



# The Progressive Generation

*How Young Adults Think About the Economy*

David Madland and Amanda Logan

May 2008

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Center for American Progress

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## Introduction and Summary

**Y**oung adults today—often known as the Millennial Generation—have decidedly progressive views on economic issues, possibly more so than any previous generation. According to the results of our first-of-a-kind analysis of Millennials’ views on the economy, a majority of 18- to 29-year-olds (our definition of this generation) believe that the government can be a force for good in the economy, and that increased investments in healthcare, education, and other areas are necessary to ensure strong and sustainable economic growth.

Our analysis also shows that Millennials mostly reject the conservative viewpoint that government is the problem, and that free markets always produce the best results for society. Indeed, Millennials’ views are more progressive than those of other age groups today, and are more progressive than previous generations when they were younger. This is especially true when compared to the conservative views of Generation X—men and women who are now in their 30s and early 40s.

Previous research on Millennials largely focused on their views about social issues, giving short shrift to their economic views. This study provides an extensive examination of the economic views of young adults today, finding that on a wide range of economic issues, from taxes to government spending, and from healthcare to support for labor unions, young people today have decidedly progressive views. Cases in point:

- Millennials are more likely to support universal health coverage than any age group in the 30 previous years the question has been asked, with 57 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds saying that health insurance should come from a government insurance plan.
- Eighty-seven percent of Millennials think the government should spend more money on health care even if a tax increase is required to pay for it, the highest level of support in the question’s 20-year history.
- An overwhelming 95 percent of Millennials think education spending should be increased even if a tax increase is required to pay for it, the highest level ever recorded on this question in the 20 years it has been asked.
- Sixty-one percent of Millennials think the government should provide more services, the most support of any age group in any of the previous 20 years the question was asked.

- Millennials are very supportive of labor unions, giving them an average ranking of 60 on a 0-to-100 scale (with 0 indicating a more negative view of labor unions and 100 being a more positive view), the second-highest level of support of any age group in the over 40-year history of the question.

These findings on economic issues hold great significance for politics today and into the future.<sup>1</sup>

Millennials are already the largest generation in size, weighing in today at between 80 and 95 million people, depending on exactly how the generations are defined. This exceeds the number of baby boomers,<sup>2</sup> and with time, Millennials will comprise an even larger percentage of the population as older generations pass away.

What's more, Millennials are a large, politically active generation that cares deeply about economic issues. Studies have found that they are, for example, more likely to express interest in politics and elections, care a good deal who wins, try to influence others' votes, and attend political meetings.<sup>3</sup> According to a report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Millennials "are not bashful about expressing their voice and are quite active in the civic realms of group membership and volunteering."<sup>4</sup>

And Millennials are voting at increasingly high rates. Though young people are less likely to vote than older people, Millennials are starting to close the gap. "In the primary elections held thus far in 2008," noted a Pew Research Center paper, "voter turnout has been up sharply, especially among young people."<sup>5</sup> And the increases in voting for Millennials this year

come on top of other recent increases. In 2004, "turnout among young voters increased 12 percent compared to 2000, the biggest increase in any single age group."<sup>6</sup> As the director of Rock the Vote argues: "2008 is set to become the third major election in a row with an increase in turnout among young voters."<sup>7</sup>

The economy is the most important issue for Millennials in this year's election,<sup>8</sup> and has been a bigger concern for Millennials than older generations. For example, in the 2006 election, 23 percent of voters under 30 years old cited the economy as the most important issue, compared to only 14 percent of the rest of the electorate.<sup>9</sup> A 2003 survey of 15- to 25-year-olds found that "jobs and the economy" was the most important problem facing the country, nearly double the number that said the war in Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

Research suggests that the political opinions and voting patterns of young adults are likely to carry forward throughout their lives.<sup>11</sup> Political attachments attitudes formed in early adulthood often continue to be held later in life.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the shared experiences of Millennials—like those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II—can form a lasting worldview that shapes their political views throughout their lifetimes. And evidence indicates that Millennials already have a distinct generational identity, with 69 percent of them thinking their age group is unique, compared to only 42 percent of Generation X and 50 percent of baby boomers, who are now between 43 and 62 years of age.<sup>13</sup>

This study did not attempt to pinpoint the source of progressive opinions of Millennials, but our research points to a number of possible reasons why in time they may

well become known in the future as the Progressive Generation. Young adults today face more significant economic challenges than have other recent generations, among them lower rates of health-care coverage, worsening job prospects, and higher levels of student loan debt—all legacies of the conservative policies that have dominated in recent years. In addition, Millennials are more likely than other age groups to disapprove of George W. Bush's handling of his presidency, which could be fueling a rejection of the larger conservative agenda and driving support for progressive policies.

The upshot: This Progressive Generation could well be poised to transform the American political landscape in 2008 and beyond due to their embrace of decidedly progressive positions on economic issues and the role of government in economy. The results of our analysis detailed in the pages that follow, and the methodology behind it, clearly indicate the strong progressive leanings of Millennials today, and the likelihood these trends will endure over the coming decades.

## What This Survey Can Tell Us

This report relies most heavily on the National Election Survey and the General Social Survey for its analysis. These sources are two of the longest-running academic surveys of Americans' views about a wide range of issues. They have been using many of the same questions about economics and politics for decades, making them ideal for comparing changes in opinions over time.<sup>14</sup> While these surveys are publicly available, they have not, according to our research, been used before to analyze the economic views of Millennials. As a result, this is a unique study, with new and important results.

These two surveys were supplemented with poll data from other sources, including surveys by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press.

