

Generation We and the 2008 Election

Ruy Teixeira
November 17, 2008

With the election of Barack Obama, we are moving into a new political era. Spearheading the arrival of this new era is the Millennial generation (born 1978-2000). In a very short time, the Millennials have had a huge impact on our politics, an impact that will only grow in years to come.

Nowhere has that impact been more obvious than in this November's election. Millennials came out in very large numbers and overwhelmingly supported Barack Obama, as well as Democrats down the ticket. The progressive inclinations of this generation are now crystal clear.

This report provides a detailed analysis of Millennials' turnout, voting preferences and attitudes in this election, supplemented where appropriate with data from earlier surveys and studies. The portrait that emerges from this analysis is of a progressive generation for whom the 2008 election is just an opening bid on their desire for change. The Millennial earthquake has begun and American politics will never be the same.

*Note: This analysis builds on extensive previous research on Millennials supporting the book *Generation We: How Millennial Youth are Taking Over America And Changing Our World Forever* by Eric Greenberg. That research and the book itself are all available for free download at the *Gen We* website.*

Millennial Turnout and Civic Engagement

The 2004 election was the first election in which the 18-24 year old age group was completely composed of Millennials and in which the 18-29 year old group was dominated by Millennials. In that election, Census data indicate that 18-24 year olds increased their turnout 11 points to 47 percent of citizens in that age group and 18-29 year olds 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 all 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 2008 elections continued this pattern. To begin with, turnout of 18-29 year olds skyrocketed in this year's primaries, about doubling overall. And in the November general election, exit poll data showed the 18-29 year old group (now composed exclusively of Millennials) increasing its share of voters from 17 to 18 percent. Based on extrapolations from these data¹ (the Census data for this election will not be available for many months), 18-29 year old turnout increased from 4-5 percentage points. This is quite an impressive performance in an election where overall turnout went up only a little over

1 percent². Indeed, 18-29 year old turnout performance was so relatively strong that it accounts for about 60 percent of the overall increase in votes in this election.

This uninterrupted series of turnout increases augurs well for Millennials' ability to impact politics in the future. This is especially so since 18-29 year old Millennials, at 18 percent of voters, are already larger than the senior vote (16 percent of voters), a group typically treated as being exceptionally influential by political observers. But Millennials, even at this early stage, outweigh them.

Moreover, the 18 percent figure actually understates the current level of Millennial influence on the electorate. This is because the 18-29 year old group does not include the oldest Millennials, the 30 year olds who were born in 1978. Once they are figured in, a reasonable estimate is that Millennials were around 20 percent of the vote in this election.

This figure will steadily rise as more Millennials enter the voting pool. In 2008, about 55 million Millennials were of voting age and roughly 48 million were citizen-eligible voters. Between now and 2018, Millennials of voting age will be increasing by about four and half million a year. And in 2020, the first Presidential election where all Millennials will have reached voting age, this generation will be 103 million strong, of which about 90 million will be eligible voters. Those 90 million Millennial eligible voters will represent just under 40 percent of America's eligible voters³.

These trends mean that every election up until 2020 will see a bigger share of Millennial voters both because more of them will be eligible to vote *and* because the leading edge of the millennials will be aging into higher turnout years. Thus, in 2012, there will be 74 million Millennials of voting age and 64 million Millennial eligible voters, 29 percent of all eligible voters. Assuming that Millennials' relatively good turnout performance continues (but not that it gets any better), that should translate into roughly 35 million Millennials who cast ballots in 2012 and an estimated 26 percent of all voters.

By 2016, there will be 93 million Millennials of voting age and 81 million Millennial eligible voters, 36 percent of all eligible voters. This should produce an estimated 46 million voting Millennials, representing 33 percent of all voters. And in 2020, those 90 million Millennial eligible voters should translate into 52 million Millennial votes, representing 36 percent of all votes cast in that election.

Moreover, because more and more Millennial voters will be aging into their higher turnout years after 2020, the proportion of Millennials among voters should continue to rise for a number of elections, despite the fact that all Millennials will already be in the voting pool. For example, by 2028, when Millennials will be ages 28-50, their share of voters should be about 38 percent, 2 points higher than in 2020.

Not surprisingly, given these high voter participation levels, the Millennial generation is also notable for its high levels of civic engagement in other areas. For example, volunteerism is unusually high among Millennials. According to UCLA's American Freshman survey—conducted for the last 40 years, with several hundred thousand

respondents each year—83 percent of entering freshman in 2005 volunteered at least occasionally during their high school senior year, the highest ever measured in this survey. And 71 percent said they volunteered on a weekly basis⁴.

