

Generation We™

How the Millennial Generation is Taking over America and Changing the World

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

A Unique and Powerful Generation Comes of Age

A new generation is about to seize the reins of history—the Millennial generation. Born between 1978 and 2000, the Millennials currently include 95 million young people up to 30 years of age—the biggest, most diverse, and best-educated age cohort in the history of the nation. In 2016, they will be 100 million strong and positioned to dominate the American political scene for 30-40 years.

During 2007-8, Eric H. Greenberg sponsored a major research study into the values and attitudes of the Millennials whose results have never before been fully revealed. Conducted by Gerstein | Agne Strategic Communications, it included an in-depth national survey of 2,000 individuals aged 18 to 29 as well as a series of twelve focus groups. This research revealed that the Millennial generation is very different from Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers (78 million by comparison) and are now creating a new politics in America.

A Powerful Generation with a Different Worldview

The worldview of the Millennial generation is shaped by two overriding dynamics that set this generation apart from those that have come before them.

The first is a commitment to the common good over individual gain, an ethos that reaches across traditional divisions such as race, ideology, and partisanship. The Millennials are not a “Generation Me” but rather a “Generation We.” They are strongly progressive, socially tolerant, environmentally-conscious, peace-loving, and poised to lead the biggest leftward shift in recent American history. They volunteer in record numbers and declare themselves ready to sacrifice their self-interest for the greater good. They do not fit neatly into any classic ideological category and are clearly eager to establish a new paradigm.

The second dynamic that fundamentally shapes the Millennials’ worldview is a comprehensive rejection of the country’s current leadership and dominant institutions. Whether it is Congress and the federal government, major corporations, or organized religion, these young Americans believe the large institutions that dominate so much of our modern society have comprehensively failed, placing narrow self-interests ahead of the welfare of the country as a whole.

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They See Themselves as A Unique Generation

The Millennials have a clear sense of generational identity. By 10:1 (90 percent to 9 percent), they agree that their generation “shares specific beliefs, attitudes, and experiences” that set them apart from generations that have come before them. And, by 68-31, they feel their generation has a great deal or a fair amount in common with young adults of their generation in other countries, rather than just a little or nothing at all. They even say, by 54-44, that they have more in common with young adults of their generation in other countries than they have with Americans of older generations.

Millennials are not convinced that the needs and goals of their generation are necessarily opposed to that of older generations in their own country. Half believe that “[t]he needs and goals of my generation are similar to those of older generations, and our best course is to work together to advance common interests,” rather than “[t]he needs and goals of my generation are fundamentally at odds with those of older generations, and accomplishing our goals will require removing those currently in power and replacing them with ourselves” (49 percent).

When asked whether their generation was more likely or less likely than earlier generations of Americans to be characterized by various attitudes and behaviors, topping the list was embracing innovation and new ideas. Over three quarters (78 percent) thought Millennials were more likely than earlier generations to embrace innovation and new ideas, compared to a mere 7 percent who thought Millennials were less likely than earlier generations to do so. This is by far the strongest result for any of the 14 characteristics tested. Further, 87 percent of Millennials agreed with the statement, “Throughout our history, America’s success has been built on innovation and entrepreneurship. As we confront the many challenges facing us today, it is that same spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship that is needed to maintain America’s strength in the 21st century.”

Sober About Their Future and Ready to Do Something About It

Millennials identify a series of political and social issues that they believe have not been adequately addressed. As these problems have been allowed to fester, they have shaped the worldview of this younger generation and set a clear agenda for them:

- **America’s dependence on fossil fuels like coal, natural gas, and oil (76 percent identified this issue as very important in shaping this generation)**
- **America’s dependence on foreign oil (75 percent)**
- **Declining quality and rising inequality in America’s public education system (75 percent)**
- **The rising cost of health care and growing number of uninsured (74 percent)**
- **Lack of long-term job and retirement security (74 percent)**
- **Increase in obesity and chronic disease (74 percent)**
- **Rapid shift of the U.S. economy from manufacturing to services (73 percent)**

Millennials are not willing to sit back and wait for others to act; instead they are ready and willing to take on the responsibility of leadership themselves. They reacted strongly to the following statements: Young Americans must take action now to reverse the rapid decline of our country. If we wait until we are older, it will be too late (89 percent agree, 48 percent strongly agree). Life in the future in America will be much worse unless my generation of Americans takes the lead in pushing for change (85 percent agree, 42 percent strongly agree).

