**Generational Replacement and the**

**Impending Transformation of the American Electorate**

**Patrick Fisher**

**Department of Political Science**

**Seton Hall University**

**South Orange, NJ 07079**

**patrick.fisher@shu.edu**

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**Abstract**

Contemporary American politics is marked by an unusually substantial generation gap. This has important implications for the future of American politics as an overwhelmingly white and conservative generation, the Silent Generation, is being replaced in the electorate by much more diverse and liberal generations, the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. To project potential partisan changes in the American electorate with generation replacement, simulations were calculated estimating what the electorate may look like, using the 2016 presidential election as a baseline. Hypothesizing the same generational dynamics of vote choice and turnout for 2020 that existed in 2016, with generational replacement alone the national plurality of 2.1% for the Democratic candidate increases to 4.8% if Generation Z votes the same as Millennials. For elections beyond 2020, the potential partisan swing towards the Democrats based on generational replacement become even much more considerable. By 2032, Millennials and Generation Z combined are projected to consist of almost one-half of the entire electorate. Even if Generation Z is not distinct from the rest of the electorate politically, given how strongly Democratic the Millennials are, the simulated gain for the Democrats in 2032 is 5%. And if Generation Z becomes as Democratic-leaning as Millennials are, the simulated swing toward the Democrats is greater than 7%.

**Generational Replacement and the Impending Transformation of the American Electorate**

***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 (Beck and Jennings 1991). An individual’s age is an important predictor of differences in attitudes and behaviors.

As long ago as the 1970s it was shown that statistical models were capable of explaining some of the underlying phenomena of generational effects (Carlsson and Karlsson 1970). 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 (Abramson 1975). The decline of partisan loyalties among Americans after 1964 was a thus direct consequence of generational change.

There are two general definitions of generation: one chronological and the other social (Edmunds and Turner 2002). 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 (Edmunds and Turner 2002). It is important to stress that when we speak of generations, we speak of averages (Twenge 2014). Individuals within a generation of course may deviate from others in the cohort (Rouse and Ross 2018).

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 (Pew 2015). 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 (Abramson 1975).

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 (Braungart and Braungart 1986). Due to the changing nature of society’s socio-economic conditions over time, people from different generations emphasize different political values (Inglehart 1990). 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 (Edmunds and Turner 2002). Consequently, the generation one comes of age politically is an important determinant in one’s political identity.

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 (Jacobson 2009).

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 outsized 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 deepens 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 (Glenn 2005, 3). 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 (Pew 2015).

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. 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 (Fisher 2008).

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.

Today, 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.

***The Generation Gap in American Politics***

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 (2015). 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 (Braungart and Braungart 1986). 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 Silent Generation (those born1928-1945), 2) the Baby Boom Generation (those born 1946-1964), 3) Generation X (those born 1965-1980, 4) the Millennial Generation (those born 1981-1996), and 5) Generation Z (those born 1997-2012).

The Silent Generation came of age during the transition between the war years and the counter-culture revolution of the 1960s. Children of the Great Depression and World War II, their “Silent” moniker refers to their image as conformist and civic-minded. *Time* coined the term in a 1951 article describing the emerging generation of the time. The Silent label, however, is not widely recognized by the public: fewer say they have heard of it than the labels for any other of the living generations (Pew 2015).

The Baby Boomers are the children of the prosperous post-War era. This generation s largely delineated by demography. Its oldest members were part of the spike in fertility that began in 1946, right after the end of World War II and its youngest members were born in 1964, right before a significant decline in fertility occurred after the birth control pill first went on the market. Other generations are less strictly defined by demography (though it plays an important role in designations including Generation X and Millennials) (Pew 2015). Baby Boomers are often associated with a redefinition of traditional values. Throughout their lives, Baby Boomers have expressed more libertarian attitudes than their elders and less respect for authority, religion, and patriotism (Putnam 2000). They are the first generation to grow up in the television era as well as the first generation where many grew up in the suburbs.

Generation X was originally referred to as the “baby bust” generation due to the drop in the birth rate following the baby boom. This generation is defined in part by the relatively low birth rates compared with the Baby Boom generation that preceded them and the Millennial Generation that followed them. The label for this generation was popularized by Douglas Coupland’s 1991 book *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. The “X” label refers to the social change that occurred during this generation’s childhood in the late 1960s and 1970s. Generation X has an extremely personal and individualistic view of politics (Putnam 2000).