The long time frame of these surveys allows for a nuanced analysis that can consider the impact of a number of factors that shape public opinion. While the lifecycle, period, and generational forces that shape the public's views can never be perfectly separated, this study attempts to disentangle them by looking at a long series of identical questions over time.<sup>15</sup>

Lifecycle theories argue that people have different opinions based on their current stage in life, and that views change over time based on life demands, such as child rearing and retirement. Period explanations note that the popularity of certain opinions can ebb and flow over time. Generational explanations argue that the shared experiences and the "spirit of the times" of a generation in its formative years can impact opinions for a lifetime.

Demographers have yet to agree on exactly when the Millennial generation begins or ends, though most definitions generally focus heavily on people who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. We chose to focus on people between 18 to 29 years of age today, or those born between 1979 and 1990. These young people entered adulthood in and around the turn of the century, which is why they are referred to as Millennials.

We also chose this under-30-year-old group because no matter which exact years are used to define the generation, this age range provides for easy comparison with previous generations when they were under 30 years old.

## Results of the Survey

**B**ased on our analysis of dozens of survey questions, we find that Millennials have decidedly progressive views about economic issues. This holds true on issues about specific policies such as support for universal health care and education, on more general questions about government spending, and on ideological orientation such as the government's role in ensuring a good standard of living.

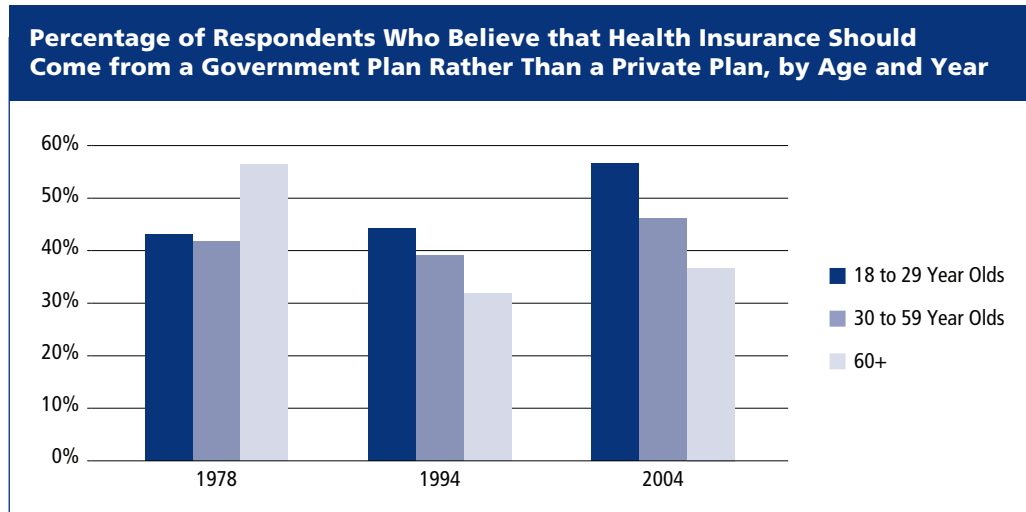
Millennials are far more progressive than older Americans and generally are more progressive than previous generations. While this is historically a nation of rugged individualism, people also look to the government for support in achieving the American Dream. Millennials are far more likely than older people, and than previous generations when they were the same age as Millennials today, to think the government has a role helping people achieve this goal.

While lifecycle, period, and generational forces are all working to shape the opinions of young people today, a careful examination of the data shows that the progressive leanings of the Millennial Generation may prove enduring. As this report will demonstrate, lifecycle and period forces explain some but not all of the progressive views of Millennials. Rather, Millennials are exhibiting some distinctive generational characteristics.

### Healthcare

Millennials have come of age amid a raging health care debate, and are the most likely age group to lack health care coverage.<sup>16</sup> So it may not come as a surprise that Millennials are supportive of universal health coverage. However, their levels of support are particularly high and noteworthy. Millennials are more likely to support a government health insurance plan than are older people, and are more supportive than previous generations were when they were younger. In fact, Millennials are more likely to support universal health coverage than any age group in any previous year.

The National Election Survey, for example, found that in 2004, over half (57 percent) of respondents 29 years of age and under thought that health insurance should come from a government insurance plan. Only 28 percent felt that it should come from a private insurance plan, and 15 percent were neutral.<sup>17</sup> In comparison, only 46 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds believed that the government should be the provider of health insurance, and only 37 percent of people 60 years of age and above believed so.



Source: Authors' analysis of National Election Survey.

The 57 percent level of support by Millennials for government provision of healthcare was the highest level of overall support for any age group in the over 30 years that the question has been asked.<sup>18</sup> When the same question was asked in 1994—when the majority of Generation Xers were 29 years of age or younger—only 44 percent of young people believed that the government should be the provider of health insurance.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in 1978, when many baby boomers would have fallen into the 18- to 29-year-old range, only 43 percent thought government should provide health insurance.

Another important indication of the uniqueness of Millennials' views on health insurance is that young people have not always been the demographic most in favor of government-provided health insurance. In 1978, for example, those 60 years old and up at the time were actually the most supportive of government-provided health insurance, with 56 percent in favor compared to 43 percent of young people and 42 percent of those between the ages of 30 and 59.

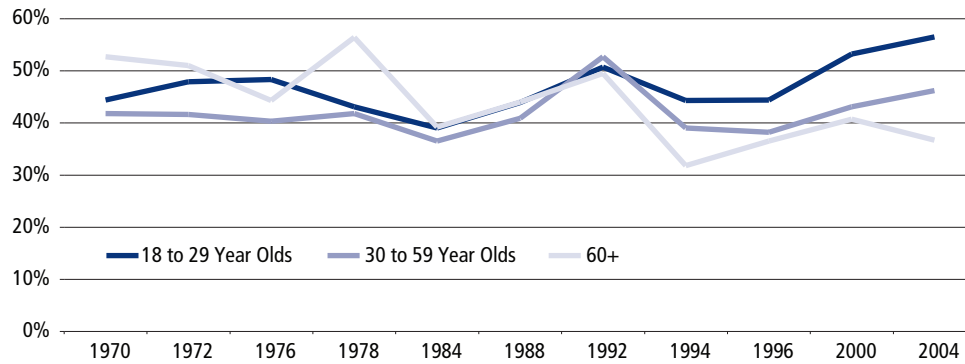
And in 1970, the first year the National Election Survey posed the question, the 60-and-up group again was more supportive of government health insurance, with 53 percent in favor, while 44 percent of young people favored government health insurance.

