardless of substantive policy disagreements that may emerge. But Millennials are less brand loyal than other generations at the outset, less likely to be satisfied with two static choices, and more apt to be swayed to change their tune than the voters who came before them.

II. The Political Implications

Eschewing Party Identity

Over the past decade, the number of Independents has grown significantly. But the percent of Millennials describing themselves as political Independents has skyrocketed compared to other generations. Since President Obama’s election, the number of self-identified Independents among the Millennial Generation has increased by eleven points—nearly double the pace of change among all other generational cohorts.¹⁰ This shift, means that at least half of younger voters now refuse to associate themselves with either political party—and it suggests that their allegiances cannot be assumed.

Self-Identified Independents by Generation

	2004	2008	2014	Change 2008 to 2014
Millennials	38%	39%	50%	+11
Gen X	33%	34%	39%	+5
Baby Boomers	30%	31%	37%	+6
Silents	25%	27%	32%	+5

Source: Pew Research Center

In fact, between 2008 and 2012, President Obama’s support among voters 18–29 years olds fell from +34 to +23—an eleven point drop.* While President Obama still won younger voters by a wide margin, his margin slipped more among this age group than any older cohorts. Among 45–64 year olds his support declined by five points between 2008 and 2012. Among those over 65, it fell by four points.

Millennials were born between 1981 and 2000. In 2008, Millennials were ages 8–27. Thus in 2008, nearly all of the 18–29 year old voters were drawn from the Millennial generation. In 2012, Millennials were between the ages of 12 and 32. Thus in 2012, all of the 18–29 year old voters were drawn exclusively from the Millennials generation, but some were also counted in the 30–44 age category.

The Independent label isn’t just a hipster, counter-cultural “whatever” signal from apathetic youth. Millennials view the Republican Party unfavorably by 19 points and consider the GOP too extreme.¹¹ But their disappointment in President Obama has risen, while hopefulness and pride have fallen

below fifty percent.¹² They aren't satisfied with either side, which in turn diminishes their desire to associate themselves with a party. And that translates into less reliable partisan voting and more opportunities for individual candidates to win over their support.

Open to Government Solutions

In 2012, many analysts were stunned when younger voters *increased* their share of the electorate over 2008 and came out to support President Obama (though with a lower margin). The assumption was that high unemployment and perceived failures of the Obama Administration to deliver on campaign promises would erode support from disillusioned youth. Yet Millennials displayed one characteristic that set them apart from older generations and the dominant Republican common wisdom—a deep belief that government can play a positive role in people's lives. Despite a lot of experience with the failure of government, Millennials still see it as a positive force, but the question is whether that faith will continue or fade. They've certainly had a lot of opportunity for their trust in government to be shaken: think Iraq, Katrina, the financial crisis, and the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA) rollout.

In a 2011 Pew intergenerational comparison, Millennials supported a bigger government providing more services (56%) over a smaller one providing fewer services (35%), a near reversal of their Baby Boomer parents, who supported a smaller government (54%) over a bigger one (35%).¹³ Just a year earlier—the year of the Tea Party takeover of Congress, in fact—53% of Millennials said the government should be doing more to solve problems compared to 42% who felt the government was doing too many things better left to individuals and businesses. No other generational cohort said government should do more.¹⁴ There is no question that at the outset, Millennials are entering the political scene with a more positive view of government than their elders.

The formative years for the Millennial Generation have been marked by major crises: September 11th, wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan, the recession, and global climate change, to name a few. In their own words, Millennials have concluded:

Our passage into adulthood has been marked by natural disasters, times of economic hardship, and the longest war fought in U.S. history. And our perspective has been fundamentally shaped by the Internet, which has made us hyper-informed and constantly connected [to] the events around the world.¹⁵



Faced with these daunting problems, Millennials have entered the political sphere supporting greater government intervention, not less, on a variety of fronts, from financial regulation and poverty alleviation programs to investments in infrastructure and education. Their experiences lead them to a belief that solutions require engagement from a wide range of stakeholders, including (but not limited to) the government.

