Beyond Party Lines: The Millennial Generation Revolutionizes American Politics

The Millennial Generation. The first generation to grow up with the Internet, widespread cell phone usage, and Facebook. A truly “plugged-in” generation. Some people claim that Millennials (b. 1982-2003) think of nothing but themselves and how many text messages they have received in the past five minutes. As unimpressed psychologist Jean Twenge puts it, “Millennials are the most narcissistic generation in history” (70). Surely, today’s self-obsessed youth, with their ipods and compulsively updated Twitter accounts, have nothing in common with their civically-focused grandparents and great-grandparents, those people who gracefully saw the nation through the Great Depression and World War II—right? Wrong. In fact, striking parallels exist between the Millennials and the G.I. (also known as the World War II or “Greatest”) Generation. Like the G.I.s, Millennials are not only coming of age during economic upheaval but also face global violence of epic proportions. In place of Nazis, we face Islamic extremists. A potentially nuclear Iran replaces the silent threat of the Soviet Union.

Historians William Strauss and Neil Howe argue for such cross-generational connections in their landmark work, Generations: The History of America’s Future: 1584-1991. What Strauss and Howe call “Civic” generations—a crucial stage in their cyclical pattern of four recurring generation types—come of age during some sort of secular crisis. This crisis spurs Civics to reject the cynicism of the previous generation and actively work towards tangible solutions, oftentimes using the government as a vehicle for such change. What is more, civic generations, Strauss and Howe argue, leave the nation quite different (and almost always better) than they found it, urging innovation in culture, technology, and politics. Millennials, then, clearly fit into the “civic” category. Growing up during a secular crisis (e.g. terrorism, war in
Iraq, massive economic recession)? Check. Rebuilding (and, more importantly, developing) technology and institutions? Check. Because the G.I. was the last civic generation, the examination of that generation can potentially predict the behavior of the Millennials. But what about the “Greatest” Generation made them great? How will the Millennials’ response mirror that of their generational predecessor? And how will the way this new generation impact our shared political future?

Regarding the political behavior of Millennials, many political scholars believe that increasing awareness of issues (which the Internet often facilitates) will lead to a depolarization of sorts. As successful businessman and philanthropist Eric Greenberg explains throughout Generation We, Millennials will see beyond traditional partisan politics as usual. It is important to note, incidentally, that Greenberg understands “beyond partisan” to mean that virtually everyone will move to a single party: the Democratic one. However, looking beyond this partisan political lens, we can conclude that, rather than moving specifically to the political left or right, the Millennial Generation will actually affect United States politics in an entirely different realm altogether: issues, rather than party loyalties, will primarily determine how someone votes in a given election. In this way, the nation will truly move beyond partisanship, rather than simply becoming unilateral as Greenberg suggests. The Millennial “pragmatic policy voter” will dominate American politics. This voter will educate himself politically, prioritize issues on the basis of magnitude and immediate relevance, and then vote on the basis of which party purposes the most practical, logically sound solution to the given problem. This new breed of political “independents” will come to fully dominate the American political scene—a truly revolutionary political phenomenon. Before such an argument can be fully realized, however, it makes sense explore the debate surrounding Millennials “Civic” nature in more detail.
The G.I. Generation (b. 1901-1924) arguably had a more profound and lasting impact on the United States than any other during the twentieth century. Growing up during the Great Depression, victoriously combating Nazi Germany, developing the atomic bomb, putting a man on the moon—not to mention producing seven U.S. presidents and Walt Disney himself (Generations 261-263). What about this generation made it so powerful, so revolutionary, so profoundly capable of public greatness? Clichéd though it sounds, the G.I.s’ faith in the United States, and consequently its governance, can be found at the heart of their generational success. They sincerely cared about the nation—and this faith and concern translated to unrivaled public achievement. As Strauss and Howe explain with the help of G.I. Ronald Reagan:

This generation of “doers” believes (like 73-year-old Ronald Reagan in 1985) that America always stands “on the threshold of a great ability to produce more, do more, be more.” Whatever G.I.s together accomplish in the exercise of citizenship, they think, must by definition be good for all generations….G.Is. have never stopped trying to make things work. (266)

The “civic” nature of a generation, therefore, involves not only an interest in political affairs but also—and more importantly—faith that the current condition of the country can actually improve. Politically concerned though they were throughout the Great Depression, World War II, and later the Cold War, G.I.s would not have remained so politically active had they not actually believed in the government’s positive potential. As a result of their political optimism, members of the “Greatest” Generation worked to find practical solutions for the momentous challenges they faced. As Strauss and Howe synthesize G.I. politics, “Even the most committed...
ideologues agreed with their FDR-backing peers that the main argument was over what [economic] system ‘worked’ best” (271). This evaluation supports the age-old idea that, in times of crisis, finding effective answers to national problems overshadows political ideologies or partisan loyalties. Can we thus conclude that Millennial politics will mirror the practical approach of the G.I.s?