A related question in the General Social Survey about healthcare also highlights the progressive nature of the Millennial generation. Over the past two decades the general public has become more supportive of increased government spending on health care, but young people over time have gone from being the least supportive group to by far the most supportive.<sup>20</sup>

When asked in 2006 whether the government should spend more or less on health care, 87 percent of Millennials responded that it should spend much or slightly more, compared to 80 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds who thought so, and 76 percent of those ages 60 and above. In 1996, when Generation Xers were in the 18-to-29 age range, 73 percent of young people felt that the government should spend more on health care, while 67 per-

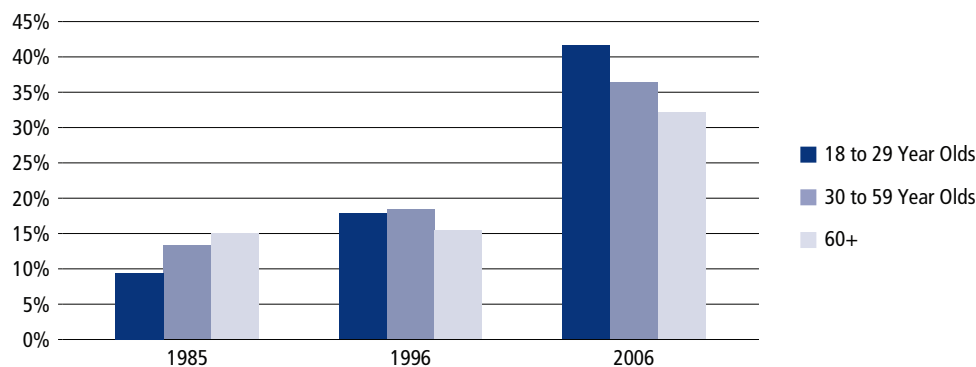


### Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that Health Insurance Should Come from a Government Insurance Plan Rather Than a Private Insurance Plan, by Age and Year



Source: Authors' analysis of National Election Survey.

### Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that the Government Should Spend "Much More" on Health Care, by Age and Year



Source: Authors' analysis of General Social Survey.

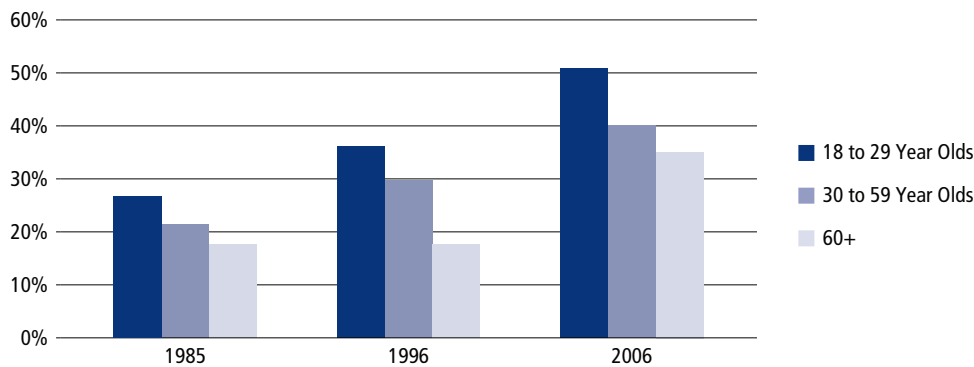
cent and 63 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds and 60 plus, respectively, felt that way.

In 1985, the first year the question was posed, young people were actually the age group least supportive of increased health care spending, although the three age groups' responses nearly mirrored each other. That year, just 57 percent of young people thought that the government should spend more on health care, while 58 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds felt that way, and 59 percent of people ages 60 and above felt that way.

## Education

People under 30 years of age are the demographic currently enrolled in college or most recently finished their education, so it may not be surprising to learn that they are more supportive of increased government spending for education than other age groups. But Millennials are far more supportive of education spending than previous generations, and their views have significantly widened the spread of support between age groups.

### Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that the Government Should Spend "Much More" on Education, by Age and Year



Source: Authors' analysis of General Social Survey.

This is likely because the costs of education have continuously risen, becoming an ever increasing burden on young people as well as their parents. According to a new Demos report, for example, the costs of a four-year college education at a public school has doubled since 1980, causing nearly two-thirds of students to take on student loan debt.<sup>21</sup> Other studies detail similarly escalating costs.<sup>22</sup>

When asked in the 2006 General Social Survey whether the government should spend more or less on education even if a tax increase might be required to pay for it, an overwhelming 95 percent of Millennials responded that it should spend more, with 51 percent believing that it should spend "much more" than it currently does.<sup>23</sup>