This all bodes well for Democrats: if Millennial faith in government holds up, it is likely that most Millennials will stay in the Democratic camp. But pitfalls lurk. Since President Obama assumed office, Millennial trust in the government has fallen sharply. Consider the following data (all from before the *Affordable Care Act* rollout):

- *When something is run by the government it is usually inefficient and wasteful*—agreement among Millennials increased from 42% in 2009 to 51% in 2012.¹⁶
- *The government is really run for the benefit of all the people*—agreement among Millennials fell from 59% in 2009 to 42% in 2012.¹⁷

- *Trust the government to do what's right all or most of the time* —agreement among 18–29 year olds fell from 44% in 2004 to 29% in 2013.¹⁸

This rising skepticism of government is likely a response to real or perceived failures on everything from government surveillance to continuing gridlock and Congressional paralysis in the face of economic turmoil. Millennial faith in government could further erode from concerns about efficacy and a sluggish economy.

The problems with the rollout of HealthCare.gov and the government shutdown could compound Millennial skepticism. In particular, Millennials' experience with the ACA demonstrates that their support for expansive government programs cannot be taken for granted. In a December 2013 Harvard poll, 57% of 18–29 year olds disapproved of the ACA, with approval standing at 38%.¹⁹ * Worse, a full 52% of younger voters now think the Obama Administration has been incompetent in running the government.²⁰

Harvard did not ask the three-part question of whether they would rather repeal the law entirely, keep the law, or keep it but fix it.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the economy grew by more than 3% per year on average between 1949 and 2000, with the economy growing at a clip greater than 3% for 34 of those years. But between 2001 and 2013, economic growth slowed to 1.8%. Even if we remove the effects of the recession, economic growth just barely inched up to 2.11%. At a time when the large Millennial cohort is entering the workforce, economic growth rates below historical averages could threaten Millennial support for Democratic economic policy—and provide an opening for Republicans.

If Democrats expect to continue to win by big margins among Millennials, they must demonstrate that government can function effectively and make good on its promises, rather than just relying on an initial openness to a more activist government. And in the wake of privacy concerns and

questions about the efficacy of government, Millennials seek transparency from policymakers, as well as a willingness to admit mistakes and learn from them.

For Republicans, an anti-government agenda, lacking constructive suggestions to solve big problems, will likely fall on deaf ears with this generation. Millennials may be cautious about “big government solutions” in the wake of perceived failures and shortcomings by lawmakers or new programs. But an agenda based solely on individual responsibility and market solutions to the challenges we face will be unlikely to garner widespread support among Millennials or inspire a new generation of voters. For Republicans to win them, they may need to find an active government version of conservatism.

Increasing concerns about the government’s efficacy fuel Republicans’ anti-government, pro-market appeals to younger voters. Yet Millennials also express deep skepticism about institutions beyond government—many of whom are deeply connected to the Republican Party. Millennial faith in corporate America and Wall Street has eroded. As parishioners they’ve turned away from the organized church. With a house built on religious conservatism and free-market fundamentalism, the Republican Party’s current foundation is ill-suited to attracting new residents from the Millennial generation. But a libertarian appeal could potentially gain traction among younger voters, and early signs suggest that younger Millennials are more open to Republican appeals than those who are on the older end of the generation.²¹ Skeptical of Big Institutions

Three-quarters of Millennials believe that America’s strength is based on the success of business—hardly an anti-capitalist perspective.²² But they are also concerned about corporate influence and power. Eighty-two percent believe too much power is concentrated in the hands of a few big companies—the highest level among any age cohort.²³ Sixty-four percent think corporations are collecting too much information about them.²⁴ Millennials are also more likely

than previous generations to say that corporations have the most influence over how they live their lives—as opposed to government—at 42%, compared to 18% for the Silent Generation.²⁵

Generational Views of Businesses

		Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers	Silents
The strength of this country today is mostly based on the success of American business		76%	74%	67%	72%
There is too much power concentrated in the hands of a few big companies		82%	76%	74%	68%
I am concerned that business corporations are collecting too much information about people like me		64%	75%	79%	81%
Which of these do you think has the most influence over how you live your life?	Government	40%	39%	42%	48%
	Business	42%	41%	35%	18%