Millennials are extremely negative about the direction of the country, and that in turn has made them pessimistic about the outlook for their generation, with two thirds saying they believe that, 20 years from now, they will live in country that is about the same (20 percent) or even worse off (46 percent) than it is today. However,

they are far from resigned to their fate and believe they can make a difference, personally and collectively. My generation of Americans has better opportunities to make a difference and produce structural change than previous generations (79 percent agree). Addressing the big issues facing my generation starts with individuals willing to take a stand and take action (80 percent), versus Individuals can't make a real difference in addressing the big issues facing my generation (20 percent).

Millennials pride themselves not only on their recognition that the status quo has failed but also on their refusal to be constrained by past conventions. Of all the attributes on which they were asked to compare themselves to earlier generations of Americans, they identified their willingness to “embrace innovation and new ideas” as the variable that most differentiates them from older Americans. More than three out of four Millennials (78 percent) say they are more likely to embrace innovation and new ideas, including 44 percent who say they are much more likely to do so – more than 10 points higher than any other variable tested.

Millennials see their embrace of innovation not as a radical departure from earlier generations, but rather as a new step forward in a tradition that highlights the best of our country and the unique American spirit. Throughout our history, America's success has been built on innovation and entrepreneurship. As we confront the many challenges facing us today, it is that same spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship that is needed to maintain America's strength in the 21st century (87 percent agree, 38 percent strongly agree).

Their belief in the power of innovation and the ability of Americans, no matter how dire the current situation, to innovate the future is the foundation of how Millennials view the future. Despite their current frustration, they remain optimistic for the future and maintain a strong belief in their own ability to effect change on a national or even global level.

Deeply Frustrated with Existing Institutions and Handling of Affairs

The dismay that Millennials express about the current leadership in our country – not just in government, but corporations and other large institutions as well – is stunning. They reject the two-dimensional partisan and ideological axes of modern politics and refuse to be constrained by any of the traditional political labels. Instead, they define themselves largely in opposition to the status quo and express a fervent desire for new ideas and new leadership that will offer them fresh alternatives to the same old partisan, lesser-of-two-evils, choices they are now forced to make.

Perhaps the most important political characteristic of the Millennials is their across-the-board rejection of the country's current leadership and dominant institutions. Whether it is Congress and the federal government, major corporations, or organized religion, these young Americans believe the large institutions that dominate modern society have comprehensively failed, placing narrow self-interests ahead of the welfare of the country as a whole. Frustrated and seeking an outlet for their innate idealism, they are eager for wholesale change.

By a margin of almost two to one (49 to 25 percent), Millennials say they are less likely than previous generations to believe that government has a positive role to play. By a margin of nearly four to one (63 to 17 percent), they are less likely than previous generations to trust government and political leaders. Their core frustration with government lies in the rejection of their common good philosophy by current leaders, as well as the broader political and partisan system in which those leaders thrive.

The extent of Millennials' rejection of politics and the two-party system cannot be overstated. They simply do not trust government and political leaders, who they strongly believe are selling out the country for selfish goals, partisan advantage, special interests, or pure greed. And while Millennials manifested their desire for change by voting in large numbers for Democrats in 2006, it is clear their skepticism extends to both parties. 70 percent say “Democrats and Republicans alike are failing our country.”

When asked how they identify themselves in partisan terms, a plurality of Millennials call themselves Independents (39 percent); this is approximately 15 points higher than in polls of all adults. Another 36 percent consider themselves Democrats (only 16 percent strong Democrats) and less than one in four (24 percent) identify themselves as Republicans (only 10 percent strong Republicans). Perhaps most important, a clear majority of Millennials (56 percent) say they are more likely to support an emerging third political party.