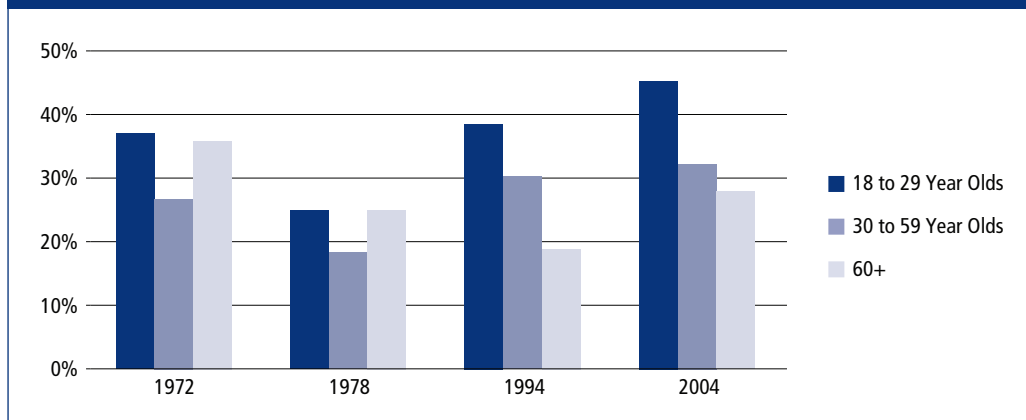
The majority of people ages 30 to 59 were also supportive of increased government spending on education, with 81 percent believing it should spend more, and roughly half of that 81 percent feeling that it should spend "much more." People age 60 and above were slightly less supportive of increased government

spending on education, with 78 percent in favor of it and only 35 percent believing that it should spend "much more."

Compare these responses to those asked in previous years and one can see that while support for spending on education has continued to grow across all age groups, Millennials are the most supportive demographic ever to respond to this question. In 1996, for example, 84 percent of the under-30 age group (comprised largely of Generation Xers) believed that the government should spend more on education, along with 79 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 65 percent of those ages 60 and above.

In 1985, the first year that the question was posed, 72 percent of young people were supportive of increased government spending, compared to 68 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 52 percent of those over 60. In addition, the percent of young people who think "much more" should be spent on education has nearly doubled from 1985 to 2006, rising from 27 percent to 51 percent.

### Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that the Government Should See to a Good Job and Standard of Living for Everyone, by Age and Year



Source: Authors' analysis of National Election Survey.

## Providing Jobs

Millennials are also far more supportive of government and the government's role in the economy than are older Americans, and generally are more supportive than previous generations. This rise in young people's support for government intervention in the economy has coincided with steadily declining pay and job quality for young workers. Between 1975 and 2005, median annual earnings dropped 20 percent for young men and stayed flat for young women.<sup>24</sup>

When asked in the 2004 National Election Survey whether the government should ensure that everyone has a good job and standard of living, or instead let each person get ahead on their own, 45 percent of Millennials said that the government should see to a good job and standard of living for everyone. Just 32 percent felt that the government should leave individuals to get ahead on their own, with 22 percent having a neutral opinion.<sup>25</sup>

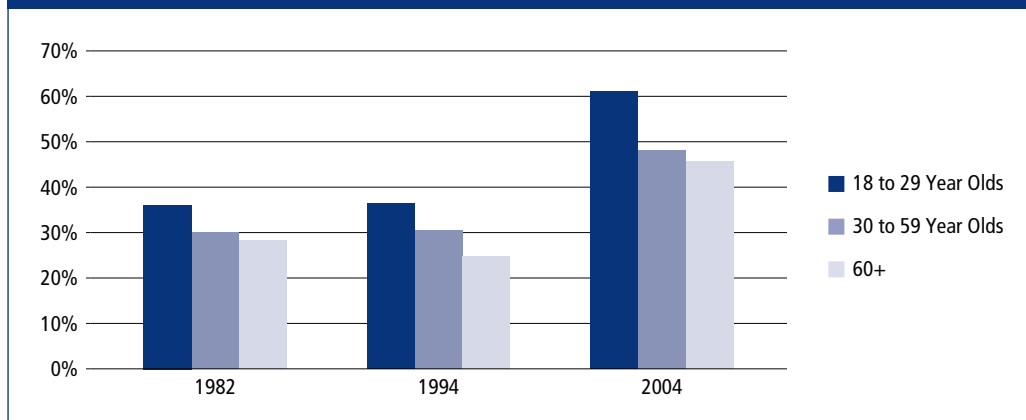
In comparison, only 32 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 28 percent of those

aged 60 and above, felt that this was the government's responsibility. And roughly half of each group, 48 percent and 52 percent, respectively, believed that the government should let individuals take care of these areas themselves.

In 1994, when Generation Xers comprised much of the 18-to-29 age range, young people were divided, with 38 percent who said ensuring good jobs and quality of life should be a responsibility of the government compared to 37 percent who said this should be left to individuals. Looking back to 1972, the first year the question was asked and also when many baby boomers were young adults, just 37 percent of young people believed it was the government's responsibility, compared to 42 percent who believed it should be left to individuals.

The General Social Survey asks a somewhat different question about the government's responsibility to provide jobs that tells a similar story.<sup>26</sup> When asked in the 2006 survey whether it should be the government's responsibility to provide good jobs for every citizen who wants

### Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that the Government Should Provide More Services, by Age and Year



Source: Authors' analysis of National Election Survey.

one, Millennials were evenly split, with half believing it should be the case and the other half believing it shouldn't.

Both groups of older people leaned more decisively against, with 60 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds believing the government should not have the responsibility of providing all interested citizens with jobs, and 70 percent of people ages 60 and above believing that to be the case. Importantly, 23 percent of Millennials replied that it “definitely should” be the government’s responsibility, which is the highest percentage this age group has on record for that response.

While recent years have produced similar results to the 2006 survey, with young people more likely than older people to support the government having a role providing jobs, this view is in sharp contrast to those in 1985. In that year, the first year the question was posed, only 34 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds believed that job provision should be the government’s responsibility—and this percentage was even less than the oldest age groups’.