The Millennial Generation is so named because it is the first generation of adults to come of age in the new millennium. The Millennial Generation are the children of what has been called the “echo boom.” This generation is largely made up of the children of the Baby Boom generation. As this generation was first entering adulthood, the term Gen Y was sometimes used to refer to them, and its boundaries were slightly different (Pew 2015). Millennials are civic minded and technologically savvy, embracing the internet and new technology for multiple modes of self-expression. Compared to other generations, Millennials are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, and no rush to marry. At the same time, they are optimistic about the future (Pew 2014).

Generation Z is the moniker we will give the post-Millennial Generation. The oldest of this generation are just now entering adulthood and casting their first votes. Though originally there had been no consensus on the name for this post-Millennial generation, by 2019 Generation Z had taken hold in popular culture and journalism. Sources ranging from Merriam-Webster to the Urban Dictionary now include this name for the generation that follows the Millennials and Google Trends data shows that “Generation Z” is far outpacing other names in people’s searches for information (Dimock 2019). One of the first academic studies to utilize this generational moniker was Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace’s 2016 book *Generation Z Goes to College.* Generation Z is the first generation shaped completely by the internet, and Generation Z has also been referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, or iGeneration. According to Seemiller and Grace’s (2016) work, Generation Z students just entering college to be loyal, compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, responsible, and determined, but being constantly connected to the screen contributes to the generation having a more sedentary lifestyle compared to older generations.

Since the years at which this generation starts is still fluid this study will utilize the generational time frame set by the Pew Research Center and classify Generation Z as those born after 1996. Eventually historical and demographic markers will factor into determining the dividing line between Millennials and Generation Z. It is unlikely, however, that any single indicator or moment will mark the end of the Millennial Generation, absent some unexpected event. More likely is that an end-point definition will emerges over time as debate among researchers and usage in popular culture forms a working definition.

The generational divide in American politics today is unprecedented over at least the last half-century (see Figure 1). 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 the Democrat George McGovern in much stronger numbers than older generations. The Baby Boomer Democratic preference, however, was short lived: since 1972 the generation has consistently been a Republican-leaning generation. At times, younger voters have actually supported more conservative candidates than older voters. This was the case, for example, when Ronald Reagan won reelection by a landslide in 1984. In the eighteen presidential elections from 1948-2016, voters under 30 years-old voted only slightly more—three percent—Democratic than the electorate as a whole. Under-30 voters, in fact, were not the most distinct age cohort: those in their 60s were four percent more Republican than the electorate as a whole.[[1]](#endnote-1) 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.[[2]](#endnote-2)

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**Figure 1**

**Generational Voting for President 1972-2016**

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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 1952-2016

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. In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, for example, the Greatest Generation was the generation most likely to vote Democratic.

***The Political Distinctiveness of the Millennial Generation***

Millennials are more ideologically liberal than generations before them at the same age (Rouse and Ross 2018, 202). The liberalness of Millennials is not simply a life-cycle effect, but rather a phenomenon tied to generational factors. Millennials today are the most Democratic age group in the nation by a substantial margin in part due their position in the partisan cycles of American politics. In general, young voters tend to react to the successes or failures of the first politicians they know. Millennials movement of toward the Democrats begun 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 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 (Silver 2009).

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. 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. Barack Obama may not be a Millennial himself, but he has been described as the “Millennial President” (Rouse and Ross 2018, 22). The relative strength of Barack Obama’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 (Fisher 2011). Thus, the strong pro-Democratic vote of the Millennials has its roots in the generation being both very pro-Obama and very anti-Bush. Obama’s strength among Millennials, in fact, was critical to his margin of victory in 2008 and 2012. In 2008 the vote among those aged 30+ was basically a dead heat. In 2012, though Obama won the Millennial vote by a smaller share than he had in 2008, the generation was even more critical in his reelection as he lost older generations by a total of a couple of percentage points. Hillary Clinton lost considerable ground in 2016 among Millennials compared to Obama’s performance among the generation in 2008 and 2012, but even so the Millennials were by far her best generation.

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**Figure 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*: 1981-1996; *Generation Z* 1997-2012

Source: Pew Research Center and author’s analysis of 2010 Census data

The Millennials support for the Democratic Party is unquestionably a product of the generation’s relative diversity. As Figure 2 displays, the Millennial Generation is considerably more diverse than older generations, especially the Baby Boom and Silent Generations (though it is not as diverse as the generation that follows it, Generation Z). The diversity of Millennials is a strong catalyst for political attitudes and policy preferences of the generation (Rouse and Ross 2018). 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, the generational gap that has emerged in the American politcs since Millennials have reached adulthood may also be a reaction to older generations of the racial and ethnic diversity of the Millennial Generation and the change that signifies.