Driven By Technology and Collective Social Action

Despite their harsh assessment of the current state of affairs and leadership, Millennials are not pessimistic about the future. In fact, they are quite optimistic and believe that new leadership can transform government and corporations. Seeing little hope for real change within the current political system, Millennials believe that innovation and new ideas are the only path forward, and they are eager to engage in collective social movements to reshape the world around their own values and priorities.

Millennials believe they can innovate themselves out of the mess they are inheriting. That task begins with the unique role of technology has had in shaping this generation and the confidence it has given them in the power of innovation to fundamentally change the world. The most important factor, of 14 surveyed, shaping their generation has been the rise of the Internet, cell phones, text messaging, e-mail, and similar advances in personal technology.

The degree to which technology has affected their personal interactions, intellectual development, and relationship to the world around them cannot be overstated. Millennials firmly believe, as sure as the sun rises, that new technologies and innovation can fundamentally reshape the world. This conviction is evident in their ability to reconcile profound pessimism about the country's current direction with a passionate belief in their own ability to put the country back on the right track and to solve challenges that have haunted this country for generations.

Millennials understand that the challenges facing the country are tremendous and that, while individual action can make a difference, it will not be enough. Having grown up with today's unprecedented levels of global social networking and information sharing, they identify "a collective social movement" as the most effective means for addressing the major challenges facing the country. They believe that ordinary citizens rallying together can and will force these massive entities to equate the common good with their own self-interest and to then hold them accountable for short-sighted actions that betray these principles. Their commitment to the common good defines their rejection of the current societal institutions as well as their prescription for transforming those institutions.

When asked about the best way to address the challenges facing the country, the leading choice by far was "through a collective social movement" (60 percent made that their first or second choice) as opposed to individual action and entrepreneurship (35 percent), media and popular culture (33 percent), government action (40 percent) and international cooperation (30 percent). Note that the number choosing a collective social movement (38 percent) as their first choice was more than twice the number choosing any other option as their first choice.

Strong and Activist Sense of Generational Mission

Consistent with their belief in collective action, Millennials have a strong and activist sense of generational mission. The results of these four questions demonstrate just how robust that sense of mission is:

In our country, each generation has a responsibility to wisely use the country's resources and power so that they can provide the next generation a secure, sustainable country that is stronger than the one they inherited (91 percent agree, 53 percent strongly agree).

Young Americans must take action now to reverse the rapid decline of our country. If we wait until we are older, it will be too late (89 percent agree, 48 percent strongly agree).

Life in the future in America will be much worse unless my generation of Americans takes the lead in pushing for change (85 percent agree, 42 percent strongly agree).

My generation of Americans has better opportunities to make a difference and produce structural change than previous generations (79 percent agree, 31 percent strongly agree).

Moreover, Millennials explicitly reject the idea that individuals shouldn't step forward and try to make a difference. Over three quarters (78 percent) say they are willing to make significant sacrifices in their own lives "to address the major environmental, economic, and security challenges facing our country." And, by 4:1, Millennials say that Addressing the big issues facing my generation starts with individuals willing to take a stand and take action (80 percent), rather than Individuals can't make a real difference in addressing the big issues facing my generation (20 percent).

A Role for Government

The scale at which Millennials want to tackle problems suggests a potentially large role for government. They believe that Government needs to do more to address the major challenges facing our country (63 percent), rather than Government is already too involved in areas that are better left to individuals or the free market (37 percent).

Similarly, Millennials said that Government has a responsibility to pursue policies that benefit all of society and balance the rights of the individual with the needs of the entire society (63 percent), rather than The primary responsibility of government is to protect the rights of the individual (37 percent).

The Politics of the Millennials

The Millennials have already begun shifting the nation's politics. Having come of age with Washington dominated by Republicans, they lean strongly the opposite way. Although they reject both "liberal" and "conservative" labels, they are especially scathing in their denunciation of conservatism, which they associate with hypocritical moralism, administrative incompetence, ideological rigidity, and corporate scandal.

