



# Generational Cycles in American Politics, 1952–2016

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## Abstract

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 noteworthy influence on partisan and ideological leanings. The political environment experienced by successive generations as they have come of age politically influences political attitudes throughout one's life. The result is that different generations have distinct political leanings that they will maintain over their lifetimes. Utilizing data collected by the American National Election Studies (ANES) from 1952 to 2016, this study utilizes cohort analysis to compare differences in generational presidential vote choice and ideological preferences over time. The findings suggest that the generational divide in American politics today is unprecedented. For the second half of the twentieth century there was remarkably modest political disparity between generational cohorts. This lack of an age divide in American politics lead the field of political science to generally focus on other demographic gaps in American politics other than generational differences. Once the Millennial Generation first entered the electorate in the early 2000s, however, there has emerged a considerable generational gap in American politics. The Millennial Generation has developed distinct political leanings that are significantly to the left of older generations. Although there is a stereotype that younger Americans are more liberal and supportive of Democrats than older Americans are, from 1952 to 2000 this generally was not the case. In fact, prior to the Millennials, there tended to be little difference between the generations in presidential vote choice and ideological leanings, and the youngest generation was not consistently the most Democratic leaning or liberal. Given 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.

**Keywords** Generations · U.S. presidential elections · Millennial Generation · Generation Z · Generation X · Baby Boomers · Silent Generation

## The Political Significance of Generations

Political beliefs are not carried by the genes—it is the environment that scholars have turned to understand the origins of citizen political dispositions. Most scholarship on the sources of political outlooks has focused on the influence of the family. Yet it is also recognized that political outlooks are shaped

by the times.<sup>1</sup> An individual's age is an important predictor of differences in attitudes and behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Generational cohorts give researchers a tool to analyze change in views over time. Generations provide the opportunity to look at Americans both by their place in the life cycle and by their membership in a cohort of individuals who were born at a similar time. While younger and older adults may differ in their views at a given moment, generational cohorts allow researchers to examine how today's older adults felt about a given

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Allen Beck and M. Kent Jennings, "Family Traditions, Political Periods, and the Development of Partisan Orientations," *Journal of Politics* 53 (1991): 742–764.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

issue when they themselves were young, as well as to describe how the trajectory of views might differ across generations.<sup>3</sup>

Generations are a way to group age cohorts. A generation typically refers to groups of people born over a 15–20 year span. An age cohort spanning 15–20 years will necessarily include a diverse assortment of people, and often there are meaningful smaller cohorts within these generations. Changes in political circumstances, societal norms and economic conditions over a period of 15–20 years can lead to people within a cohort having different formative experiences.<sup>4</sup>

As long ago as the 1970s it was shown that statistical models were capable of explaining some of the underlying phenomena of generational effects.<sup>5</sup> One study of the 1970s, for example, found that whereas social class related strongly to partisan choice among the cohorts born before 1924, there was virtually no relationship between class and presidential vote among voters born after 1924.<sup>6</sup> The decline of partisan loyalties among Americans after 1964 was thus a direct consequence of generational change.

A fundamental component of the idea of generational cohorts is the relative stability of political behaviors. Most people either go to the polls regularly or abstain regularly.<sup>7</sup> Voting, however, is not a habit rather a consequence of a stable interest in politics. If voting were habitual, voters appear ritualistic and relatively unthinking in their participation. On the other hand, if the underlying political interest is stable, voting constitutes a deliberate and purposeful reaffirmation of the motivation to participate.<sup>8</sup>

There are two general definitions of generation: one chronological and the other social.<sup>9</sup> The notion of generational units, however defined, can be useful to understanding contemporary generational movements. Generations acquire social solidarity as a consequence of shared experiences and the emergence of a collective world view.<sup>10</sup> It is important to stress that when we speak of generations, we speak of averages.<sup>11</sup> Individuals within a generation of course may deviate from others in the cohort.<sup>12</sup>

Age denotes two important characteristics about an individual: their place in the life cycle and their membership in a cohort of individuals who were born at the same time in history.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, an important question to consider in the evaluation of generations is whether a generation is distinct, compared to other generations, or if their attitudes and beliefs are the product of lifecycle effect. The life-cycle explanation for the generation gap assumes that young persons are less affected by their social class than older person are because the young have had less experience in the work force than their elders and have had less time to learn the social and political norms of their class. The life-cycle explanation, however, finds little empirical support.<sup>14</sup>