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**Figure 3**

**Generational Vote by Race and Ethnicity in the 2016 Presidential Election**

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Source: American National Election Studies 2016

Importantly, however, Millennials relative liberalness and support for the Democratic Party is not just a product of their diversity. Given the diversity of the Millennial Generation, it is not surprising that the racial overtures of Donald Trump’s populism did not resonate with non-white Millennials. Racial divisions in partisanship and voting have increasingly outweighed divisions by class, age, gender, and other demographic measures (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015) and Trump exploited this to his benefit among older voters in 2016. Yet white Millennials were much less likely to be receptive to Trump’s pitch (see Figure 3). While African-Americans and Latinos of all generations voted overwhelmingly against Trump, among white voters there is a stark generation gap in Trump’s support. Though Trump did managed to win a pluarity of white Millennials in 2016, his margin of white Millennials was considerably smaller than it was for whites of other generations. The difference among whites in the Millennial and Silent Generations is especially notable: whites in the Silent Generation voted for Trump at a clip of more than 30 points higher than that of white Millennials. Millennials lack of support for Trump, therefore, was not just a symptom of the generation’s diversity.

Potentially part of the reason white Millennials were less supportive of Trump than older whites was due to their more tolerant attitudes toward immigration (Fisher 2014). Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric was also perceived to be a critical component of his success among older voters, but repelled many in the diverse Millennial generation. There was a strong relationship between the proportion of native born and support for Trump: relatively few people in the places where Trump was strong in 2016 were immigrants (Irwin and Katz 2016). White Americans’ concerns about Latinos and immigration have led to support for Trump’s less generous and punitive policies that conflict with the preferences of much of the immigrant population. The country’s growing racial diversity, therefore, is leading to a greater racial divide in politics. As whites move to the right of the political spectrum, racial minorities strongly support the left (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). White Millennials, however, appear to have been relatively immune to adopting conservative attitudes in response to an immigration backlash.

Another factor in white Millennials relative lack of support for Trump is the generation’s favorable attitudes toward the Obama administration. Obama ran on an explicit platform of change, in campaign that appealed to the young and reached out to racial and ethnic minorities. For Obama’s (disproportionally Millennial) supporters this is a matter of hope and pride. For supporters of the Trump, as for many Americans, Obama’s election symbolized the culmination of generation change that provoked deep anxiety.

After Obama’s victories, it had been argued that any potential Republican nominee would have to do considerably better among Millennials than John McCain and Mitt Romney to have a chance of winning the general election. Donald Trump, however, did only marginally better among Millennials than the previous two Republican presidential nominees. Trump’s lack of appeal to Millennials, after Obama so successfully wooed them, solidified the Democratic Party’s standing with the generation. American politics. Trump’s presidency, therefore, could portend a long-term effect on American politics by influencing as Millennials’ conceptions of American politics.

The loyalty of Millennials of all races toward both Barack Obama and the Democratic Partywas thus reinforced 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 campaign that appealed to the young and reached out to racial and ethnic minorities. 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.

***Generational Turnout***

Part of the reason for underestimating the potential political power of Millennials is that to date their turnout rates have not been that impressive (see Figure 4). The impact of Millennials’ political influence so far has undoubtedly been mitigated by the generation’s low voter turnout rates since the generation has entered the electorate. The political power of the Millennial Generation, however, will increase dramatically as 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. The relatively low turnout rates for Millennials so far, therefore, is not to be unexpected. It’s the future potential of this generation’s influence that is critical to understanding the impending change in the American electorate.

It has been suggested that even though Millennials are no less engaged than past generations, they display different norms of citizenship which places less emphasis on voting. Rates of participation among Millennials in contacting public officials and discussing politics with friends and family, for example, are nearly equal to that of older adults (Rouse and Ross 2018, 206-207). Millennials, according to this argument, are more likely to follow engaged citizenship as opposed to the model of duty-based citizenship that older generations follow (Dalton 2016). The idea that Millennials will be less likely to vote than previous generations as they age, however, is questionable at best. Millennials, in fact, have so far voted at higher rates than Gen X when they were at the same age (Rouse and Ross 2018, 202-203). And even if Millennials were to hypothetically vote at lower rates than previous generations at the same age, the size of the generation alone makes them an inevitable political force.

