



# A Political Outlier: the Distinct Politics of the Millennial Generation

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## Abstract

The generation one comes of age politically is an important determinant in one's political identity. As a result, there is the potential for a disparity of the vote choice among different generations. Today, the youngest generation of American adults—the so-called Millennial Generation—have developed distinct political leanings that are significantly to the left of older generations. Since Millennials have achieved adulthood and gained the right to vote the generation has consistently been a generational outlier. The strong pro-Democratic vote of the Millennials has its roots in the generation being both very pro-Obama and very anti-Bush. The Millennials support for the Democratic Party, however, is also due to the generation's liberal views on policy that are a product of Millennials' relative diversity, high education levels, global perspective on politics, and lack of religiosity. The huge generation gap that has emerged since Millennials have entered the electorate suggests that there is an emerging realignment of the electorate along generational lines. With generational replacement, Millennials thus have the potential to alter the direction of American politics.

**Keywords** Millennials · Generations · Democratic party · Republican party

The learning of specific orientations to politics and experiences with the political system is extremely important to one's political maturity.<sup>1</sup> People develop values and assign priorities to their values that are shaped in a large part from the socio-economic conditions that they cultivate during their formative years from childhood to early adulthood. Due to the changing nature of society's socio-economic conditions over time, people from different generations emphasize different political values.<sup>2</sup> Changes in societal experiences, therefore, may alter citizens' political orientations.

Consequently, the generation one comes of age politically is an important determinant in one's political identity. Though a political generation gap is not a perpetual feature of the American political landscape, one's generation can be a note-

worthy influence on partisan and ideological leanings. Not only may there be a divergence between different generations' vote in a particular election, but also there exists the possibility of long-term generational effects on political behavior. The generation in which one comes of age politically can play an important role in structuring one's political views their entire life. The result is that different generations have distinct political leanings that they will maintain over their lifetimes.<sup>3</sup>

According to the social-psychological conception, partisan identities are adopted in early adulthood stabilize quickly, and thereafter become highly resistant to more than transient change.

The influences of the political environment are most noticeable among younger voters. Political events and personalities therefore have the greatest and most lasting influence during the stage of life when partisan identities are forming.<sup>4</sup> For example, throughout their lives, Baby Boomers have expressed more libertarian attitudes than their elders and less respect for authority, religion, and patriotism. On the other hand,

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Fisher, "The Emerging Age Gap in U.S. Politics," *Society* 45 (2008): 504–511.

<sup>4</sup> Gary C. Jacobson, "The Effects of the George W. Bush Presidency on Partisan Attitudes," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39 (2009): 172–209.

Generation X has an extremely personal and individualistic view of politics.<sup>5</sup> Political leanings can thus be quite consistent as people age. As a result, there is the potential for a disparity of the vote choice among different generations. There are distinct partisan trends among generations, with some generations leaning Republican and others Democratic depending upon the political climate in which they developed their formative political views.

## The Democratic-Leaning Millennials

The generational divide in American politics today is unprecedented over at least the last half-century.<sup>6</sup> The youngest generation of American adults—the so-called Millennial Generation—have developed distinct political leanings that are significantly to the left of older generations (see Fig. 1). Since entering the electorate in significant numbers in 2004, Millennials have voted significantly more Democratic for president than any other generation. In Fig. 1, all of the generations follow similar trends (e.g. a swing Republican peaking 1982–1984, followed by a Democrat swing peaking in 1996 and the more variance going forward with a Democratic surge in 2008 for Obama. The Millennials also follow this trend of a Democratic surge in 2008, and a slow decline in 2012 and 2016, but in a way that is much more skewed toward the Democratic Party. Although there is a stereotype that younger Americans are more liberal than older Americans are, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, prior to the Millennials, the only other youngest generation of voters since 1972 that was notably more Democratic in its presidential vote preferences were the Baby Boomers in 1972, who supported George McGovern in much stronger numbers than older generations. The Baby Boomer Democratic preference, however, was short lived: since 1972 the generation has not been a notable political outlier.

Thus, before the Millennials there tended to be little difference between the generations in vote choice, and the youngest

generation was not consistently the most Democratic leaning. At the end of the Twentieth Century, in fact, it was more accurate to view the country's oldest citizens—the Greatest Generation—as voters whose memories of the Great Depression and World War II lead them to have a lasting faith in the government activism and those more supportive of the Democratic Party.<sup>7</sup> In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, for example, the Greatest Generation was actually the generation most likely to vote Democratic.