Such a conclusion will prove quite reasonable after the analysis of key generational similarities. Only after these are proven can we use the G.I.s as a civic blueprint for the Millennials. Both generations, for instance, are highly educated overall within their historical context: the G.I.s graduated high school at much higher rate than their predecessors (Generations 267) and amongst Millennials college attendance has exploded compared to the Generation Xers (The Millennials 1). As any political scientist will attest, more highly educated individuals are much more likely to actively participate in politics, a trait that compliments the “civic” label assigned to these generations. The G.I.s and the Millennials also share a commitment to technological advancement. The phrase “national security” embodies the technological motivations of the former: from the nuclear bomb to the development of satellites and rocket ships, G.I. scientific innovation found its origins in the dominant national concern for domestic and global safety. On the other hand, constant communication—texting, Facebook, Twitter, e-mail—embodies the Millennials’ technological identity. Just as technology maintained great political clout throughout the life cycle of the G.I. Generation—from President Truman’s controversial use of the atomic bomb to President Reagan’s “Strategic Defense Initiative,” a.k.a. Star Wars—the political importance of contemporary technologies like the Internet will undoubtedly play a major role in Millennial-dominated politics. The utilization of information...
technology will inevitably shape the future of politics, namely by making news available 24/7 with the click of a button.

An underlying cause for such similarities between these two generations may well involve the remarkably comparable political and economic worlds in which they grew up, a parallel noted earlier. As political historians Marley Winograd and Michael D. Hais explain in *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics* (2008), international conflicts—the rise of fascism for the G.I.s and the threat of terrorism for the Millennials—heighten American awareness of current affairs (68). Recent Civics have thus been instilled from a young age with some form of political awareness. Like the G.I.s who matured during the Great Depression, Millennials are rising into adulthood during the current economic crisis. This forced introduction into economic politics spurs young people to search for the policies that “work,” as noted earlier in the analysis of the G.I.s, rather than those which adhere to a certain ideology. The G.I.s unified around a single goal: the restoration of America to society. They did not all necessarily agree on how to do this, but this common motivation drove them to forsake rigid ideologies and work exclusively for the immediate needs of the nation. If the Millennials follow in their footsteps, how will they politically respond to the crises they face?

**A Civic Generation in the Twenty-First Century**

The next step in the evaluation of how Millennials will revolutionize American politics involves taking a twentieth century model of a civic generation, exemplified by the G.I.s, and translating that model into a twenty-first century context. Only then can we begin to predict future Millennial behavior. The Millennials and G.I.s are both civic generations. Their unique historical contexts must be taken into consideration. The G.I.s grew up in a world in which few
people attended college; besides newspapers, radio was the sole form of media. They turned to the government for aid, according to Howe and Strauss, essentially because they saw it as the only entity that had the capacity to help them (Generations 271). A huge portion of Millennials will earn college degrees, and they have access to a plethora of information technologies, most significantly the Internet. The historical backdrops of their lives prove quite different. We cannot simply assume that Millennials will usher in an era of expanded government as their G.I. counterparts did. We must evaluate how the now-established values inherent in a civic generation will manifest themselves in a twenty-first century context. These values include political awareness, faith in the positive power of politics, active participation in government, and an emphasis on finding effective solutions rather than adhering to a strict political ideology.

Predicting the political manifestations of such generational traits is no easy feat. Fortunately, the modern fathers of generational politics theory, Strauss and Howe, decided to expand on the predictive aspect of their argument in Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation (2000), a follow-up of sorts to Generations. While Strauss and Howe refrain from specifying how Millennials will actually vote, they provide several societal themes that will heavily influence politics:

Income and class disparities will narrow, as Millennial unionism and corporatism rise in power….In the workplace, they [Millennials] will add stress-reducing structures to settle expectations, even at the cost of innovation. In technology, they will launch big projects to improve people’s daily lives….The Oh-Thirties will become an orderly decade of capital broadening, much as the ’90s will be remembered as a chaotic decade of capital deepening….New public devices that provide collective security against risks—economic, social, and global—will be a major goal for midlife Millennials. (319-320)
Here, Strauss and Howe detail several Millennial themes—including the development of technology and improving public life—that clearly stem from the “civic” values discussed thus far. Between the move towards economic equality and the emphasis on “stress-reducing structures,” a thorough interpretation can detect subtly utopian overtones. Many potential “Millennial” values (as defined by Strauss and Howe) parallel overarching liberal political themes. But an astute reader recognizes that voters and politicians can act on these values in either a conservative or liberal manner. For instance, how will unionism and corporatism flourish simultaneously? Will “capital broadening” happen in the private sector? And will the focus on collective welfare inhibit innovation? The goals of the Millennial Generation, it seems, may transcend traditional liberal and conservative ideologies.

Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais tackle more specific Millennial questions such as these in *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics* (2008), which also works within the framework of cyclical American politics that *Generations* introduces. If *Millennials Rising*, then, discusses broad societal objectives of Millennials, *Millennial Makeover* provides a real world, if leftward-leaning, blueprint of the future of American politics. For instance, with regard to how Millennials will positively affect the American government (and governance), Winograd and Hais predict: “Millennials are likely to endorse an administrative approach that decentralizes the administration of government, even as it expands government and its functions” (235). Here, the authors clearly equate expansion of government with improvement in political structure, as they do when they laud FDR as one of the nation’s two best presidents (the other one being Abraham Lincoln). In order to deal with all the national debt incurred (this book was written even before the massive economic downturn of late 2008), Winograd and Hais promise: “There is no question that tax rates and taxable receipts

Comment: Note how this is not a mere summary of the previous quote but a more argumentative engagement with it. Here, the skills learned in the RA portion of the course should come back in the form of a more argumentative engagement with your sources in your RBA.

Comment: Not only will you employ your analysis skills, you will begin to make rhetorical moves—whether successful or not—that work to convince the reader of your own argument. Here, the author both gives herself credibility as an “astute reader” and also encourages you to think of yourself as this kind of informed reader as well. Does it work?

Comment: Notice how her argument is coming together here in direct engagement with the above quote.

Comment: Here’s the old “General to Specific” transition. If Strauss and Howe offer general guidelines buy shirk the more important and detailed questions, this next source will help us answer those questions.

Comment: Not how she situates this source within the broader research conversation she’s engaged in here.

Comment: Even in the set-up here we get a sense of the argumentative approach. The author not only controls the voices using sound fundamentals (fully framed quote integration) she also controls their voices argumentatively, subtly tugging the reader to understand the quote in a particular light.

Comment: Again, great set-up using both capsule summary and a signal phrase.

Comment: Again, this set-up is not only mechanically sound, but involves a subtle critical element. I don’t know about you, but I interpret “promise” here as being somewhat argumentative and sarcastic.
will have to go higher as the country’s debts become too large to manage otherwise during the next two decades. As in past civic eras, the tax increases that are adapted will be designed to reduce economic inequality by asking those most able to pay to contribute the most” (252).

These economic policies agree with Strauss and Howe’s hypothesis that Millennials will indeed reduce economic inequality. However, as Winograd and Hais continue discussing specific policy issues, the authors take more and more liberties with their interpretation of Strauss and Howe’s predictions in both Generations and Millennials Rising. In most cases, the authors’ logic relies too heavily on a sort of civic mindset that they believe will lead to the complete fulfillment of the liberal agenda. They essentially ignore a major characteristic of civic generations: solving national problems pragmatically supersedes adherence to a particular ideology. Winograd and Hais incorrectly reason that this means all Civics move to a single ideology: the liberal one. This flawed reasoning comes as a result of their disregard for historical context—they merely examine how the G.I. generation vastly expanded government and assume Millennials will do the same. However, the future political influence of today’s young people must be judged while taking contemporary context, such as the profound impact of the Internet on politics, into consideration.

The Internet: a haven for social recluses, an outlet for anyone and everyone who has something to say, a breeding ground for obscenity, a bottomless pit of information—and the ascendant means of mass communication. Millennials, especially, get the vast majority of their information about current affairs online. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign’s monumentally successful capitalization on this fact serves as indisputable proof of this generation’s “online” orientation. Furthermore, the Obama campaign recognized and geared its message towards the civic values of the Millennials, using rhetoric that spoke of “real solutions,”
the importance of community service, and the “promise of change” (*Organizing for America* 2009). Virtually every presidential candidate of the past several decades has employed the use of similar rhetoric, but the unprecedented flocking of young people towards Obama further solidifies their identity as a civic generation. These inspiring words only mobilized young people because they spoke directly to values already developed within Millennials. Does the success of the Obama campaign does not necessarily mean that solely Democrats will capitalize on the Internet as a campaigning tool? Not likely. As with television and radio before it, both parties eventually become quite adept at manipulating media to their advantage. For whatever reason, the Democrats simply got a “head start” with online campaigning. However, no evidence suggests this head start will be permanent.