A better explanation is that the political environment experienced by successive generations as they have come of age politically influences political attitudes throughout one's life. Studies have demonstrated that ideological differences between generational cohorts are attributed more to the unique experiences of a particular cohort than it can to age itself.<sup>15</sup> Unique personality development results from the interaction of the self, the socializing experiences of family, peers, school, media, and other social agents, and the idiosyncratic experiences derived from one's daily routine.<sup>16</sup> Due to the changing nature of society's socio-economic conditions over time, people from different generations emphasize different political values.<sup>17</sup> A generation can be defined in terms of a collective response to a traumatic event or catastrophe that unites a particular cohort of individuals into a self-conscious age stratum.<sup>18</sup>

Differences between generations can be the byproduct of the unique historical circumstances that members of an age cohort experience, particularly during a time when they are in the process of forming opinions. 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 being formed.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Post-Millennials Begin" Pew Research Center March 1, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Gosta Carlsson and Katarina Karlsson, "Age, Cohorts and the Generation of Generations," *American Sociological Review* 35 (1970): 710–718.

<sup>6</sup> Paul R. Abramson, *Generational Change in American Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Ron Schachar, "Voting May Be Habit Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003): 540–550.

<sup>8</sup> Markus Prior, "You've Either Got It or You Don't? The Stability of Political Interest over the Life Cycle," *The Journal of Politics* 72 (2010): 747–786.

<sup>9</sup> June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Atria Books, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Stella M. Rouse and Ashley D. Ross, *The Politics of Millennials* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Paul R. Abramson, *Generational Change in American Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Braungart and Margaet Baraungart, "Life Course and Generational Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986): 205–231.

<sup>16</sup> Michael X Delli Carpini, *Stability and Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960s* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Jacobson, "The Effects of the George W. Bush Presidency on Partisan Attitudes," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39 (2009): 172–209.

Generational differences are in part the result of a period effect an older generation experienced that subsequent generations did not (e.g. the younger generations of today did not experience the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights Movement because they were not yet born). In other cases, a historical moment can have an outsize effect on members of one generation. This may be because it occurs during a key point in the life cycle, such as adolescence and young adulthood, when awareness of the wider world develops and personal identities and value systems are being strongly shaped. For example, persons born in the United States in 1920 spent their late adolescence and early adulthood in the Great Depression, whereas persons born just 10 years later spent the same stages of life in a period of relative prosperity and economic growth.<sup>20</sup> The Great Depression thus had the effect of helping shape a cohort of Americans who were strong supporters of the Democratic Party for decades to come.<sup>21</sup>

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 noteworthy influence on partisan and ideological leanings. The political environment experienced by successive generations as they have come of age politically influences political attitudes throughout one's life. 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>22</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. This study will compare differences in generational political preferences in the United States, utilizing those generational boundaries and conceptions that are widely—though not universally—accepted. The generations this study will use are those as defined by the Pew Research Center.<sup>23</sup> The generational names 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 names are largely the creations of social scientists and market researchers. Generational identity is fundamentally rooted in cultural shifts resulting from social, economic, and political events.<sup>24</sup> Generational analysis, however, is not an exact science and the years and terms that are used to define generations will vary from study to study and can change over time. The age boundaries of these widely used labels are somewhat variable and subjective, so it is perhaps not surprising that many Americans do not identify with their generation.

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 we will compare are: 1) the Greatest Generation (those born 1910–1927), 2) the Silent Generation (those born 1928–1945), 3) the Baby Boom Generation (those born 1946–1964), 4) Generation X (those born 1965–1980, and 5) the Millennial Generation (those born 1981–1996).

## The Political Ideology of Generations 1972–2016

Although there is a stereotype that younger Americans are more liberal than older Americans are, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, in some years younger voters have supported more conservative candidates than older voters did. This was the case, for example, when Ronald Reagan won reelection by a landslide in 1984. Today, however, there is a notable ideological divide in American politics.