### Increasing Services

When asked in the National Election Survey whether the government should overall provide more or fewer services, Millennials overwhelming support increased services, and were more supportive than any age group in any previous year the question was asked.<sup>27</sup> In 2004, 61 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds thought the government should provide more services, while 48 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 45 percent of those 60 and over, agreed. In 1994, when much of Generation X was under 30, only 36 percent of young people felt the government should provide more services, the same percent of young people who felt that way in 1982, the first year the question was asked.

Millennials also reject the idea that cutting government is good for the economy. When asked in the General Social Survey whether they were in favor or against the idea that cutting government was a good way to help the economy, Millennials had the lowest support of cutting government spending in the history of the question.<sup>28</sup>

In 2006, just 15 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds were “strongly in favor,” and 33 percent “in favor,” meaning that overall just under half were supportive of the idea.

In comparison, 65 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 70 percent of those ages 60 and above, were in favor of cutting government spending as a way to help the economy. In 1996, when many Generation Xers were 18 to 29 years old, 76 percent of young adults supported cutting the government. In 1985, the first year the question was asked, 69 percent of young adults were in favor of reducing government spending. In both 1985 and 1996, about 85 percent of both 30- to 59-year-olds and those over age 60 favored reducing government spending.

Surveys by the Pew Research Center also indicate that Millennials have a progressive ideological orientation toward the government’s role.<sup>29</sup> When Millennials were asked in 2007 whether it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves, they were more likely to “completely agree” than any age group in any of the survey’s 20 previous years. In 2007, 31 percent of 18- to 29-year-

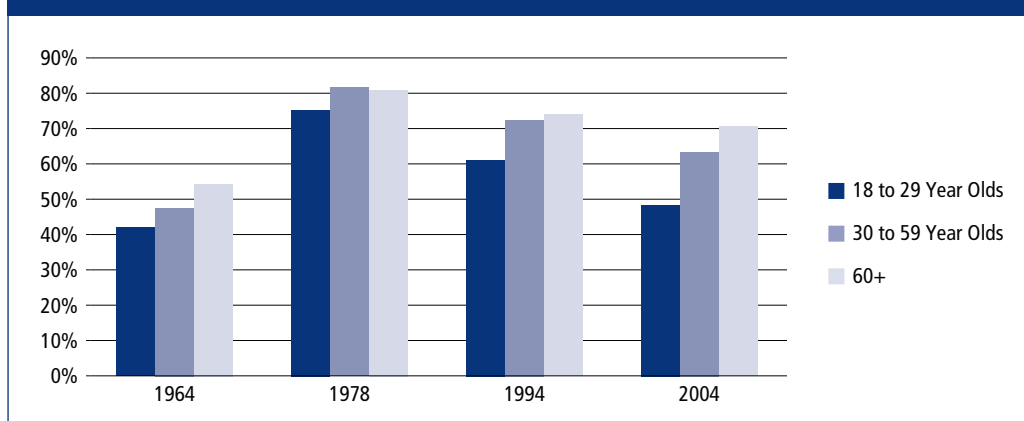
olds “completely agree” (and 42 percent “somewhat agree”) that it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves, while 25 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds and 26 percent of those over 60 completely agreed. In 1994, only 22 percent of young people completely agreed.

## Government Can Perform Efficiently

Millennials are far less likely to think that the government wastes tax dollars than older people and most previous generations, though they are concerned about government waste. In 2004, according to the National Election Survey, 49 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds thought the government wastes “a lot” of money, compared to 64 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds, and 71 percent of those over 60.<sup>30</sup>

In 1994, when the majority of Generation Xers were in the under-30 age group, 61 percent of young people thought the government was wasteful. Similarly, in 1978, when many baby boomers would have fallen into the 18-to-29-year-old range, 76 percent of young people

**Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that the Government Wastes “A Lot” of Tax Revenue, by Age and Year**



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Election Survey.

thought the government wasted money. In fact, you need to go back to the early 1960s and late 1950s—the first years the question was asked—to find a time when young people felt the government wasted less money than do Millennials today.

Other studies have similarly found that Millennials have a generally more positive view of the government. When the Pew Research Center asked in 1987 whether people agreed with the statement, “When something is run by the federal government it is usually ineffective and wasteful,” 54 percent of people between the ages of 18 to 29 agreed, compared to 69 percent of those 30 to 59 years old, and 74 percent of those 60 years of age and above. Fast forward to 2007. Just 42 percent of Millennials agreed with the statement while 70 percent of those between the ages of 30 to 59 did, along with 76 percent of those 60 years old and above.<sup>31</sup>

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement also found that Millennials are more likely to view the government favorably than older people. In 2006, 45 percent of young people—defined in that survey as 15 to

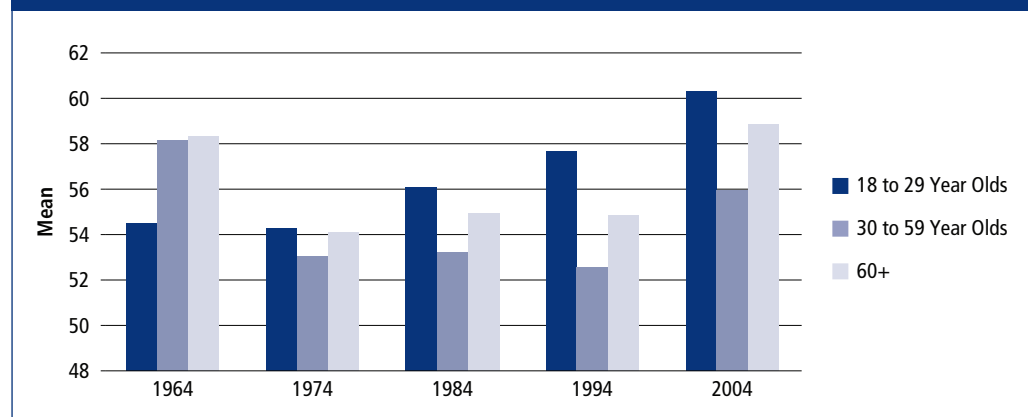
25 years old—believed that the government “often does a better job than people give it credit for,” compared to just 35 percent of people ages 26 and older.<sup>32</sup>