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**Figure 4**

**Voter Turnout by Generation 1988-2016**

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Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946 through 1964; *Generation X:* 1965 through 1980; *Millennial*: 1981-1996; *Generation Z* adults born after 1996

Source: Pew Research Center

The entire Millennial Generation is now old enough to vote and as Millennials age they can be expected to cast ballots in increasing numbers. Figure 5 demonstrates the potential political heft of the Millennials. With more than 60 million eligible voters, as a share of the potential electorate Millennials are now almost as large as Baby Boomers. The approaching generational transformation of the electorate is even more pronounced when you consider Generation Z, the post-Millennials. The oldest of this generation are just entering adulthood and they were just a small proportion of the electorate in 2016. By 2020, however, Generation Z will consist of about 24 million eligible voters. Millennials and Generation Z, therefore, will combined consist of about 20 million more eligible voters than Baby Boomers. As Millennials and Generation Z vote in increasing numbers and replace Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation in the electorate the American polity will undergo significant changes.

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**Figure 5**

**Eligible Voters by Generation 1996-2020**

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Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946 through 1964; *Generation X:* 1965 through 1980; *Millennial: 1981-1996; Generation Z* adults born after 1996

Source: Pew Research Center

***Generational Replacement and the Changing American Electorate***

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 (Erikson, Macken, and Stimson 2002, 154-155). To study generational replacement is to study mass political change (Delli Carpini 1989). Contemporary generational replacement in the American electorate is extremely consequential because of the partisan and ideological differences between the oldest and youngest American voters.

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 generational change. As the Greatest Generation—who came of age politically during the New Deal Era and was overwhelmingly Democratic throughout their lives—died off, the elderly—who are now comprised mostly of early Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation—became considerably 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.

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 (and potentially Generation Z) 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.

Though Millennials’ liberal politics is well established, the politics of the post-Millennials, Generation Z, is still in flux as this generation is just entering adulthood and gaining the right to vote. Regardless of where and when the line is drawn to end the Millennial Generation, it will take several years before enough post-Millennials have reached adulthood to allow for meaningful statements about the next adult generation. But one thing is clear: the next generation will undoubtedly be shaped by very different influences and forces than previous generations (Pew 2015).

In its first comprehensive generational analysis of Generation Z, Pew found that on a range of issues, from Donald Trump’s presidency to the role of government to racial equality and climate change, the views of Gen Z mirror those of Millennials (Parker, Graf, and Igelink 2019). In each of these realms, the two younger generations hold views that differ significantly from those of their older counterparts. In most cases, members of the Silent Generation are at the opposite end, and Baby Boomers and Gen Xers fall in between. In January 2019 only about three-in-ten Gen Zers and Millennials approved of the way Donald Trump was handling his job as president, compared with 38% of Gen Xers, 43% of Boomers and 54% of Silents. Similarly, large majorities in Gen Z and the Millennial generation say government should do more to solve problems, rather than that government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals, considerably more than older generations (Parker, Graf, and Igelink 2019).

There also appears to be notable generational differences among Republican identifiers that do not exist among Democrats. The youngest Republicans stand apart in their views on the role of government and the causes of climate change. Gen Z Republicans are much more likely than Republicans in older generations to say government should do more to solve problems. They are also less likely than their older counterparts to attribute the earth’s warming temperatures to natural patterns, as opposed to human activity. Generation Z Republicans are also significantly more likely to belief that blacks aren’t treated equally compared to older Republicans (Parker, Graf, and Ingelink 2019).

A key characteristic that differentiated Millennials from previous generations is their diversity. Millennials were the most racially and ethnically diverse adult generation in the nation’s history. Yet the next generation will be even more diverse: Generation Z is by far the most racially diverse generation to date (Seemiller and Grace 2016). Nearly one-half of Generation Z is non-white, compared to about four-in-ten Millennials, three-in-ten Gen Xers, and less than two-in-ten Baby Boomers and Silents (Fry and Parker 2018). When discussing the difference in generational political attitudes, therefore, it is critical to underscore that to important degree this is a consequence of different racial and ethnic political preferences. In other words, the generational gap in American politics is intertwined with the race gap.

Racial diversity is not the only demographic change that may impact future elections. In addition to greater diversity (which is primary affecting the younger part of the electorate), the older part of the voting population is growing more rapidly as the huge Baby Boom generation ages. These demographic shifts toward both a more racially diverse younger electorate and an aging electorate can be expected to change the playing field in terms of how the parties and candidates appeal to these shifting voting blocs (Frey, Teixeira, and Griffin, 2016).