Utilizing data collected by the American National Election Studies (ANES), we utilize cohort analysis to compare differences in (first, in this section) generational ideology and (second, in the next section) presidential vote preferences over time. The generations will be compared from both a simultaneous time perspective where the generations overlap in the American polity at the same time as well as a life-cycle perspective where differences between the generations are compared by presidential election cycle after the respective generation enters the electorate. Two modes of comparison will be employed, one comparing the generations normally (non-adjusted) and another differentiating the generations relative to the rest of the electorate at that time. Figures 1 and 2 display the mean ideological self-identification for each generation. The data is derived from the ANES time-series cumulative data file in presidential election years since 1972, the first year the ANES included ideological self-identification as part of its survey. The ANES scale asks respondents to place themselves ideologically on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being the most liberal (furthest to the left), 7 being the most conservative (the

<sup>20</sup> Norval D. Glenn, *Cohort Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Fisher, *Demographic Gaps in American Political Behavior* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008), chapter 6.

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

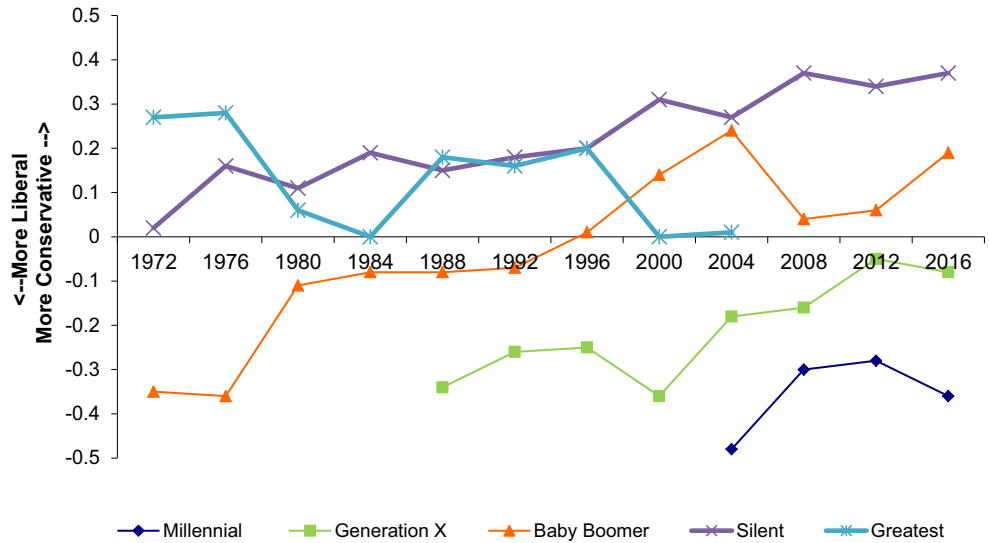
<sup>24</sup> Richard Braungart and Margaet Braungart, "Life Course and Generational Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986): 205–231.

**Fig. 1** Ideological Self-Identification by Generation Relative to Adult Population 1972–2016. Ideological Scale from 1 to 7. Negative = Most Liberal, Positive = Most Conservative. 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. X-axis denotes presidential election cycle after each generation entered the electorate in substantial numbers. First presidential election cycle for *Greatest* = 1936; *Silent* = 1952; *Baby Boomer* = 1972; *Generation X* = 1988; *Millennial* = 2004. Source: American National Election Studies 1972–2016