Source: Pew Research Center

Unsurprisingly, Millennial skepticism also extends to the virtues of the free market, with 72% believing that a free market economy needs government regulation to serve the public’s interest—compared to 61% of Gen X, 62% of Boomers, and 54% of Silents.²⁶ The financial crisis, the sluggish economic recovery, and the lack of jobs cast doubt on Wall Street’s and big businesses’ ability to solve problems for everyday Americans. With high levels of student loan debt and unemployment, the basic bargain Millennials were offered—work hard and earn a college degree so you can get a good job—has seemingly disappeared overnight.

Millennial skepticism towards big institutions is also evident in their attitudes towards religion. Only 43% of 18–29 year-olds have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the church and organized religion, a full 10 points lower than seniors. And 26% express very little or no confidence in the church or organized religion, similarly 10 points higher than seniors.²⁷ About 20% of Americans now claim to be religiously unaffiliated, but for those under 30, that figure is 33% (compared to 9% for those over 65).²⁸ While not necessarily reflecting an increase in atheism (the “unchurched” or “nones,” as they are often called, do tend to believe in God and consider themselves spiritual), this trend

suggests a turn away from religion as an institution coupled with a greater emphasis on individual spirituality.

The lack of integration of Millennials into organized religion is complex. Millennials are the most educated generation, and they are more likely than their elders to believe in evolution. Further, they support a broad gay equality agenda, including marriage for gay couples, and feel that many organized religions have been hostile to that movement. The role organized religion continues to play in modern American politics—primarily concentrated on the far right and with an increasingly vocal fundamentalist tilt—is squarely out-of-step with many of younger peoples' views. Thus, while many Millennials may be spiritual and believe in God, they are unwilling to align with an institution that appears at odds with their hearts in many respects.

Millennial voters are unlikely to align with a political party that expects blind faith in large institutions—either governmental or nongovernmental. They are results-oriented and seek evidence that a policy or program will work. If Republicans hope to secure more Millennial support, it isn't enough to simply trust in big business and "let the market decide." The market appears to have failed Millennials, and they are unsure that corporations and large financial institutions are acting in the public's best interest. The church appears to have failed them as well—protecting priests embroiled in scandal and devaluing their gay friends and family as unequal and unwelcome. The popularity of Pope Francis and excitement over the fresh air he's breathed into the Catholic Church in such a short period of time is testament to the baggage associated with organized religion among young people in America today. And the fusion of orthodox religion and Republican Party social conservatism has saddled both of them with the problems of the other in the minds of Millennials.

Diverging on Culture War Issues

Millennials' journey into adulthood coincided with a period of increasing societal tolerance on questions of gender roles, as

well as growing acceptance and visibility of gay and lesbian people in their communities, classrooms, and homes. This massive culture shift has also affected how they view issues around gender and family life. But on some issues, Millennials' experiences have driven them to hold what we may call conservative views on cultural issues rather than conforming to recent patterns of values and partisan alignment.

While views of all Americans—old and young, Democratic and Republican, Evangelical and unaffiliated—have evolved recently toward support for marriage for gay couples, Millennials have been out in front of that movement. In a 2014 survey, 69% of Millennials supported marriage for gay couples, compared to only 37% of the Silent Generation, 45% of the Baby Boom Generation, and 55% of Gen X. While only 27% of white Evangelical Protestants *supported* marriage for gay couples, 43% of white Evangelical Protestant Millennials held similar views.²⁹ In fact, younger voters are more supportive of marriage in every demographic group, with the probability of supporting marriage increasing by 0.8 percent with every birth year. The result is that one-quarter of the change in public opinion between 2004 and 2011 on the issue of marriage was driven by generational change—*younger voters replacing older ones.*³⁰