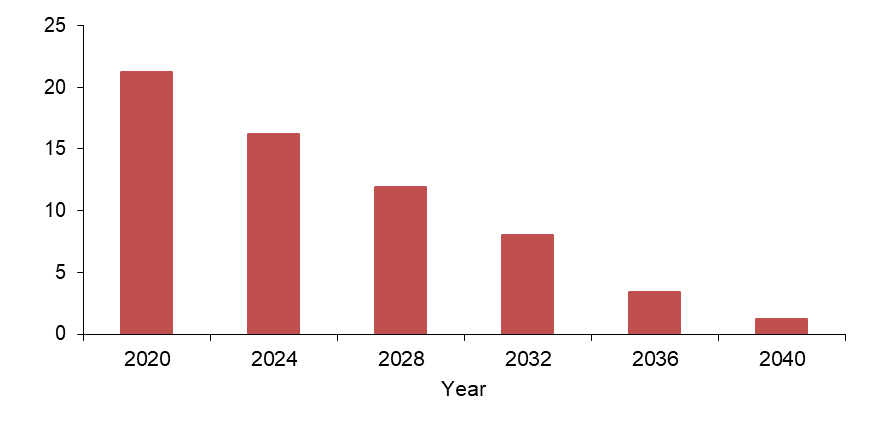
So how will generational replacement impact future American politics? The critical components of contemporary generational replacement in the electorate is that an overwhelmingly white and conservative generation, the Silent Generation, is being replaced in the electorate by much more diverse and liberal generations, the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. The Silent Generation has reached a point in their life-cycle where the attrition of this generation will be quite notable over the next couple of decades (see Figure 6). The number of projected eligible voters of the Silent Generation is expected to be around 21 million for the 2020 presidential election, going down to 16 or million in 2024 and less than 12 million in 2028 before dwindling to less than a million after the 2040 elections.

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**Figure 6**

**Projected Eligible Voters of the Silent Generation in Future Elections**

(in millions)

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Source: Author Calculations from U.S. Census

Millennial and Gen Z influence, therefore, will be especially felt as they replace members of the conservative Silent Generation in the electorate. To project potential partisan changes in the American electorate with generation replacement, simulations were calculated estimating what the electorate may look like, using the 2016 presidential election as a baseline. Tables 1-4 present simulations of the political consequences of generational replacement of the electorate, estimating what the partisan preferences of the presidential electorates of 2020, 2024, 2028, and 2032 could be focusing solely on the effects of generational replacement. It is important to underscore that these simulations are not predictions of future elections. The goal of the simulations is not to predict actual future elections but rather to display the potential effects of generational change.

Tables 1-4 each comprise of three generational replacement simulations. The key to each simulation is the relative size of the generation in the electorate, which is estimated given the projected population of the generation (which includes immigrants who have gained American citizenship) and the projected voter turnout rates for the generation. Each simulation estimates the voter turnout of each generation based on 2016 voter turnout along with the historical age effects of turnout—that is, that people are more likely to vote as they get older (and that this trend diminishes with age). Extrapolating from the Millennials 2016 voter turnout rate of 51%, for example, the generation is projected to have voter turnout rates of 56% in 2020,58% in 2024, 61% in 2028, and 62% in 2032.

As for the partisan divide between the generations, each simulation assumes that the generations’ vote in the same proportions for the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates that they did in 2016. This of course has no chance of being the case in reality. The Democrats are sure to nominate candidates very different from Hillary Clinton in future presidential elections and after 2020 a Republican nominee will inevitably have different strengths and weaknesses as a candidate than Donald Trump. The utility of the simulations is not to predict the exact vote totally of future presidential nominees, but rather to analyze what the generational effects of a transforming electorate could be assuming stability (or neutral changes) in generational partisan preferences.

The first simulation presented in Tables 1-4 models Generation Z as a “blank slate,” indicating what the electorate would look like if Generation Z votes like the rest of the electorate as a whole. Another simulation has Generation Z voting like Millennials, which given the first findings of partisan preferences of Generation Z done by Pew may be the case today. Finally, assuming the very real possibility that Generation Z may not ultimately be as liberal and Democratic-leaning as Millennials, the third simulations has Generation Z voting like Generation X, a generation that has been notably less supportive of Democrats in the past than Millennials, but that today has become more Democratic-leaning than older generations.

Hypothesizing the same generational dynamics of vote choice and turnout for 2020 that existed in 2016, and modeling Generation Z as a “blank slate,” with generational replacement alone the national plurality of 2.1% for the Democratic candidate increases to 4%. This change towards the Democrats of 1.9% is the smallest of the dozen simulations presented in Tables 1-4. If Generation Z were to split their ballots the same as Millennials, the simulated change in the Democrats favor with generational replacement would be 2.7% in 2020, and if Generation Z hypothetically voted along the same lines as Generation X the shift towards the Democrats would be 2.1%. The fact that in only one presidential election cycle of four years that generational replacement alone could alter the electorate’s partisan preference by 1.9% to 2.7% is unquestionably an underappreciated aspect of generational dynamics of the contemporary American electorate.