**Ideological Self-Identification by Generation Relative to Adult Population 1972–2016**

Ideological Scale from 1-7

Negative = Most Liberal, Positive=Most Conservative

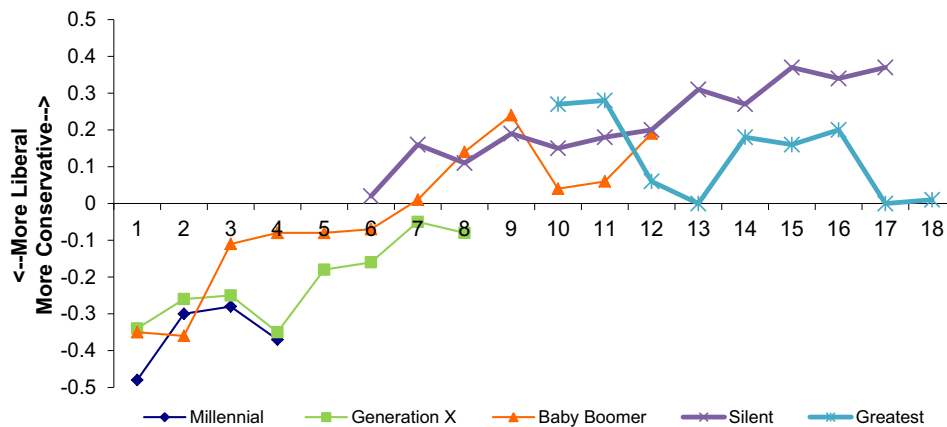


furthest to the right), and 4 being in the ideological center. Figure 1 shows the ideological self-identification by generation relative to the overall adult population, thus indicating the degree by each generation was more liberal or conservative than other generations in each presidential election year from 1972 to 2016. Figure 2 displays the same data but compares each generation to each other by presidential election cycle after the generation entered the electorate.

Figure 1 neatly demonstrates the ideological age divide today. Since the Millennials have reached adulthood, each generation has been more conservative than the younger

generation coming after it. This supports the commonly held narrative that younger adults are relatively liberal but become more conservative as they age. By visualizing the generations in terms of the presidential election cycle in which they entered the electorate, as is done in Fig. 2, we can compare generational ideological preferences at similar stages in their lifetimes. The Millennials ideological leanings are less of an outlier here, as Baby Boomers and Generation X were also fairly liberal in the first two elections after these generations became adults. In the third and fourth presidential elections after entering the electorate, however, Millennials have been

**Ideological Self-Identification by Generation Relative to Adult Population 1972–2016 By Presidential Election Cycle after Entering Electorate**



**Fig. 2** Ideological Self-Identification by Generation Relative to Adult Population 1972–2016. By Presidential Election Cycle after Entering Electorate. 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. X-axis denotes presidential election cycle after each generation entered the electorate in substantial numbers. First presidential election cycle for *Greatest* = 1936; *Silent* = 1952; *Baby Boomer* = 1972; *Generation X* = 1988; *Millennial* = 2004. Source: American National Elections Studies 1972–2016

Millennial: adults born after 1981. X-axis denotes presidential election cycle after each generation entered the electorate in substantial numbers. First presidential election cycle for *Greatest* = 1936; *Silent* = 1952; *Baby Boomer* = 1972; *Generation X* = 1988; *Millennial* = 2004. Source: American National Elections Studies 1972–2016



clearly more liberal than Generation X and (especially) Baby Boomers. Focusing on the older generations, it is noteworthy that the Greatest Generation was generally more liberal than the Silent Generation as both generations aged. This highlights that generations are not necessarily destined to become more conservative as they grow older.

The historical ideological differences of the generations over time are noteworthy. Though the Silent Generation has generally been consistently more conservative than the population as a whole, the Greatest Generation showed much more ideological volatility as they aged and in their later years had ideological preferences that resembled those of the overall adult population. Baby Boomers have become considerably more conservative as they have aged and have been to the right of the overall population since 1996 (their seventh presidential cycle after entering the electorate). This is consistent with Pew's findings that about half of Boomers say their political views have become more conservative as they have aged, while only about one-third say they have grown more liberal.<sup>25</sup> Generation X has also become more conservative in their ideological self-identification as they have aged, though to date (through eight presidential election cycles) they have been more liberal than the overall population. Millennials, in their four presidential election cycles to date are noteworthy in their consistently liberal aggregate ideological self-identification.

Since reaching voting age, Millennials have consistently identified themselves ideologically to the left of other generations. In every presidential election year since entering the electorate the average Millennial ideological self-identification has been left of center (lower than 4). The only other generations that have identified themselves in the aggregate as left of center in a presidential election year have been Baby Boomers in 1972 and 1976 and Generation X in 1992 and 2000. These findings are consistent with research conducted by the Pew Research Center. In 2015, across a set of 10 political values questions on issues such as the role of government, the environment and business, just 15% of Millennials express either consistently or mostly conservative views compared with 44% who have a mix of liberal and conservative views and fully 41% who express consistently or mostly liberal views.<sup>26</sup> By comparison, more Gen Xers (25%), Baby Boomers (33%), and Silents (39%) express consistently or mostly conservative views across the set of 10 questions.