Because Millennials grew up with the Internet, they take it as a given aspect of their everyday lives. As political scholar Stefanie Sanford explains, “This group [“Trailing Xers” a.k.a Millennials born between 1982 and 1991] differed sharply from their older colleagues in their views of technology. Most of them [those Trailing Xers interviewed] looked at me blankly when I asked how technology was changing their lives or the lives of their communities. They had always used these technologies…” (141). Therefore, as proven by the immense success of the Obama (online) campaign, the Internet will inevitably play a major role in the Millennials’ politics simply because it plays such a major role in their everyday lives. In *Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet* (2004), political scientist Michael Cornfield notes that, a “smart voter revolution” can indeed occur if individuals with a genuine interest in political affairs use the Internet as the unrivaled (by sheer volume) source of information that it is (11). As we have now firmly established, a key aspect of the Millennials’ civic nature is their concern for political affairs. Therefore, they will take the initiative to research political issues via the
Internet in order to educate themselves politically. But what will this refreshingly educated ruling generation mean for the future of politics? The answer is quite simple: the peaceful takeover of the “pragmatic policy voter.”

**The Ultimate Political Impact of the Civic Millennials**

Now that we understand the Millennials’ civic generational identity and have translated it into a modern context, we can delve directly into the heart of this discussion: how specifically the Millennial Generation will redefine American politics. We already know that they will not implement an ideological mandate but rather will be solely focused on pragmatically solving the very real challenges the nation faces. Thus, our hypothesis will not deal with how a particular political party appears to dominate, but rather how the very idea of dominant parties has begun to decline. Historically and into the present day, parties provided politically unaware and uninformed citizens with an easy means of political participation; these people rely on parties to guide their stances on issues (Hetherington and Keefe 187). Consequently, party identification largely indicates of how an individual will vote in a given election. However, with the Millennial Generation this will undoubtedly change.

As we saw in our examination of Obama’s presidential campaign, the internet is the future of political media, and it is therefore important as a resource of information for the Millennials. Acting out of motivation inherent in their civic spirit, Millennials will educate themselves about specific policy issues, searching always for the most effective solution rather than the viewpoint that adheres to a partisan ideology. In “The Aging of the Boomers and the Rise of the Millennials,” an essay in Red, Blue, and Purple America (2008), political scholar Scott Keeter uses statistics and insightful analysis to highlight the Millennials’ unique ability to evaluate issues individually, rather than merely on a party platform. For instance, significant
portions of Millennials identify themselves as fiscally conservative and socially liberal.

Throughout their lifetimes, then, they will have to decide which issues take priority in a given election. Will they vote Democrat in support of gay marriage or Republican in support of lower taxes? Thus, it follows that fewer and fewer Millennials will faithfully vote along party lines, instead floating back and forth based on the issues they deem “key” in any given year. A feasible solution to an economic crisis will, for example, dictate a Millennial’s vote rather than his or her stance on gun control. This prioritization of issues, based on their currency and magnitude, will prove deeply rooted in the civic nature of Millennials: their overall political goal is always what they believe is best for the nation. Everything else is secondary.

With this primary aim in mind, it logically follows that third parties will not suddenly emerge at political forces to be reckoned with. As noted political scientists Marc J. Hetherington and William J. Keefe point out, third parties overwhelmingly tend to cater towards single-issue voters and/or a heavily ideological base (39). Third parties therefore are essentially the antithesis of this new pragmatic, non-ideologue breed of Millennial voters. A third party somehow situated in “the middle” of the two primary parties would in all likelihood find itself forgotten in times of national turmoil, during which people generally look for concrete solutions rather than what they perceive as too moderate of a position. On a strictly practical level, we cannot reasonably postulate that somehow America will suddenly abandon its two-party system; such an extreme departure from the political system, that perhaps the next Idealist generation will champion, is not what Millennials seek—they simply want to methodically make the current system realistically work as well as it can. Thus, clearly a political tidal wave is coming with the Millennials, but in a fittingly sensible form as the Millennials political behavior evolves from its overarching generational—civic—traits.
This generation’s civic nature explains why Millennials will indeed take initiative to educate themselves politically. This increased degree of political awareness will drive Millennials, motivated by their sense of civic duty, to pragmatically evaluate how they vote in a given election; the era of the “pragmatic policy voter” is imminent. A few key issues, which will often change from election to election, will guide a Millennial’s vote rather than an “R” or “D” next to a candidate’s name—a truly revolutionary political phenomenon. Only when this revolution comes to fruition will the United States actually deserve the “beyond-partisan” label. At that point, we will have moved beyond partisanship and towards the fulfillment of our unfathomable potential as a nation.

Works Cited


Comment: Note how all the sources here seem very fitting. There are no voices that shed brings up in the paper that force us to ask: why is that person there? Her sources are mostly credible and recent books along with a few article. There are no random web pages or broad encyclopedia sources. There is a very specific argument being made here, but it is not being made in a vacuum. Using the research base—the “source dialog” or “conversation”—from the TIC, she expands her sources a bit, and more forcefully weaves in her own argumentative voice as she begins taking sides. Sounds easy, doesn’t it?


Works Consulted