They are also more politically engaged. In the 2006 American Freshman survey, more freshman reported they discussed politics frequently as high school seniors (34 percent) than at any other point in the 40 years covered by the survey. And, in a December, 2006 Pew Research Center Gen Next study, 18-25 year old Millennials (corresponding to birth years 1981-88 at the time of the survey) are running about 10 points higher than Gen X'ers at the same age on following what's going on in government and in level of interest in keeping up with national affairs.

Similarly, in a January, 2007 Pew Research Center survey, 77 percent of 18-29 year olds said they are interested in local politics, up 28 points from 49 percent in 1999 - the highest increase of any age group surveyed. The survey also found that 85 percent of 18-29 year olds report they are "interested in keeping up with national affairs," a 14 point increase from 71 percent in 1999 and nearly the same level of interest as adults of all ages (89 percent).

Millennials also come out well in measures of election-related political engagement. Looking back at the 2004 election, the University of Michigan's National Election Study (NES), found that 18-29 year olds in 2004 (an age group dominated by Millennials, who were 18-26 at the time), were either higher or matched previous highs on a wide range of political involvement indicators, when compared to 18-29 year olds in previous elections. These indicators included level of interest in the election, caring a good deal who wins the election, trying to influence others' vote, displaying candidate buttons or stickers, attending political meetings and watching TV programs about the campaign. (The 2008 NES which will provide comparable data for this election will not be available until late spring of 2009).

The most recent survey findings confirm this pattern of high civic engagement, especially as it pertains to the intersection of technology and politics. The most thorough data come from the Harvard Institute of Politics' (IOP) Fall, 2008 survey of 18-24 year old Millennials, completed in early October, just one month before this year's election. In that survey, 52 percent said they had signed an online petition, 27 percent had written an email or letter advocating a political position, 24 percent had contributed to an online political discussion or blog advocating a political position, 22 percent had attended a political rally, 16 percent had donated money to a political campaign or cause and 14 percent had volunteered on a political campaign for a candidate or issue.

Facebook and Myspace have become major outlets for political engagement among Millennials. In the IOP survey, two-thirds said they had a Facebook account and, of that group, 36 percent said they had used Facebook to promote a political candidate, idea or event. The analogous figures for Myspace were 60 and 18.

Data from another recent survey provide more detail on this emerging online political engagement among Millennials. In a mid-October Democracy Corps/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research survey of 18-29 year olds, 53 percent said they had watched a campaign commercial online; 45 percent said they had read a political blog; 39 percent had visited a campaign or candidate-sponsored website; 30 percent had forwarded a political video to a friend or family member; 28 percent had sent or forwarded emails about a candidate or campaign; 25 percent had forwarded a campaign commercial to a friend or family member; and 23 percent said they had signed up as a friend of a candidate on Facebook, Myspace or a similar social networking site.

It's also worth noting that nonpolitical civic engagement like volunteerism continues at high levels among broad groups of Millennials (as noted earlier, volunteerism in the last year of high school has reached record levels). In the IOP survey, 47 percent of 18-24 year old Millennials reported they had volunteered for community service in the last year. And political discussion, which has also reached record levels among high school seniors, remains high among these older Millennials: 58 percent said they had discussed the Presidential campaign with someone just in the last day.

There is also some evidence there is an additional reservoir of civic engagement among Millennials yet to be tapped. In the IOP survey, 76 percent said that if a friend or peer asked them to volunteer for a community service they considered worthy, they would do so; the analogous figures for attending a political rally or demonstration and volunteering on a political campaign were 63 and 47 percent respectively. In addition, 59 percent said they would be interested in engaging in some form of public service if the new President made a call to do so to young Americans (as Kennedy did in 1961).

Finally, the IOP survey amply documents the extent to which Millennials have strongly positive attitudes about the potential of political engagement. For example, 69 percent thought political engagement was an effective way of solving important issues facing the country and 67 percent thought such engagement was an effective way of solving important issues facing their local community; the analogous figures for community volunteerism were 68 and 81.

In addition, 72 percent disagreed that "politics is not relevant to my life right now"; 84 percent disagreed that "it really doesn't matter to me who the president is"; 53 percent disagreed that "people like me don't have any say about what the government does"; 59 percent disagreed that "political involvement rarely has any tangible results"; and 60 percent disagreed that "it is difficult to find ways to be involved in politics". In addition, 68 percent agreed that "running for office is an honorable thing to do"; the analogous figures for community service and getting involved in politics were 89 and 64.