Since Millennials have gained the right to vote, the generation has consistently been a generational outlier. Hillary Clinton's 17-point margin among Millennials, in fact, is actually the lowest plurality the generation has given a Democratic presidential candidate. In 2004, the first presidential election in which Millennials could vote in sizable numbers, the Millennial vote went overwhelmingly for John Kerry and were by far his best generation. This, however, pales in comparison to Barack Obama's margins in 2008 and 2012. Obama won a staggering two-thirds of the Millennial Vote in 2008 and maintained his strength among younger voters by getting more than three-fifths of this generation's vote in 2012. Obama's strength among Millennials, in fact, was critical to his margin of victory in 2008 and 2012. The vote among those aged 30+ in 2008 was basically a dead heat and without the Millennial vote in 2012 Obama would have lost reelection. Hillary Clinton's defeat in 2016 can thus partly be attributed to the fact that even though the Millennials were by far her best generation, her vote share among the generation was notably lower than Obama's. Clinton, however, lost considerable ground compared to Obama with other generations as well. Overall, even though her showing among younger Americans was not as impressive as Obama's, her poor performance among older voters resulted in an enormous generational gap that was comparable in scope to those of 2008 and 2012.

## Reasons Why the Millennials are a Political Outlier

Millennials today are the most Democratic age group in the nation by a substantial margin in part due to the partisan cycle of American politics. In general, young voters tend to react to the successes or failures of the first politicians they know.<sup>8</sup> Millennials' movement toward the Democrats began as soon as a substantial number of the generation became enfranchised in 2004. John Kerry's support among Millennials, however, was to a considerable degree a function of their contempt for George W. Bush rather than of

<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 257–261.

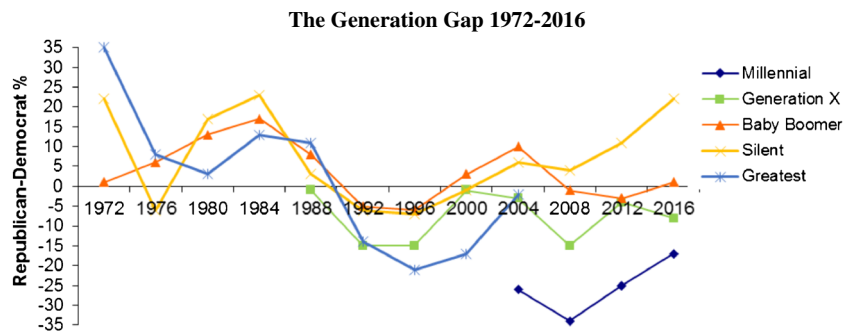
<sup>6</sup> The generational names we have chosen are the handiwork of popular culture, with some being drawn from a historic event, others from social or demographic change, and others from a turn in the calendar. Generational analysis is not an exact science and the years and terms that are used to define generations will vary from study to study. This study thus utilizes those generational boundaries and conceptions that are widely—though not universally—accepted. According to our definitions, each generation is similar in its longevity, ranging from 16 to 19 years in length. From oldest to youngest the generations will be defined by the following parameters:

- 1) *The Greatest Generation*: those born from 1910 through 1927.
- 2) *The Silent Generation*: those born from 1928 through 1945.
- 3) *The Baby Boomers*: those born from 1946 through 1964.
- 4) *Generation X*: those born from 1965 through 1980.
- 5) *The Millennial Generation*: adults born after 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Warren E. Miller, "Generational Changes and Party Identification," *Political Behavior* 14 (1992): 333–352.

<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center, "A Different Look at Generations and Partisanship," April 30, 2015.

**Fig. 1** The Generation Gap 1972–2016. Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910 through 1927; *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer*: 1946 through 1964; *Generation X*: 1965 through 1980; *Millennial*: adults born after 1981. *Source*: American National Election Studies 1972–2016



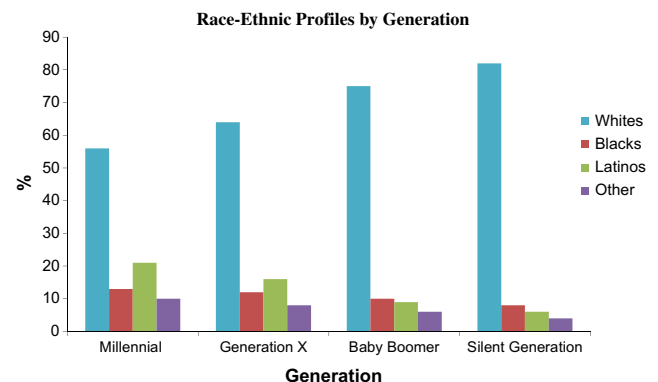
strong support for Kerry himself. Due to Bush’s low levels of popularity for much of his presidency, those who became adults during his administration—the first voters of the Millennial Generation—have consistently been associated with relatively low levels of Republican identification.<sup>9</sup> Barack Obama, on the other hand, has tended to be enormously popular among Millennials from the outset of him announcing his presidential candidacy in 2007. The support Millennials have consistently given Obama is unquestionably a defining political characteristic of the generation. The relative strength of Barack Obama’s and Hillary Clinton’s support among different generations in the 2008 Democratic primaries, in fact, goes a long way in explaining the political dynamics of the 2008 Democratic nomination.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the strong pro-Democratic vote of the Millennials has its roots in the generation being both very pro-Obama and very anti-Bush.