## Labor Unions

Millennials are more supportive of labor unions than older people and previous generations were at the same age. Because unionization has declined steadily over the past 40 years, with unions today representing only about 12 percent of the workforce, down from about one-third in the late 1960s, today’s young people have had the least direct exposure to labor unions of any recent generation. Millennials’ opinions of unions, then, could be considered more about their general impression of workers joining together to have greater influence over wages, benefits, and working conditions, rather than their personal experience with organized labor. Thus young people’s opinions about labor unions provide some insight into their ideological orientation.

When asked in the 2004 National Election Survey to rank their feelings toward

**Mean Response to Question About Feelings Towards Labor Unions with Less Than 50 Indicating More Negative Feelings and More Than 50 Indicating More Positive Feelings, by Age and Year**



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Election Survey.

labor unions on a scale of 0 to 100, with 50 to 100 indicating that they felt favorably and warm toward labor unions and 0 to 50 meaning that they didn't feel favorably toward them, Millennials' mean response was 60, while those between the ages of 30 to 59 had a mean response of 56, and those 60 years old and up had an average response of 59.<sup>33</sup>

Millennials' mean response was not only higher than the other age groups' responses in 2004, but was the second-highest mean recorded by any age group over the 40-year history of the question (the highest being young people's mean of 62 in 1998). In 1994, when Generation Xers were in the 18-to-29-age group, their mean response was 58, which was higher than the 30- to 59-year-olds' mean of 53, and the mean of 55 for those 60 years of age and up.

This pattern was very similar to the response in 1984, when the means were 56, 53, and 55 for 18- to 29-year-olds, 30- to 59-year-olds, and 60 years old and up, respectively. And in 1974, when baby boomers were classified as young people, their mean response of 54 was equal to that of people aged 60 and above, and higher than 30- to 59-year-olds' mean of 53. The first time this question was posed in 1964, young people actually had the least favorable impression of labor unions out of the three age groups, with a mean of 54 compared to the mean of 58 belonging to both of the older age groups.

## Business

Millennials' views on business defy easy characterization, and suggest a pragmatic progressivism, rather than a more populist orientation. They have rather nuanced,

but generally supportive, views about business. They support both businesses profits as well as, on some occasions, increased regulation. Compared to previous generations, Millennials have relatively middle-ground opinions about business that are not especially supportive or opposed.

The National Election Survey has continuously asked participants to rank their feelings toward big business on a scale of 0 to 100, with 50 to 100 indicating that they felt favorably and warm toward business, and 0 to 50 meaning that they didn't feel favorably toward business.<sup>34</sup> In 2004, Millennials had slightly less warm feelings than did older people, giving business a mean response of 53, compared to 55 for respondents aged 30 to 59, and those 60 years old and above.

However, the Millennials' response puts them about in the middle of previous generations' opinion of business. When they were young, baby boomers had the lowest view of big business in the history of the survey, giving business a mean ranking of 42 in 1976. In contrast, Millennials have a less favorable view of big business than did Generation X and some older generations when they were young. In 1994, young people gave business a mean response of 58 and in 1964, the first year the question was asked, 18- to 29-year-olds had a mean response of 59.

Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center provide a similarly mixed view of the Millennials' opinions about business.<sup>35</sup> For example, in 2007, people under age 30 were more likely than older people to agree that the strength of this country is mostly based on the success of American business, while in many previous years, including 1989 and 1994, young people were less likely than older people to agree.

The same survey also found mixed feelings among young people about government regulation of business. In 2007, people under age 30 were less likely than older people to think the regulation of business usually does more harm than good. However, Millennials' concerns about regulations were higher than young people's were in many of the survey's 20 previous years.

Finally, in 2007, young people were less likely than older age groups to think that business corporations make too much profit. Millennials, however, were more likely than any previous group of young people in the survey's 20-year history to think that corporations make too much profit. In sum, Millennials are generally supportive of business, though their views defy easy characterization.

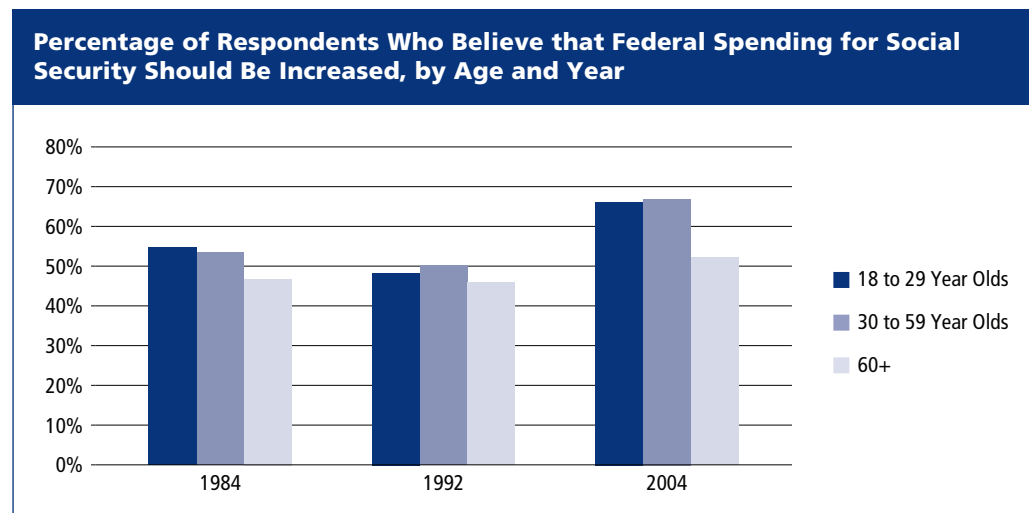
## Social Security Privatization

Social Security is perhaps the one issue where Millennials' views are not so progressive, though their opinions on this issue are far more progressive than is commonly known. Commentators often argue that because young people were