The Silent Generation, on the other hand, has emerged as clearly the most conservative generation in contemporary American politics. With the exception of 1972, when the Silent Generation's mean ideology was about that of the

overall adult population, the Silent Generation has consistently been notably to the right ideologically. And as the generation has aged it has become unquestionably more conservative in its aggregate ideological leaning. The Silent Generation's conservatism is rooted in its views of the role of government. For most of their adult lives, members of the Silent Generation have been one of the more conservative generations with respect to their view of the role of government. At least as far back as 1980, they have generally been more likely than younger generations to say they prefer a smaller government providing fewer services than a bigger government providing more services.<sup>27</sup>

Before moving on to an analysis of generational presidential vote choice, it is important to note that in every presidential election year from 1972 to 2016 that the aggregate American mean ideological self-identification was greater than a 4 (ranging from a mean of 4.11 in 1972 to 4.35 in 1988), indicating that Americans consistently identify themselves to be slightly to the right of center. Despite this however, more in the United States report feeling closer to the Democratic Party than the Republicans, even as more perceive the Republican Party as better representing their views ideologically. The Republican Party is simultaneously perceived as more extreme on specific issues and less radical in its broader agenda.<sup>28</sup>

### Presidential Vote Choice of Generations 1952–2016

We will now turn to an analysis of presidential vote choice of the generations. As one would expect, generational presidential vote choice closely resembles generational self-identification. ANES data for presidential vote goes all the way back to 1952 so we can conduct a longer time-series analysis for presidential vote choice than ideological placement. This is not relevant for later generations beginning with the Baby Boomers, but this longer time series allows us to compare the presidential votes for the Silent and Greatest generations from 1952 to 1968, which is not possible for ideology due to lack of ANES data.

Figure 3 displays the surprising lack of generational voting in presidential elections for the second half of the twentieth century. With the exception of 1972, there was relatively little partisan differences in presidential voting relative to the overall electorate until the Millennials achieved adulthood. Figure 4 further emphasizes the degree by which Millennials are a partisan outlier. By comparing the generations relative partisanship by presidential election cycle after entering the electorate, it is clear that generations do not necessarily

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Center, "Millennials in Adulthood" March 7, 2014.

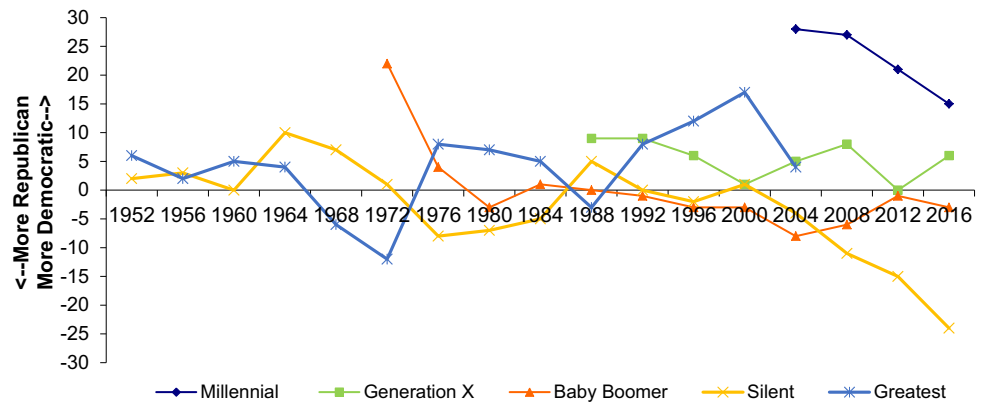
<sup>26</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research" September 3, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election," November 3, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 47–49.

**Fig. 3** Generational Partisanship in Presidential Elections Relative to Adult Population 1952–2016. 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 1952–2016

### Generational Partisanship in Presidential Elections Relative to Adult Population 1952–2016



become progressively more Republican as they grow older. The Silent Generation, in fact, started out Republican-leaning and has with a couple exceptions (including the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater race) maintained its Republican tendencies. And at the end of their lives the Greatest Generation actually became more supportive of Democratic presidential candidates than they had been previously.