The Millennials support for the Democratic Party is also a product of the generation’s relative diversity. As Fig. 2 displays, the Millennial Generation is considerably more diverse than older generations, especially the Baby Boom and Silent Generations. Certainly the fact that Millennials are considerably more likely to be non-white explains some of their pro-Democratic tendencies as racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are considerably more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than white Americans. At the same time, today’s large generational gap may also be a reaction to older generations of the racial and ethnic diversity of the Millennial Generation and the change that signifies.

It is important to note, however, that Millennials disproportionate support for Democrats, is not just simply a product of the generation’s diversity. Among whites, Millennials are also a political outlier (see Fig. 3). White Millennials have been substantially more likely to support Democratic presidential nominees than whites of other generations. While white Millennials have been relatively resistant to Republican

appeals, whites in the Silent Generation have moved strongly toward the Republican Party since Obama was elected president in 2008.

The loyalty of Millennials of all races toward both Barack Obama and the Democratic Party was solidified by Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign. Unquestionably, a critical component of Trump’s campaign message in 2016 was a deep loathing of his predecessor. Trump criticism of Obama included him becoming the most prominent adherent of the so-called “birtherism” movement that claims that Obama was not born in the United States, and thus was ineligible to be president. As a result, Trump’s success has been perceived to be a political reaction to President Obama. Obama ran on an explicit platform of change, in campaigns that appealed to the young and reached out to racial and ethnic minorities. Trump, like Obama before him, ran on a campaign of change in 2016. Trump, however, chose a campaign strategy that focused on appealing to the discontent of older Americans. Trump’s poor performance among Millennials, therefore, should not be surprising as it can be regarded as a symptom of him actually running against what the younger generation of Americans represented. Though Trump did manage to gain some ground compared to previous Republican nominees among the generation, Millennials were still be a considerable margin the

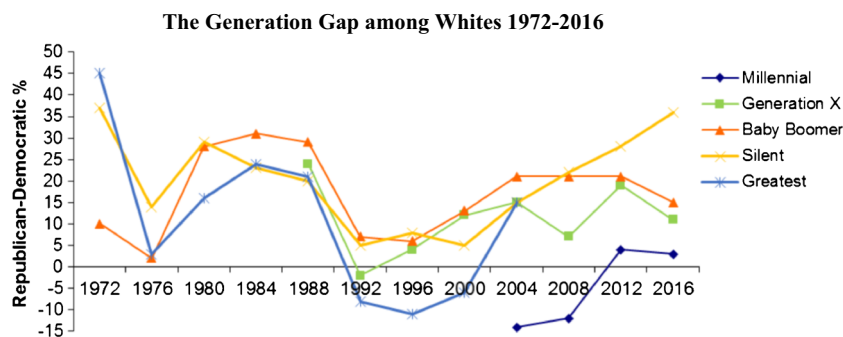


**Fig. 2** Race-Ethnic Profiles by Generation. Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer*: 1946 through 1964; *Generation X*: 1965 through 1980; *Millennial*: adults born after 1981. *Source*: Author’s analysis of 2010 Census data

<sup>9</sup> Frank Newport, “Democrats Do Best among Generation Y and Baby Boomers,” *Gallup* May 8, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Fisher, “The Gapology of the Obama Vote in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries,” *Society* 48 (2011): 502–509.

**Fig. 3** The Generation Gap among Whites 1972–2016. Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910 through 1927; *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer*: 1946 through 1964; *Generation X*: 1965 through 1980; *Millennial*: adults born after 1981. Source: American National Election Studies 1972–2016



least Republican generation. Trump's lack of appeal to Millennials, after Obama so successfully wooed them, may thus have solidified the Democratic Party's standing with the generation.

The Millennials are the best educated and most globally-oriented generation in American history. The generation's relatively high level of education is potentially an important factor in understanding Millennials' distinct politics. Since education levels have become strongly correlated with vote choice, the education gap goes hand-and-hand with the generation gap in American politics. At the same time, as the first generation raised with the internet, Millennials also have a much more global outlook than older generations. Younger Americans have been exposed to much more of the world, both in terms of technology and in terms of personal travel and are much more likely to have a global perspective.