For elections beyond 2020, the potential partisan swing towards the Democrats based on generational replacement become even much more considerable. In 2024, the simulations have the Democrats gaining 2.9% to 4.3% due to generational replacement. These figures increase from 4% to 5.9% in 2028 and 5% to 7.2% in 2032. Focusing on the 2032 simulation displays just how dramatic the partisan consequences of generational replacement could potentially be. By 2032, the Millennial Generation and Generation Z combined are estimated to have more than 138 million eligible voters, of which more than 76 million are projected to actually vote. This would be almost one-half of the entire electorate. Even if Generation Z is not distinct from the rest of the electorate politically, given how strongly Democratic the Millennials are, the simulated gain for the Democrats is 5%. And if Generation Z becomes as Democratic-leaning as Millennials are, this would mean that about half of the electorate in 2032 supported the Democratic presidential nominee by a plurality of 17% in 2016.

**Table 1**

**Estimated 2020 Presidential Vote of 2016 Electorate with Generational Replacement**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Generation Z a Blank Slate:***

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2020*

*2020 Eligible Voters Turnout 2020 Turnout 2020 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 24.5 37 38 9.3 ---------- ----------

*Millennials* 63.7 51 56 35.6 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.1 62 64 36.5 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 68.1 69 71 48.3 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  21.2 70 67 14.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 143.9 Dem +2.1 Dem +4.0

***Change: Democratic +1.9***

***Generation Z votes like Millennials*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2020*

*2020 Eligible Voters Turnout 2020 Turnout 2020 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 24.5 37 38 9.3 ----------- Dem +17

*Millennials* 63.7 51 56 35.6 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.1 62 64 36.5 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 68.1 69 71 48.3 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  21.2 70 67 14.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 143.9 Dem +2.1 Dem +4.8

***Change: Democratic +2.7***

***Generation Z votes like Generation X*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2020*

*2020 Eligible Voters Turnout 2020 Turnout 2020 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 24.5 37 38 9.3 --------- Dem +8

*Millennials* 63.7 51 56 35.6 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.1 62 64 36.5 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 68.1 69 71 48.3 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  21.2 70 67 14.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 143.9 Dem +2.1 Dem +4.2

***Change: Democratic +2.1***

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Source: Author Calculations from U.S. Census

**Table 2**

**Estimated 2024 Presidential Vote of 2016 Electorate with Generational Replacement**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Generation Z a Blank Slate:***

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2024*

*2024 Eligible Voters Turnout 2024 Turnout 2024 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 38.5 37 45 17.3 ----------- -----------

*Millennials* 64.3 51 58 37.3 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.5 62 66 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 64.8 69 71 46.0 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  16.2 70 65 10.5 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 149.1 Dem +2.1 Dem +5.0

***Change: Democratic +2.9***

***Generation Z votes like Millennials*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2024*

*2024 Eligible Voters Turnout 2024 Turnout 2024 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 38.5 37 45 17.3 ------------ Dem +17

*Millennials* 64.3 51 58 37.3 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.5 62 66 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 64.8 69 71 46.0 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  16.2 70 65 10.5 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 149.1 Dem +2.1 Dem +6.4

***Change: Democratic +4.3***

***Generation Z votes like Generation X*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2024*

*2024 Eligible Voters Turnout 2024 Turnout 2024 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 38.5 37 45 17.3 ------------- Dem +8

*Millennials* 64.3 51 58 37.3 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 57.5 62 66 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 64.8 69 71 46.0 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  16.2 70 65 10.5 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 234.6 60 61 149.1 Dem +2.1 Dem +5.3

***Change: Democratic +3.2***

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Source: Author Calculations from U.S. Census

**Table 3**

**Estimated 2028 Presidential Vote of 2016 Electorate with Generational Replacement**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

***Generation Z a Blank Slate:***

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2028*

*2028 Eligible Voters Turnout 2028 Turnout 2028 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 55.2 37 47 25.9 ---------- ----------

*Millennials* 65.7 51 61 40.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 56.8 62 67 38.1 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 60.6 69 72 43.6 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  11.1 70 62 6.9 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 249.4 60 61 154.5 Dem +2.1 Dem +6.1

***Change: Democratic +4.0***

***Generation Z votes like Millennials*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2028*

*2028 Eligible Voters Turnout 2028 Turnout 2028 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 55.2 37 47 25.9 ---------- Dem +17