For the most part these figures reinforce the degree of lack of partisan generational differences from 1952 to 2016, with four noticeable exceptions: 1) the Baby Boomers in 1972 (their first presidential election); 2) the Greatest Generation in 1996 and 2000 (their sixteenth and seventeenth presidential elections); 3) the Silent Generation 2012–2016 (their sixteenth and seventeenth presidential elections); and 4) the Millennials 2004–2016 (their first four presidential elections). While the Greatest Generation and Silent Generation were both partisan outliers towards the end of their lives in their 16th and 17th presidential elections after reaching adulthood, it is important to stress that their partisan preferences were the opposite, with the Greatest Generation strongly supporting the Democratic nominee and the Silent Generation strongly supporting the Republican nominee.

In the seventeen presidential elections from 1952 to 2016, voters under 30 years-old voted only slightly more—3%—Democratic than the electorate as a whole. Under-30 voters, in fact, were not the most distinct age cohort: those in their 60s were 4% more Republican than the electorate as a whole.<sup>29</sup> Prior to the George W. Bush administration, most presidential elections since the advent of polling did not have much of an age gap, and by the 1990s there was evidence that the age gap on public policy issues that had grown in the 1960s and 1970s was shrinking.<sup>30</sup> 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. In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, for example, the oldest Americans were actually the age group most likely to vote Democratic. 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.

In a study focusing on the Baby Boomers from 1972 to 2008, it was found that the specifics of each election pushes and pulls all generations with relatively equal force.<sup>31</sup> This, however, has adamantly not been the case with the Millennial Generation. As Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 demonstrate, the partisan generational divide in American politics is unprecedented. Millennials have developed distinct political leanings that are significantly to the left of older generations. Since entering the electorate in significant numbers in 2004, Millennials have voted significantly more Democratic for president than any other generation. It is important to stress that other generations were generally not substantially more Democratic when first entering the electorate. 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 generally leaned Republican.

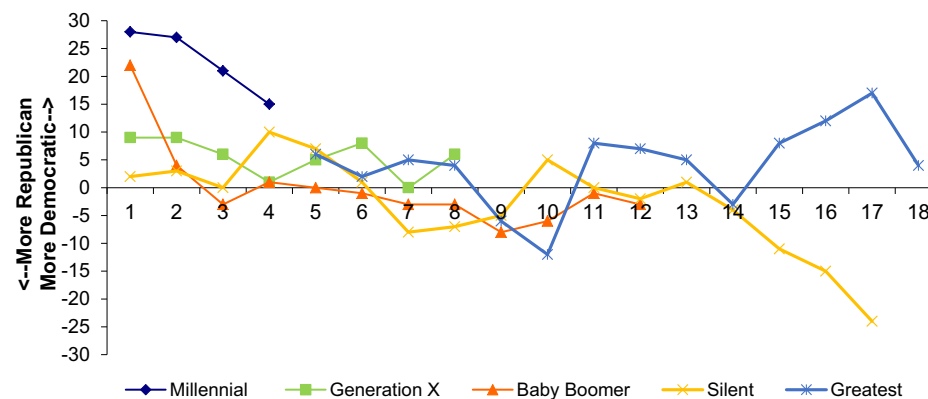
The degree by which the Millennials have been a political outlier so far can be seen by the fact that even though Hillary Clinton won the Millennial vote by a 17-point margin, historically a very lopsided generational total, this is actually the lowest plurality the generation has given a Democratic presidential candidate. In 2004, the first presidential election in which

<sup>29</sup> Author calculations of 1952–2016 American National Election studies data.

<sup>30</sup> Researchers at the National Opinion Research Center were most concerned with the apparent generation gap that was evident in the years 1973, 1985, and 1997, and used the General Social Survey of 3000 adults to analyze the trend. By comparing about twenty variables such as abortion, economic conditions, and civil rights, the researchers found that the gap has fallen from an average of 19.4% in 1973, to 16.7% in 1985 and finally to 15.2% in 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Baby Boomers," *The Forum* 12 (2014): 417–445.