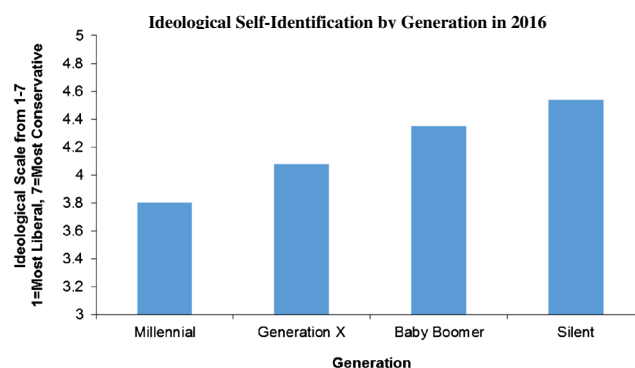
Millennials preference for Democrats is consistent with their ideological self-identification. Millennials identify themselves ideologically to the left of other generations (see Fig. 4). In fact, Millennials are the only generation that identifies themselves to the left of the ideological center. The Millennial Generation's preference for Democrats thus goes beyond simple partisanship and is issued-based as well. Millennials have particularly distinct attitudes on social issues. On some social issues such as gay marriage, Millennials are considerably more liberal of older Americans.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1990s there has been a greater emphasis placed on cultural issues by candidates and other political elites.<sup>12</sup> As a result, moral traditionalism has exerted a greater effect on vote choice through party identification and there has been a process of realignment in the electorate along a moral traditionalism divide. This insinuates a widening and deepening of a cultural-values-based realignment of the American electorate on generational lines.

The Millennials' liberalism on social issues goes hand-and-hand with the generation's relative lack of religiosity (see

Fig. 5). Millennials are considerably less likely to attend religious service than those of other generations, especially the Silent Generation. While almost one-half of Millennials never attend religious services, the figure is less than one-third for the Silent Generation. Almost one-half of the Silent Generation, on the other hand, attends religious services at least weekly, a figure that is more than twice that of Millennials. The Millennials' distinct attitudes towards religion, especially compared to the Silent Generation, suggests a potential future transformation of the role of religion in American politics as Millennials become a more dominant electoral force with generational replacement.

## Generational Replacement and the Changing American Electorate

Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation are distinctly to the right of the general population. In the past, older Americans have not necessarily been ideologically more conservative than their younger counterparts. Democratic candidates in the past have long relied on seniors who cherished their Social Security and Medicare. The movement of older Americans toward the Republican Party is largely a result of



**Fig. 4** Ideological Self-Identification by Generation in 2016. Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer*: 1946 through 1964; *Generation X*: 1965 through 1980; *Millennial*: adults born after 1981. Source: American National Election Studies 2016

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Fisher, *Demographic Gaps in American Political Behavior* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's even Worse Than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).



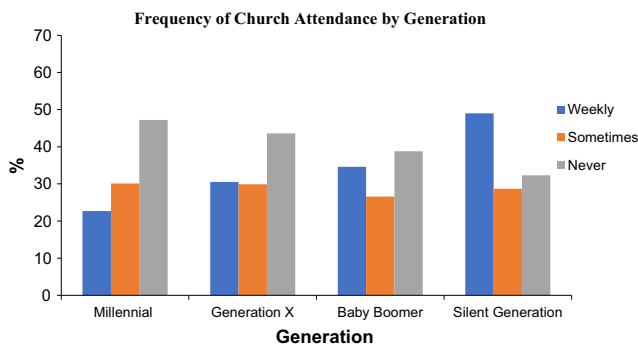


Fig. 5 Frequency of Church Attendance by Generation. Source: American National Election Studies 2016

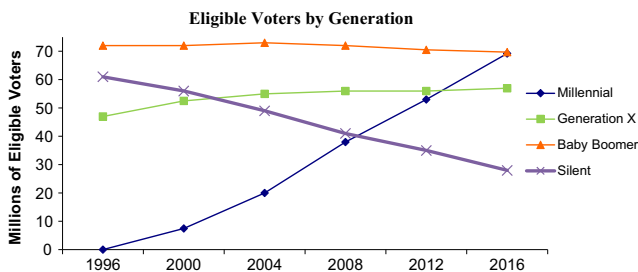


Fig. 6 Eligible Voters by Generation. Generations are defined by the following birth years: Silent: 1928 through 1945; Baby Boomer: 1946 through 1964; Generation X: 1965 through 1980; Millennial: adults born after 1981. Source: Pew Research Center

generational change. As the Greatest Generation (who came of age politically during the New Deal Era and was overwhelmingly Democratic) dies off, the elderly (who are now comprised mostly of early Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation) have become more Republican.