In contrast to this progressive movement on marriage, public opinion surrounding abortion doesn't exhibit the same tendencies—even when comparing generational cohorts. Here, the experience of Millennials has differed in three ways from older generations—all of which solidify their ambiguity on the issue. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of public battles over access not only to abortion but also basic contraception. But abortion was literally and figuratively brought out of back alleys in the 1970s, so Millennials have not had the generational experience of coat hangers and unsafe medical practices threatening women's health and safety. Furthermore, since the 1980s, and increasing in the 1990s and 2000s, contraception has been much more widely available, allowing people to avoid or delay pregnancy with

more reliability. Finally, ultrasounds were introduced into U.S. hospitals in the 1970s and became widespread in the 1980s and 1990s. Millennials have come of age in an era in which sonogram photos are used to announce a friend’s first-trimester wanted pregnancy on Facebook, which undoubtedly complicates their perspective on ending unwanted pregnancies that are similarly far along.

Consequently, young peoples’ views on the issue of abortion are no more progressive than the attitudes of their parents and grandparents—if anything, there has perhaps even been a rightward shift among some subsections of Millennials. For example, 56% of Americans and 54% of Millennials believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Similarly, 48% of Catholic Millennials and 53% of all Catholics believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases. White Evangelical Protestants overwhelmingly oppose abortion, with 64% saying it should be *illegal* in all or most cases. Starkly, among white Evangelical Protestant Millennials, a whopping 88% believe abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.³¹

Beyond gay equality and abortion, Millennials have views of family life that are distinct from prior generations. Millennials’ views regarding work and household arrangements reflect lived reality—61% of Millennials grew up in a two-parent household, as opposed to 80% of Boomers and Silents, and many had mothers who worked outside the home.³² Only 21% of Millennials ages 18–28 are married, compared to 29% of Gen Xers, 42% of Boomers, and 54% of Silents when they were the same age.³³

Different Generational Family Structures

	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers	Silents
Grew up living mostly with both parents	61%	68%	80%	80%
Married when 18–28	21%	29%	42%	54%

Source: Pew Research Center

And Millennials are less prone to cast moral judgment on Americans who have different family arrangements. Few Millennials disapprove of people living together without being married (22%) or of mothers of young children who

work outside of the home (23%). By contrast, 58% of Silents and 44% of Boomers disapprove of living together without being married, and nearly 4 in 10 of each older generation think it is a bad thing for mothers of young children to work outside the home.³⁴

Over the years, the menu of so-called culture war issues has evolved, and it will no doubt continue to do so. For example, in 1990, only 18% of Americans supported marijuana legalization; in 2013, that figure stood at 52%. Two-thirds (65%) of Millennials support legalization—more than Gen Xers (54%), Boomers (50%), or Silents (32%).³⁵ As the public questions the efficacy of increasing resources for a failed “War on Drugs,” political leaders in both parties will have to construct a new framework in responding to an issue most thought was long ago settled—and they’ll do so knowing that Millennials see things very different than their elders.

However, both parties should caution against stereotyping Millennials as liberals or libertarians on social issues by extrapolating their support for a broad gay equality agenda or marijuana legalization. Republicans may be able to revitalize their connection to Millennials voters by softening their language around immigration, gay and lesbian people, and single mothers, without compromising their positions on core issues to the party, such as abortion. If the GOP can meld some more libertarian views with religious ones and advocate for smaller, more effective government rather than no government, they may have a chance to close the margin with Millennials. Short of these steps, though, it is hard to see how Republicans will gain significant ground with this modern generation in the near term.

Embracing Racial & Ethnic Diversity

In 1976, 89% of presidential voters were non-Hispanic white; twenty years later, in 1996, 83% of voters were white. It took twenty years for the number of white voters to decline by six points. But in the sixteen years between 1996 and 2012, the proportion of white voters fell even lower, to 72%—an eleven

point drop in just sixteen years. If current trends persist, the number of non-Hispanic whites should fall below 50% of the U.S. population sometime around 2043.