**Generational Partisanship in Presidential Elections Relative to Adult Population 1952–2016  
By Presidential Election Cycle after Entering Electorate**



**Fig. 4** Generational Partisanship in Presidential Elections Relative to Adult Population 1952–2016. By Presidential Election Cycle after Entering Electorate. 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. X-axis denotes presidential election cycle after each generation entered the electorate in substantial numbers. First presidential election cycle for *Greatest* = 1936; *Silent* = 1952; *Baby Boomer* = 1972; *Generation X* = 1988; *Millennial* = 2004. Source: *American National Election Studies 1952–2016*

Millennials could vote in sizable numbers, the Millennial vote went overwhelmingly for John Kerry and were by far his best generation. Kerry's support among Millennials, however, was to a considerable degree a function of their contempt for George W. Bush rather than of strong support for Kerry himself. This, however, was not the case in 2008 and 2012 as Barack Obama himself was enormously popular among Millennials from the outset of him announcing his candidacy in 2007. 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.

To further demonstrate the relative importance of generation on presidential vote choice, bivariate correlations for two-party presidential election vote were tested for all generations since the Silent Generation in each presidential election from 1952 to 2016. The following seven generations and presidential elections had Pearson coefficients that were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ):

- 1) Baby Boomers 1972 ( $p < .001$ )
- 2) Millennials 2004 ( $p < .01$ )
- 3) Millennials 2008 ( $p < .001$ )
- 4) Millennials 2012 ( $p < .001$ )
- 5) Silent Generation 2012 ( $p < .001$ )
- 6) Millennials 2016 ( $p < .001$ )
- 7) Silent Generation 2016 ( $p < .001$ )

It is striking just how few generations have been statistically significant in presidential elections from 1952 to 2016. Before

the Millennials reached voting age the only statistically significant generation from 1952 to 2000 was the Baby Boomers in 1972. The bivariate correlations thus emphasize just how historically unusual the contemporary generation gap in American politics is. Not only have the Millennials consistently been statistically notable, but 2012 and 2016 are the only presidential election during this time period with two different generations (Millennials and Silent Generation) being statistically significant. Looking at the generations from both a partisan and ideological perspective, it is evident that the Millennials have emerged as the generation that identifies itself as both considerably more liberal and more Democratic than the rest of the contemporary American population and that the Silent Generation has become by a significant margin the generation most likely to identify as conservative and Republican.<sup>32</sup>

## An Unprecedented Transformation in American Politics

The last half century has seen dramatic demographic, social, and technological changes and different generations of Americans have their own distinct reactions to these changes. The racial and ethnic makeup of the country has been transformed. The 1950s-era family is now just one of a growing variety of family arrangements. The old means of communicating have also given way to digital platforms that were unimaginable 50 years ago. In general, older generations are having a harder time processing these changes, while younger generations are more likely to take them in stride. Among

<sup>32</sup> Shiva Maniam, "A Wider Partisan and Ideological Gap between Younger, Older Generations," Pew Research Center March 20, 2017.

older Americans, there is a tension between their belief that America is the greatest country in the world and a sense of pessimism about the country's future. Younger Americans are less convinced about America's greatness but more comfortable with the path the country is currently on.<sup>33</sup> This includes relative ease with the country's changing demographics. Among members of the Silent Generation today, 79% are non-Hispanic whites; among the Millennial Generation, the figure is 59%.<sup>34</sup> One-in-five Millennials is Hispanic, compared with only 7% among Silent Generation adults.<sup>35</sup> Demographically, politically, economically, socially and technologically, the generations are more different from each other now than at any time in living memory.<sup>36</sup>

The findings of this study suggest that the generational divide in American politics today is unprecedented. For the second half of the twentieth century there was remarkably modest political disparity between generational cohorts. This lack of an age divide in American politics lead the field of political science to generally focus on other demographic gaps in American politics other than generational differences. Once the Millennial Generation first entered the electorate at the turn of the century, however, there has emerged a considerable generational gap in American politics. Not only are Millennials notably more left leaning than other generations, but at the same time older Americans are distinctly to the right of the general population. In the past, older Americans have not necessarily been ideologically more conservative than their younger compatriots have been. 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 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 of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation—have become more Republican.

Generational replacement occurs when a new (mainly young) citizens enter the eligible electorate and other (mainly older) voters die off. This allows aggregate partisan change to occur even with people maintaining their initial party identification throughout their political life cycle.<sup>37</sup> Given the different generational political leanings, generational replacement in the electorate has the potential to markedly change future political preferences. 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 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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<sup>33</sup> Pew Research Center, "The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election," November 3, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Taylor, *The Next America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015). Chapter 4.

<sup>37</sup> Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. Macken, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.154–155.