But it's important to stress that these are attitudes about the *potential* of political engagement. As surveys have persistently documented, Millennials believe today's government and political leaders are typically falling far short of their potential to do good and solve problems. In the IOP survey, 69 percent agreed that "elected officials seem to be motivated by selfish reasons"; 74 percent agreed that "politics has become too

partisan”; and 67 percent agreed that “elected officials don’t seem to have the same priorities that I have”. These concerns will have to be addressed and overcome for Millennial activism to reach its full potential.

Millennial Voting and Partisanship

The progressive inclinations of the Millennial generation have been apparent for awhile. In 2006, 18-29 year olds overall voted 60-38 Democratic, with the 18-24 year old group (all Millennials) going 59-38 Democratic, while the 25-29 year olds (all Millennials but the 29 year olds) were 60-39 Democratic. These identical margins among the 18-24 year olds and 25-29 year olds point to great generational consistency among the Millennials.

In light of this generational consistency, it’s interesting to note that in 2004, when 18-24 year olds were all Millennials but 25-29 year olds were mostly not, we did not see consistency across the two age groups. The all-Millennial 18-24 year olds voted 56-43 Democratic for president while the older, mostly non-Millennial 25-29 year old group voted only 51-48 Democratic.

In 2008, 18-29 year olds, now all Millennials, voted Democratic by a stunning 66-32 margin. And just as in 2006, we see remarkable generational consistency: 18-24 year olds voted 66-32 Democratic while 25-29 year olds voted 66-31 Democratic. Essentially no difference.

Obama’s support among 18-29 year olds was remarkably broad, extending across racial barriers. He carried not just Hispanic 18-29 year olds (76-19) and black (18-29 year old (95-4) but also white 18-29 year olds (54-44). Obama’s 10 point advantage among white 18-29 year olds contrasts starkly with his 15 deficit among older whites.

Obama’s huge overall margin among Millennials contributed mightily to his strong victory this November. Indeed, without 18-29 year olds, Obama’s popular vote margin would have been slightly under one percentage point. That figure implies that the overwhelmingly proportion of Obama’s popular vote victory (87 percent) was attributable to the support of 18-29 year old Millennials. Indeed, without these Millennial voters, Obama would have been hard-pressed to claim much of a mandate from his election victory.

Another way of looking at the strength of Obama’s support among Millennials is how many electoral votes he would have carried if just 18-29 year olds had voted. Based on the NEP exit poll results, he would have received at least 448 electoral votes and probably more like 475 (the higher figures incorporates the electoral votes of Colorado, Oregon and Washington, where the NEP has not yet reported results for this age group, but which were highly likely to have had an 18-29 year old majority for Obama).

It’s also worth noting that Obama got 60 percent of the youth vote or more in every swing state in the 2008 election with the lone exception of Missouri. That was also the only swing state Obama lost. And if Missouri’s margin for Obama among this age group

had been just a little closer to his average swing state margin among 18-29 year olds (about 30 points), he would have won that state as well.

The voting inclinations of the Millennials, hugely important in this election, could become even more so over time. If Millennials remain oriented as they are and maintain the generational consistency they have shown so far, the simple process of cohort replacement—more Millennials moving into the electorate and taking the place of older voters—will increase the Democrats’ margin over the GOP by an additional two and a half percentage points in 2012 and then by another two and a half points in 2016. That’s quite a shift.

And that shift will definitely be toward the Democrats and the relatively progressive politics they represent, not just toward Obama. In 2008, the 66-32 margin for Obama among 18-29 year olds was not far off the 63-34 margin for House Democrats among this age group. Even more important, party identification among 18-29 year olds, according to data released by the Pew Research Center right before the election, has been running 29 points pro-Democratic (61-32), an absolutely stunning figure. Party identification is the single strongest predictor of how people vote and tends to stick with individuals once they form an attachment early in their political lives. It appears that the Democrats in particular and progressive politics in general will be reaping the benefits of Millennials’ strong political leanings for many years to come.

Millennial Attitudes

It is important to stress that the Millennials’ political leanings are not just about party but rather reflect a deep structure of progressive attitudes that propels them, at this point, toward one particular party. The best recent data on Millennials’ attitudes comes from the Democracy Corps/Campaign for America’s Future (DC/CAF) post-election survey of 2000 voters, conducted November 4-5. Full crosstabs from this survey have been made publicly available on the web, so it is possible to look at the answers of 18-29 year old Millennials for every question on the survey.