In the focus groups, practically every Millennial, even self-proclaimed evangelical Christians, said that they associated the word "conservative" with people who are narrow-minded, judgmental, intolerant, backward-looking, and inflexible. Anyone using the "conservative" word will suffer a cultural disconnect with the Millennials. The Republicans will need to change their language if they wish to win the hearts and minds of the youth.

In 2002, Millennials voted Democratic by a 49-47 margin. Since then, their progressive tilt has steadily increased. Their votes made the 2004 presidential race close and decisively tipped the 2006 Congressional elections, with 18-29 year olds favoring Democrats 60-38. In the 2004 election, Census data indicate that the 18-24 year old group, completely composed of Millennials, increased their turnout 11 points to 47 percent of citizens in that age group, while 18-29 year olds—dominated for the first time by Millennials—increased their turnout 9 points to 49 percent. These increases were far, far higher than among any other age group. In 2006, Millennials also increased their turnout levels relative to the last congressional election. Census data show that 18-29 year olds (almost Millennials at this point) increased their turnout from 23 percent to 26 percent of citizen-eligible voters, a 3 point gain relative to 2002. This gain was once again higher than among any other age group.

The under-30 voting trend for the 2008 elections is likely to show a further large increase. In the survey, 75% of the respondents stated that they were registered to vote, and 63% declared that they were almost certain to vote, while another 16% stated they would probably vote. When combining this increased potential turnout with

their recent track record for voting progressive, America is now in a political environment where the Millennials own the swing vote that just may control the national electoral system.

Millennials have turned out in record numbers in the 2008 primaries, helping to create the amazing groundswell for Sen. Barack Obama. His optimistic message of change and hope, his use of social networking and other electronic campaign tools, and his personal appeal as a symbol of a youthful, educated, and diverse America make Obama the archetypal candidate for Millennials to rally around.

If Sen. John McCain is to compete for his share of the Generation We vote, he will need to eschew the politics of personal attacks, culture war, ideology, and intense partisanship, and instead burnish his image as a creative problem-solver, a social moderate, and a civil campaigner dedicated to compromise and service rather than party.

Post-Partisan, Post-Ideological, and Post-Political

Millennials are post-ideological because they are uninterested in learning about and defending the “conservative” or “liberal” approaches to the problems our country faces. Instead, they are pragmatic, open-minded, and innovation-oriented, eager to experiment with new solutions no matter where they may come from and no matter what political orientation they may be associated with.

They are post-partisan because, although they lean Democratic, they are disgusted with what they perceive as the narrowness, pettiness, and stagnation that often characterize both major parties. Though they are open to the possibility of a third party, the Millennials are far more interested in getting beyond party identification altogether and in focusing on cooperative efforts to make America and the world a better place.

And they are post-political because they are fed up and bored with the interest-group conflicts, identity-based appeals, and power-seeking maneuvers they see as dominating the public arena. More tolerant and accepting than any previous generation, Millennials are ready to call a halt to “culture wars” that pit people of different religions, races, ethnicities, regions, cultures, values, and sexual orientations against one another for political gain. They believe that all of us—not only all Americans, but all humans around the planet—will ultimately share the same destiny, and therefore must find ways to work together for the common good. And they stand ready to lead the effort.

The Millennial Agenda

Generation We is inheriting a damaged future and a series of problems that are of crisis proportions. They have no choice other than to innovate their way out of the mess they (and we) are in. Their change agenda begins with Project FREE, a concept that earned overwhelming support from the Millennials who participated in the Greenberg research. The concept: To create an Apollo or Manhattan-like project to invent new sources of non-fossil fuel energy free from carbon emissions based on hydrogen, fusion, or other means. Project FREE’s ultimate goal is to free Americans from dependence on centralized sources of energy and instead to generate most energy at the point of need.

Other items of importance on the Millennial agenda include restoring and protecting the environment, providing quality nutrition and health care for all, modernizing our educational system, balancing the national budget and eliminating the national debt, and restoring civil rights, freedom of expression, and individual privacy.

The political leaders who act first to join Generation We in their quest for a new era of American freedom, security, and prosperity will become generational heroes and benefit spectacularly from the epochal political realignment that has already begun.