On the other hand, the unpopularity of the Republican Party among the Millennial Generation, combined with the tremendous support Obama managed to garner among

Millennials has created a new overwhelmingly Democratic generation of voters. Even if Millennials move toward the Republicans as they age, the degree by which the generation is such an outlier favoring the Democrats suggests that as the political power of Millennials grows in stature through generational replacement, long-term demographic trends appear to favor the Democrats.

The huge generation gap that has emerged since Millennials have entered the electorate suggests that there is an emerging realignment of the electorate along generational lines. If history is any guide, as younger voters mature they will vote at increasingly higher rates and they will generally maintain their original partisan loyalties. Since the vote preferences of previous generations are relatively stable this suggests a long-lasting preference of the Millennials towards the Democrats, possibly altering the partisan balance of American politics as this new generation of voters matures and becomes a larger segment of the American electorate.

The political power of the Millennial Generation will only increase if their voting turnout rates increase as they age. Even though the differences in the vote preferences vary from generation to generation, voting behavior is pretty clear cut in regard to whether or not people vote: turnout goes up dramatically as citizens get older. There is therefore a consistent generation gap when it comes to voter turnout. Now that Millennials are all eligible to vote, the generation can be expected to cast ballots in increasing numbers. Figure 6 demonstrates the potential political heft of the Millennials. As a share of eligible voters, Millennials are already as large as Baby Boomers. Millennials were 29% of the electorate in 2016 and this figure will increase steadily in subsequent elections. As Millennials vote in increasing numbers and replace older Americans in the electorate the partisan and ideological preferences of voters may undergo dramatic changes.

The policy preferences of the American electorate thus has the potential to change markedly with generational

**Millennials Liberal-Leaning Positions on Public Policy Relative to Silent Generation**

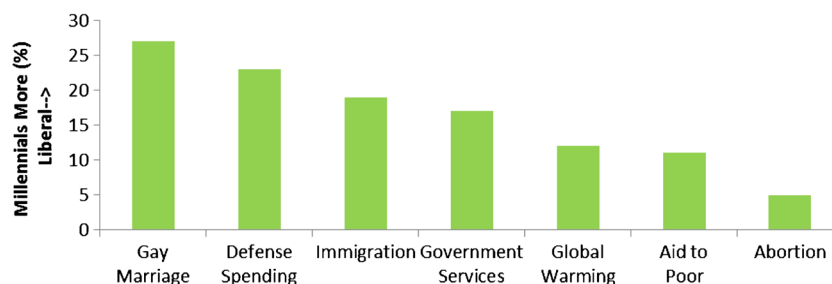


Fig. 7 Millennials Liberal-Leaning Positions on Public Policy Relative to Silent Generation. Figures represent differential among Millennial Generation (adults born after 1980) and Silent Generation (those born 1928–1945) in 2016. Gay marriage = agree that gays should be allowed to marry. Defense spending = defense spending should be reduced. Immigration = immigration levels should be reduced. Government

services = government should provide more services. Global Warming = Government should be doing more about rising temperatures. Aid to poor = aid to the poor should be increased. Abortion = abortion should never be permitted/permitted only in cases of rape and incest. Source: American National Election Studies 2016

replacement (see Fig. 7). On a number of public policy issues, Millennials are considerably more liberal than their counterparts in the Silent Generation. On gay marriage, defense spending, immigration, government services, global warming, aid to the poor, and abortion Millennials are more liberal than those in the Silent Generation. On some of these issues, such as abortion, the ideological differences between the generations may not be large enough to merit more than a negligible change in public policy. On other issues, however, the differences in policy preferences among Millennials and the Silent Generation is so large that generational replacement can be expected to change public policy. In fact, one can already argue that this has occurred on gay marriage, a cause Millennials overwhelmingly support, even as the Silent Generation has remained skeptical.

Contemporary generational replacement in the American electorate is extremely consequential because of the partisan and ideological differences between the oldest and youngest

American voters. Given the Millennials' left-leaning politics, generational replacement would probably have an important influence of American politics regardless of whomever these voters were replacing in the electorate. The Silent Generation that is currently being replaced in the electorate, however, has in recent years emerged as considerably the most Republican and conservative generation in contemporary American politics. Conservative and Republican-leaning Americans are thus currently being replaced in the electorate by relatively liberal and Democratic-leaning voters. The Millennial Generation thus has the potential to alter the course of American politics.

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