Start with the reasons why Millennials chose to vote for Barack Obama. In the DC/CAF survey, 45 percent cited “will invest in education and make college more affordable” as one of the top three reasons why they voted for him (only the fourth-ranked reason among all Obama voters); 42 percent cited “would withdraw troops from Iraq and Afghanistan”; 41 percent cited “would be for the middle class and cut middle class taxes first”; and 31 percent cited “has a plan for affordable health care for all”.

Respondents were also asked which of seven problems Obama should give the most attention to as President. Millennials’ top choices were “reducing unemployment and getting the economy moving” (65 percent made this their first or second choice) and “investing in alternative energy and getting us off foreign oil” (46 percent).

In terms of the seriousness of specific economic problems, Millennials’ top choice was “failure to make the investments we need in education and research to maintain

America's leadership" (94 percent cited this either a very serious or serious problem). Among voters as a whole, however, this was only the fifth-ranked choice. Millennials' second choice was "too much debt, little saving and high interest payments that leave people squeezed" (93 percent).

A number of policy proposals were given to respondents, who were asked to rate the priority level that should be given to these proposals. Seventy percent or more of Millennials rated the following proposals as the single highest priority, one of the top few priorities or near the top of the list of priorities:

- End the war in Iraq responsibly and redeploy our troops from Iraq to Afghanistan (93 percent)
- Regulate the banking system to make sure a financial crisis like this one can never happen again (80 percent)
- Repeal the Bush tax cuts for those making over 250,000 dollars and cut taxes for middle class families and anyone making under 200,000 dollars (77 percent)
- Make health insurance affordable and accessible to all Americans (74 percent)
- End dependence on foreign oil by 2025 by requiring one quarter of U.S. electric power to come from alternative energy where new investments will create new jobs (72 percent)

Finally, the survey posed a number of statement pairs to respondents, who then had to choose which statement in the pair came closer to their own point of view. By and large, Millennials' responses to these statement pairs highlighted their exceptionally progressive views on social and policy issues. Here are some of the most noteworthy findings.

On social issues, respondents were asked whether "Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society. OR Homosexuality is a way of life that should be discouraged by society". Millennials selected the first statement over the second by 67-20, compared to 54-39 among all voters.

Millennials showed less tax sensitivity than voters as a whole in terms of moves to increase economic performance and fairness. For example, respondents were given the choice "I'm more worried that we will fail to make the investments we need to create jobs and strengthen the economy. OR I'm more worried that we will go too far in increasing government spending and will end up raising taxes to pay for it". Millennials chose the first over the second statement by 67-33, while voters overall were split down the middle 48-49. Similarly, the following choice was posed about corporate tax breaks: "I'm more worried that we will give more tax breaks to the rich and corporations. OR I'm more worried that we will go too far taxing the rich and corporations". Millennials favored the first statement over the second by 74-26, compared to 61-34 among all voters.

A related economic policy choice was the following: "When I voted, I was more concerned that Obama will raise taxes and increase government spending. OR When I voted, I was more concerned that McCain will continue the economic policies that have

cost us jobs and caused higher prices”. By 57-33, Millennials were more concerned about McCain’s policies causing job loss and price hikes than about Obama’s policies causing tax hikes and spending increases. But among voters as a whole, this choice elicited a very close 49-45 split.

On trade, the following choice was posed: “I’m more worried that we will do too little to require fair trade and enforce worker and consumer protections. OR I’m more worried that we will go too far burdening free trade accords with protections for consumers and labor”. By 65-30, Millennials selected the first over the second statement, compared to 57-43 among all voters.

On health care, respondents were offered these two statements: “Our health care system needs fundamental reform, we should regulate insurance companies and give everyone a choice between a public plan or what they have right now. OR Our health care system needs fundamental reform; we should give American families more choice by giving individuals a tax credit to choose their own coverage”. Millennials preferred the first over the second statement by 67-32, a substantially higher margin than among all voters (58-38). There was also a health care statement pair about how boldly to act to solve the problem: “On health care, we need to act boldly to address the problems. OR On health care, we need to act step-by-step to address the problems”. Millennials were solidly on the side of moving boldly, rather than step-by-step (57-38), while voters as a whole actually sided slightly with the more incremental approach (46-50).

On Iraq, respondents were asked whether “We need to start reducing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq. OR We must stay the course to achieve stability and finish the job in Iraq”. By 69-31, Millennials preferred the first over the second statement, while voters as a whole favored the first over the second by a significantly more modest margin (58-41).