*Millennials* 65.7 51 61 40.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 56.8 62 67 38.1 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 60.6 69 72 43.6 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  11.1 70 62 6.9 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 249.4 60 61 154.5 Dem +2.1 Dem +8.0

***Change: Democratic +5.9***

***Generation Z votes like Generation X*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2028*

*2028 Eligible Voters Turnout 2028 Turnout 2028 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 55.2 37 47 25.9 ------------ Dem +8

*Millennials* 65.7 51 61 40.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 56.8 62 67 38.1 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 60.6 69 72 43.6 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  11.1 70 62 6.9 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 249.4 60 61 154.5 Dem +2.1 Dem +6.5

***Change: Democratic +4.4***

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Source: Author Calculations from U.S. Census

**Table 4**

**Estimated 2032 Presidential Vote of 2016 Electorate with Generational Replacement**

*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*

***Generation Z a Blank Slate:***

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2032*

*2032 Eligible Voters Turnout 2032 Turnout 2032 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 72.3 37 49 35.4 ----------- -----------

*Millennials* 66.1 51 62 41.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 55.9 62 68 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 54.7 69 71 38.8 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  6.7 70 62 4.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 255.7 60 62 157.4 Dem +2.1 Dem +7.1

***Change: Democratic +5.0***

***Generation Z votes like Millennials*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2032*

*2032 Eligible Voters Turnout 2032 Turnout 2032 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 72.3 37 49 35.4 ------------ Dem +17

*Millennials* 66.1 51 62 41.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 55.9 62 68 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 54.7 69 71 38.8 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  6.7 70 62 4.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 255.7 60 62 157.4 Dem +2.1 Dem +9.3

***Change: Democratic +7.2***

***Generation Z votes like Generation X*:**

*Estimated # 2016 Voter Estimated Estimated # 2016 Estimated 2032*

*2032 Eligible Voters Turnout 2032 Turnout 2032 Actual Voters Plurality Plurality*

*(millions) (%) (%) (millions) (%) (%)*

*Generation Z* 72.3 37 49 35.4 ----------- Dem +8

*Millennials* 66.1 51 62 41.0 Dem +17 Dem +17

*Generation X* 55.9 62 68 38.0 Dem +8 Dem +8

*Baby Boomers* 54.7 69 71 38.8 Rep +1 Rep +1

*Silent Generation*  6.7 70 62 4.2 Rep +22 Rep +22

Total 255.7 60 62 157.4 Dem +2.1

Dem +7.5

***Change: Democratic +5.3***

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Source: Author Calculations from U.S. Census

Again, these simulations are not intended to be projections, but all indicate gains for the Democrats in future elections; the uncertainty is just how large of gains. Given the Millennials’ left-leaning politics, generational replacement would in all probability have 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. Consequently, as Millennials’ flex their electoral muscles, the generation has the potential to alter the course of American politics. From a partisan perspective, the emergence of the Millennials as an electoral force means that generational replacement is unquestionably working to the advantage of the Democrats. The question is simply one of degree.

***The Consequences of Generational Replacement***

Along with partisan preferences, the policy preferences of the American electorate potentially could change markedly with generational replacement (see Figure 7). On a number of public policy issues, Millennials are considerably more liberal than their counterparts in the Silent Generation (Fisher 2018). 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 the ideological differences between the generations may not be large enough to merit more than a negligible change in public policy. Most notably, there is no significant generational difference on one of the most divisive issues in the nation: abortion rights (Rouse and Ross 2018). Abortion is thus one issue that is largely not driven by generational attitudes or experiences.

**Figure 7**

**Millennials Liberal-Leaning Positions on Public Policy**

**Relative to Silent Generation**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Figures represent differential among Millennial Generation (adults born after 1980) and Silent Generation (those born 1928-2945) 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

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. Millennials came into adulthood more supportive of allowing gays to marry legally than older generations and those greater levels of support have persisted over time. As a result, a good share of the explanation for the shift in attitudes about same-sex marriage is attributable to generational replacement as members of older, less supportive, generations pass away, they are “replaced” in the voting age population by members of younger, more supportive, generations entering adulthood (Pew 2015). And gay marriage is not an aberration: Millennials are more open to outsiders and they have high levels of social tolerance (Rouse and Ross 2018, 12).

In regards to defense, not only are Millennials more supportive of reducing defense spending, but they are less supportive of military action than older generations as well (Rouse and Ross 2018). The post-9/11 world is substantially different than the pre-9/11 world, and the Millennial cohort has grappled with the wide-ranging effects of that tragedy. The world Millennials live in is much smaller and closer than the world experienced by previous generations. Millennials see the world as less threatening than non-Millennials and are more likely to support foreign policies aimed at cooperation with other nations. Consequently, they lean toward diplomatic solutions to international conflict.