This acceleration is driven by the aging into the electorate of two diverse generations—Millennials and the nearly-as-diverse Gen Xers—and increased legal immigration since the 1960s. Approximately 40% of Millennials are non-white or Hispanic.* Stark generational differences are evident when comparing Millennials to the Silent generation, which is 79% non-Hispanic white (compared to 59% of Millennials). And 11% of Millennials have at least one immigrant parent, which is significantly higher than among Gen Xers (7%) or Baby Boomers (5%).³⁶

Describing Millennials as the most diverse generation is based on modern conceptions of race and ethnicity. Consider that in the 1910 census, 14.7% of the U.S. population was foreign-born. Immigration from eastern and southern Europe was partially responsible for this. And many of these folks were not viewed as part of the Anglo-Saxon/white racial category. The changes wrought by adding millions of Italians, Irish, and other immigrants likely appeared as foreign to latter day contemporaries as the changes being wrought now appear to some in the U.S. [See U.S. Census Bureau, “Long-term trends: Foreign-Born Population and as Percent of Total Population,” Accessed May 16, 2013. Available at: http://www.census.gov/how/infographics/foreign_born.html.]

Millennials are not just composed of a greater diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds than older generational cohorts, they also have relatively higher levels of interaction with people of other backgrounds. This has exposed them to the unique political, economic, and socio-cultural traditions of communities not traditionally dominant in American political discourse. And it’s likely that their experiences with different cultural norms and values have imbued them with a more cosmopolitan outlook.³⁷

Drawing upon recent presidential voting patterns, survey data, and the current Republican brand, most political analyses of this transformation assume that increasing ethnic and racial diversity and openness will automatically benefit Democrats electorally. But although Millennials’ diversity makes them more open on issues of race and

immigration than their elders, the evidence that it will result in durable support for Democrats is mixed.

Millennials display far more tolerance on racial and ethnic issues than other generations. For example, only 28% think we've gone too far in pushing equal rights, compared to 39% of Gen X, 41% of Boomers, and 46% of Silents.³⁸ And 91% of Millennials agree that interracial dating is acceptable, with 75% agreeing completely. The figures for Gen X mirror Millennials (92% and 73%, respectively), which is unsurprising given their nearly identical levels of racial and ethnic diversity. Baby Boomers and Silents, however, have lower levels of support for interracial dating—87% agree and 57% completely agree it is acceptable among Boomers and 76% agree and 37% completely agree among Silents.³⁹

On immigration, similar generational divergences exist. Nearly seven in ten Millennials think that newcomers strengthen American society, with a paltry 27% saying newcomers threaten our customs and values. But those figures are 44% strengthen to 46% threaten for Boomers and 40% strengthen to 45% weaken for Silents.⁴⁰ And 81% of Millennials support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, 20 points higher than support among the Silent Generation.⁴¹ Clearly, anti-immigrant and racially-charged rhetoric and policy alienates this diverse generation.

Romney's "self-deportation" and lack of compassion for DREAMers hurt him with Hispanic voters, but perceptions of general hostility to non-whites by Republicans also more broadly limit their ability to make inroads among a generation which largely embraces multiculturalism. The question is whether those wounds will leave a permanent scar, and whether traditional Democratic Civil Rights Era-inspired approaches to race may seem antiquated to a generation which is increasingly becoming a rainbow.

In some ways, the Millennial experience has led to decreased support for or focus on traditional issues surrounding race. The *Voting Rights Act* and affirmative action—both legacies of the battle for civil rights—have been weakened by recent

Supreme Court decisions and could be severely limited in the coming decade. But these issues do not necessarily resonate with today's younger generation like they did 50 years ago with young people. Among younger Millennials, 63% do not believe that race or gender will impact their future career prospects.⁴² And only 23% of those under 40 years old supported using race as a factor in university admissions, with a whopping 62% strongly opposed.⁴³ President Obama ran in 2008 as a post-partisan and post-racial candidate. On both of these fronts, he was in-line with Millennials, many of whom see both racism and race-based affirmative action as relics of an earlier age.

Democrats cannot be complacent, simply relying on the diversity of Millennials to deliver elections. While non-white and Hispanic electoral support for the Democratic Party has been overwhelming in the past two presidential elections, that hasn't translated into overwhelming identification among Millennials as Democratic *partisans* (as we noted in section three). And, looking at Pew data compiled over 15 years, 28% of Millennials identified as a conservative, 38% as a moderate, and another 28% as a liberal—hardly a left-wing crowd.⁴⁴ While their experience of growing up in a diverse (racially and otherwise) generation shapes their views on some issues that divided their parents and grandparents, Millennials' tolerance toward racial and ethnic diversity should not be mistaken for a wholesale embrace of traditional liberalism.