And on education, the following choice was offered: “We need to reform our public schools and invest properly so that we can give our children a world class education. OR We need to reform our schools by giving parents vouchers so they have more choice and can send their children to private schools when public schools are failing”. By an overwhelming 81-12, Millennials chose the first over the second statement, compared to 68-28 among all voters.

Finally, it’s worth noting that Millennials showed little interest in carving out private accounts for Social Security. When given the following choice “We need to reform Social Security and protect it to ensure that it’s a safety net the American people can count on. OR We need to reform Social Security and establish personal savings accounts so individuals have more options”, they preferred the first, non-private account approach over the second, private account approach by a 57-43 margin.

These findings speak strongly to Millennials’ progressive orientation and are consistent with previous research (see, for example, my Generation We report “What We Now Know about the Millennial Generation” for an extensive review of the available data). But it is frequently argued that these distinctly progressive views are nothing

new—younger voters always tilt toward the left and therefore these views are age-dependent not generational in nature.

As mentioned earlier, party identification does not fit this model well and really does have a strong generational component. The same is true of social issues, where relative liberalism on these issues has been dramatically higher with each succeeding generation. That's why the dynamic of generational replacement has been so potent in driving the evolution toward social liberalism in the United States. Millennials will provide a further and strong push along this road.

The argument is more fairly engaged about economic and related issues. But is it really true that Millennials' progressive views on economics are just the same old same old? A careful new study by David Madland and Amanda Logan of the Center for American Progress⁵ casts considerable doubt on this proposition.

For example, Madland and Logan find that support for universal health coverage was higher among (mostly Millennial) 18-29 year olds in 2004 than it has been among 18-29 year olds in the 30 previous years the question has been asked on the University of Michigan's National Election Survey (NES). That is particularly true when comparing 18-29 year olds in 2004 to 18-29 Gen X'ers in 1994. Moreover, 18-29 year olds have not always been, as they are today, the age group most support of universal health coverage—back in 1978, it was seniors who had the most progressive views.

In terms of education, the University of Chicago's 2006 General Social Survey (GSS) showed (the almost all Millennial) 18-29 year old group displaying far higher support for increased spending on education than previous generations. Moreover, this unusually high support for increased education spending was in response to a question that stipulated a tax increase might be required to pay for this spending.

In terms of jobs, Madland and Logan find that 18-29 year olds in 2004 were the most supportive this age group has ever been of the idea that the government should see toward a good job and standard of living for everybody—substantially higher than 18-29 year old Gen X'ers in 1994 and higher still than 18-29 year old Boomers in 1978 (NES). And in 1978, the 18-29 year old Boomers were no more progressive on this issue than seniors were.

More generally, in a classic NES question on whether respondents prefer a government that provides more services but has to spend more as opposed to a government that provides less services but spends less, 18-29 year olds in 2004 were overwhelmingly supportive of a government that provides more services. Their level of support was higher than any age group in any previous year the question has been asked. Similarly, a 2007 Pew question asked respondents whether it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves. The survey's 18-29 year olds (all Millennials) were more likely to completely agree that it is than any age group in any of the survey's previous twenty years.

So much for the idea there is nothing distinctly progressive about today's Millennials. On the contrary, they are deeply progressive. That, combined with their overwhelming numbers and strong political leanings, assures them of a dramatic impact on our society in the decades to come. The 2008 election is truly just the beginning of that impact, which is likely to reshape our world in profound and positive ways. Given the scale of the challenges we face, the Millennial earthquake could not come at a better time.

Endnotes

¹ Extrapolations from Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), “Turnout Rises to at Least 52 percent”, November 7, 2008. Exit poll extrapolations of youth turnout have generally tracked the Census data well; see CIRCLE, “The Youth Vote 2004”, CIRCLE Working Paper 35, July, 2005 for useful comparisons.

² Michael McDonald, “2008 Unofficial Voter Turnout”, US Elections Project, November 9, 2008.

³ Estimations in this and subsequent paragraph’s based on author’s analysis of 2008 Census National Population Projections by single years of age, 2008 NEP exit poll sample composition and 2004 Census Voter Supplement data by single years of age.

⁴ Some data sources indicate that rates of volunteering among Millennials may actually have been highest right after, and presumably in reaction to, 9/11—but differences in question wording and population surveyed prevent a definitive judgment on this possibility.

⁵ *The Progressive Generation: How Young Adults Think About the Economy*, May 2008.