more likely to support President Bush's proposal for private Social Security accounts, their views on the issue are conservative. Anna Greenberg, a leading pollster and former Harvard professor, for example, argues that young adults "hold decidedly non-progressive values on privatization of Social Security," noting that 74 percent of young adults support privatization, compared to 41 percent of adults over the age of 60.<sup>36</sup>

This support for privatization, however, is probably based on the young age of the Millennials—a lifecycle effect—rather than anything distinctive about their generation. The reason: studies show that the further people are away from retirement age, the more likely they are to support proposals for private accounts. Once their distance from retirement age is accounted for, there is nothing distinctive about Millennials' views on privatization.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, based on other measures, young people today are as supportive as or even more supportive of Social Security than older people and previous generations when they were younger. For example, the National Election Survey indicates that people under 30 years of



Source: Authors' analysis of National Election Survey.



age today are more likely than older people to support increased federal spending for Social Security.<sup>38</sup> In 2004, 66 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds felt that spending on Social Security should be increased; only 52 percent of those over 60 years of age supported this proposal.

Millennials' 66-percent support for increasing Social Security spending in 2004 was the second-highest level for young adults in the 20 years the question had been asked, and far higher than the figure in 1984, when 55 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds felt Social Security spending should be increased. In addition, young people are not always more supportive of spending on Social Security. For example, in 1992, 30- to 59-year-olds were more likely to say spending should be increased than were 18- to 29-year-olds.

Similarly, the General Social Survey study also finds that Millennials are more likely to think the government should be spending more money to provide for Americans' retirement than older people today, or Generation X when it was younger.<sup>39</sup> In 2006, 69 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds felt the government should spend much more or slightly more on retirement, while 65 percent of 30- to 59-year-olds felt that way, along with 59 percent of those over 60 years old. In 1996, only 56 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds felt spending should be increased, and in 1985 only 53 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds supported increased spending.

## Personally Optimistic About Finances, Though Concerned

Despite facing significant economic challenges, young adults are generally, but not always, optimistic about their chances for financial success, though previous generations may have had slightly more positive outlooks. A 2007 Pew Research Center report found that 72 percent of young people today think that young adults have a better chance of acquiring a well-paying job compared to young adults 20 years ago.<sup>40</sup>

In 1990, when the same question was asked of Generation X, 79 percent thought that young adults then had better chances of finding a well-paying job. Forty-seven percent of Millennials thought that young people today enjoy better financial security, compared to 44 percent who thought young adults 20 years ago had it easier. In 1990, 53 percent of Generation Xers thought that financial security for young people was better at that time.

In contrast to this general optimism expressed in the Pew surveys, some other polls suggest a more downbeat perspective. A *New York Times*/CBS/MTV Poll found that only 25 percent of young voters think they will be better off than their parents' generation, while 48 percent say they will be worse off.<sup>41</sup>

## Why Are Millennials So Economically Progressive?

As this study indicates, time period, age, and generational factors each play a role in shaping the progressive views of Millennials. Yet the patterns described in this report—where young people today are consistently more progressive than older people today and than previous generations when they were younger—suggest that lifecycle and period explanation are incomplete and that at least some part of Millennials’ progressive views are caused by generational factors.

Several pieces of data suggest that a lifecycle explanation is not sufficient. The decades of survey data show that young people are not always more economically progressive than older people. In addition, Millennials are more progressive than previous generations—especially Generation X, for which there is the most comparable data at the same age. A period explanation is not likely to be sufficient because even though all Americans have been trending more progressive in recent years, Millennials are far more progressive than older people today and, on several questions, have become more progressive at faster rates than the rest of the population.

As a result, it is likely that, in addition to period and lifecycle factors, there are generational forces at play in shaping the progressive views of Millennials. This suggests that not only are Millennials quite progressive now, but they are likely to be so in the future.

This report does not attempt to tease out what is causing the unique views of the Millennial generation. Far more research would be needed to pinpoint the exact origins of this young generation’s progressive opinions and attitudes. This study, however, would be remiss if it did not at least suggest a few possible explanations for why this generation has developed particularly progressive views on the economy.

It is possible that the difficult financial situation of young adults today compared to recent generations is driving their progressivism. The relatively bleak performance of the economy for young people—such as lower rates of healthcare coverage, worsening job prospects, and higher levels of student loan debt—during a period of economically conservative policy-making could also be leading Millennials to reject the conservative agenda and support progressive alternatives.

Between 1975 and 2005, median annual earnings dropped 20 percent for young men, and stayed flat for young women.<sup>42</sup> In 1967, men between the ages of 18 and 24 earned three quarters as much as men 25 and older, but by 2004, those in the younger age group made only half as much.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, the percentage of young workers in “bad jobs,” or those that pay less than \$32,000 per year and do not have health or retirement benefits, increased to 41 percent in 2004 from 35 percent in 1979—the largest increase of any age group.<sup>44</sup>

Young adults are by far the most likely group to not have health insurance.<sup>45</sup> Nearly 30 percent of 18- to 30-year-olds do not have health insurance, more than double the rate for the rest of population, according to Census Bureau estimates. In 1979, 63 percent of recent high school graduates had employer-provided health insurance, compared to 34 percent in 2004. Over the same time period, the percentage decreased from 78 percent to 64 percent for college graduates.<sup>46</sup>

Since 1980, tuition at public four-year universities has more than doubled.<sup>47</sup> In 2004, the median student loan debt for graduates of four-year public colleges was \$15,000, a 78 percent increase over 10 years.<sup>48</sup> Today, nearly two-thirds of all four-year graduates have student loans, while in 1993, the number was less than half.