Questioning American Exceptionalism

The oldest Millennials were eight years old when the Berlin Wall fell. Few remember the Soviet Union. While the 1990s were dominated by economic growth and domestic issues, the start of the 21st century was a decade of war. Conflict-weary and fatigued on the heels of a recession, Millennial support for traditional military endeavors (boots on the ground) has declined in recent years. And while threats of terrorism are real and persist, most Millennials haven't

experienced the specter of a communist menace nor the threat of annihilation. As a result, 52% of 18-29 year olds think the U.S. should stay out of world affairs—compared to 31% of their Cold War-era elders. ⁴⁵

But Millennials are not the isolationists some libertarians like to believe. By 20 points, Millennials were more supportive than Silents of the military nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. And 60% said the U.S. made the right decision to use force in Afghanistan—14 points higher than Silents. ⁴⁶

Millennial concerns with international engagement stem from questions of style and form. While 70% of Americans say that the U.S. is the greatest country in the world, only 58% of Millennials agree. Given their racial and ethnic diversity, access to information from all over the globe, and high proportion of immigrant parents, Millennials are less likely than others to claim superiority for their country.

Cooperative engagement is a more accurate description of the Millennial approach to foreign policy. They want us to take allies' interests into account even if it means we have to compromise (63%) or emphasize diplomacy (66%) over military strength (29%), and they worry that emphasizing military force breeds hatred and leads to terrorism. ⁴⁷ By contrast, Silents favor going it alone, are divided on the role of diplomacy, and support military force to stop terrorism even if engenders further hatred. ⁴⁸

Further, younger voters seem to reject any particular war doctrine, preferring a case by case assessment. While 24% of those 18-29 support preemptive strikes against hostile countries and 33% oppose such action, a 40% plurality is unsure as to the best course of action. And nearly four in ten remain ambivalent about whether they support U.S. military involvement in other countries to protect ourselves from terrorism (38%), spread democracy (39%), or stop genocide (42%). ⁴⁹ Like in most other areas, Millennials don't adhere to a strict ideology on national security but rather want to assess each circumstance in context to determine the most effective approach.

Conclusion

The access to information and widespread consumer choice characteristic of the Millennial Generation has turned them into explorers. Yet Republicans and, to a lesser extent, Democrats expect them to accept traditional party positions that are not aligned with their experiences. Increasingly, younger voters are calling themselves Independents, which has two implications for modern politics. First, as Millennials eschew partisan labels, they are much more likely to switch the party they support from election to election—even amongst those who claim to “lean” towards one party or another at a given time.⁵⁰ Thus, their volatility in elections may increase.

Second, Republicans need not win younger voters outright to win presidential elections; they only need to shave off a few points to be successful in the short term. If the government seems ineffective at solving problems and the economy continues to sputter along, Millennials may take another look at Republicans, and there’s no reason to believe that brand loyalty to the Democratic Party would dissuade them from doing so. That would mean that a scenario in which a Republican presidential candidate wins more than 40% of younger voters could become increasingly likely—and it could be enough to propel the GOP back into the White House in the next cycle or two.

Millennials are poised to have an outsized influence on our politics due to their sheer size. But their values and beliefs have been misunderstood, if not openly maligned, largely because they are not seen in the context of this group’s unique generational experiences. Millennials can both support an expansive federal role for government while holding reservations and deep skepticism about its efficacy. They may be racially and ethnically diverse, but their views were not forged in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. They came of age in an era of unprecedented access to alternatives and a steady stream of information from nearly any region of the world, yet they are expected to get excited by

orchestrated events and scripted interactions. They have the potential to shake up American politics as we know it—and both parties must reassess their message to appeal to them.

TOPICS

AMERICAN ELECTORATE 139

END NOTES

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