Economically, Millennials were shaped by the fact they were born during the longest period of economic expansion in the twentieth century, yet entered the job market in the worst economic recession since the 1930s (Thompson 2012). On issues such as support for government services and aid to the poor, this has pushed the generation to the left. An area of public policy that Millennials are particularly likely to support increased spending for is education. Education is a very important issues for the Millennial Generation and it is clear that the generation is more concerned about education, especially the high costs of education, than older adults. The generation realizes that education is more important than ever as the income gap in educational attainment has continued to widen (Rouse and Ross 2018).

Millennials also have distinct attitudes on climate change. Millennials are only slightly more likely than Xers and Boomers to say there is solid evidence of warming and that the warming is caused mostly be human activity, but are almost twice as likely as Silents to say that global warming is caused by human activity (Pew 2011). A possible explanation for this is the fact that Millennials are more trusting in science than older Americans. This trust in science leads them to see climate change as fact, not opinion. Consequently, Millennials are generally liberal and open-minded in their thinking about the issue of global warming and that these attitudes are resilient to political and economic factors that may constrain the thinking of older adults on the issue (Rouse and Ross 2018).

No issue may symbolize the differences (politically, socially, demographically) between Millennials and older generations more than its attitudes on immigration. The Millennial Generation’s attitudes about immigration are influenced by the increased diversity of the population and their exposure to and interaction with immigrants. The diversity of the Millennial Generation has been primarily driven by the large waves of Latinos and Asians that have been emigrating to the United States since the 1960s (Rouse and Ross 2018).

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. In 1965 the U.S. population was 84% white, by 2050 it will be 46% white, according to Pew projections (Taylor 2015, 105). In general, older generations are having a harder time processing these changes, while younger generations are more likely to take them in stride. Among 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. Millennials are less convinced about America’s greatness but more comfortable with the path the country is currently on (Pew 2011).

These generational tensions in the American electorate have been manifesting for a time, but finally came to head with the candidacy, and then presidency, of Donald Trump. Trump’s style and tactics—as well as his political message—has encouraged a widening of the generational gap in American politics. The generational bases of support for Trump and his predecessor Barack Obama have proven to be completely different. Obama’s coalition was the coalition of the future, Trump’s is that of the past. Millennials today are considerably more ethnically diverse than other generations. Hispanics in particular make up a larger portion of Millennials than the general population as a whole. Trump’s lack of appeal to racial and ethnic minorities, therefore, may not have prevented his victory in 2016 but could cause considerably harm to future Republican candidates as it suggests that, as a more diverse Millennial Generation matures, the Democrats are poised to pick up more votes.

It is possible that the GOP “brand” could be hurt by the nomination of Trump in 2016 in a way that could haunt the party for decades. For Millennials, especially women and minorities, Trump could prove to be so toxic that members of these groups refuse to vote Republican for years to come. The long-term consequences of Trump’s generational gap, therefore, distinctly favor the Democratic Party. While 19 percent of Hillary Clinton’s vote was from 18-to 29-year-olds, only 10 percent of Trump’s vote came from the same demographic. Since the vote preferences of previous generations have been relatively stable, as the political power of Millennials grows in stature through generational replacement, long-term demographic trends appear to favor the Democrats. The Democratic Party’s character as a group coalition allows it to benefit from an increasingly heterogeneous national electorate (Grossman and Hopkins 2016, 323-324). Generational churn, therefore, ought to be the Democrats’ best friend (Taylor 2015).

Though it is possible that Trump could help ideologically redefine the Republican Party in a way that appeals to more voters in the future, Trump’s lack of appeal among younger Americans poses considerable risk for Republicans long-term. There is the distinct possibility that Trump’s agenda may be too backward looking to win new supporters in future elections. His call to “Make America Great Again” appealed openly to nostalgia. He won in 2016 by maximizing the support in decisive states among declining segments of the electorate: older, rural, white, non-college-educated voters (Harwood 2017). In other words, Trump’s base of support was everything that the Millennial Generation is not. It is thus unlikely that his 2016 strategy—in which Trump still lost the popular vote by 2.9 million—is not a sustainable path to victory for future Republican candidates.

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**Endnotes**

1. Author calculations of 1948-2012 American National Election studies data. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 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 3,000 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 percent in 1973, to 16.7 percent in 1985 and finally to 15.2 percent in 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)