Another possible reason for the progressive views of Millennials is that they maintain highly unfavorable views of President George W. Bush. Their rejection of the president and his policies could be leading them to favor a more progressive economic viewpoint, though much more research is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

Certainly Millennials have a very low opinion of President Bush—much lower than other age groups. In 2004, people were asked to place him on a feeling thermometer, where ratings between

50 and 100 degrees meant that respondents felt favorably and warm toward the person and ratings between 0 and 50 degrees meant that respondents didn’t feel favorably toward the person and didn’t care too much for the person. People between the ages of 18 and 29 gave Bush an average of 45, while those 30 and over gave an average more than 10 points higher. The Millennials’ ranking of Bush was the only time in the 40 years that the question has been asked that any age group gave a sitting president an average score lower than 50.

In addition, examination of this feeling thermometer in previous years indicates that young people do not always have a lower rating of the president, even if the president is Republican. For example, in both 1986 and 1988, 18- to 29-year-olds ranked President Reagan as high or higher than those between 30 and 59 years of age, and those aged 60 and over. Thus, the Millennials’ strong disapproval of President Bush could be helping drive a larger rejection of conservative policies and push them toward progressive views. Some more advanced statistical tests provide preliminary support for this theory.<sup>49</sup>

## Implications for The Future

The degree to which people tend to maintain throughout their life the attitudes and opinions that they currently have is a point of much debate.<sup>50</sup> As a result, it is impossible to be certain about whether Millennials are likely to keep their progressive economic views. The general thrust of academic literature, however, is that political ideas and attachments that are developed in early adulthood tend to last.<sup>51</sup> Research suggests that a social-

ization process occurs that leads young adults to hold onto the party identification and opinions that they developed in their formative years. While people's opinions certainly change throughout their life, they are more likely to hold onto existing views than to reverse them.

Despite the considerable debate about how much people's attitudes change as they age, and the general support for the idea that people tend to maintain their previous views, some people still hold onto an overly simplified and often incorrect assumption that people naturally become more conservative as they get older. While some studies have found support for this view, most have raised considerable doubt about its validity, with a handbook on gerontology noting that, "It is a stereotype that individuals become more conservative as they age."<sup>52</sup>

In fact, several studies have found that people actually become more progres-

sive as they get older. A textbook on generational analysis argued: "According to almost any constant definition of conservatism people typically become less rather than more conservative as they age."<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, the findings of a 2007 study of 30 years of public opinion data in the prestigious *American Sociological Review* "contradict commonly held assumptions that aging leads to conservatism."<sup>54</sup> While these studies did not focus on the same survey questions used in this study, they cast significant doubts on the idea that the Millennials' economic progressivism will moderate over time.

As a result, it is likely that Millennials, as they age, will continue to be a progressive generation, supporting significant government intervention in the economy. Thus the progressive views of the Millennial generation are likely to impact politics today and well into the future.

## Conclusion

This report indicates that young adults today have progressive views on a range of economic issues. From support for specific programs such as universal health care to their general ideology, Millennials tend to think government can and should play a positive role in the economy.

A number of factors are likely to cause these progressive views, including both lifecycle and period factors, but Millennials are also shaping up to be an especially progressive generation. Millennials' views are more progressive than older people's today, and than those of previous generations, and they stand in especially stark contrast to the more conservative views of Generation X. On many economic issues, Millennials are more progressive than any previous generation.

These views about the economy and government are likely to have profound effects on politics today and into the future. Millennials are demonstrating that they are a politically engaged generation, and polls show that young voters are making their decisions about whom to support in the 2008 presidential election based on the economy. Thus the economically progressive views of young people are likely to play an important role in the coming year. And in the future, as Millennials become an even more dominant share of the electorate, their progressive views are likely to shape politics for years to come.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Studies generally have found that Millennials have overwhelmingly progressive social views on most issues such as interracial marriage, rights for gays, and immigration, though Millennials tend to be less supportive of abortion rights. Studies have also found that Millennials are more likely to support the Democratic Party than older Americans.
- 2 Peter Leyden and Ruy Teixeira, 2007. The Millennial Generation is so large because many are children of Boomers, but also because many are children of the huge wave of immigrants in the last several decades.
- 3 Leyden and Teixeira, 2007.
- 4 Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins, 2002.
- 5 Keeter, 2008.
- 6 Pew Research Center, 2007.
- 7 Heather Smith, 2008.
- 8 Celinda Lake, Joshua E. Ulibarri, and Karen M. Emmerson, 2008.
- 9 Anna Greenberg and Amy Gershkoff, 2007.
- 10 Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2004
- 11 The degree to which early political attachments hold over time is a point of much debate, as will be discussed later in this report.
- 12 See for example, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Alwin and Krosnik, 1991; Jennings and Niemi, 1977; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1975; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008.
- 13 Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins, 2002.
- 14 This study focuses on aggregate changes in public opinion rather than individual-level change and thus does not use panel data.
- 15 On the difficulty of disentangling these, see for example, Menard, 2002.
- 16 The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2007.
- 17 Exact question wording: "There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some (1988, 1994-LATER: people) feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses (1984 AND LATER: for everyone). (1996, 2004: Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1). Others feel that (1988, 1994-1996: all) medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance (1984 AND LATER: plans) like Blue Cross (1984-1994: or [1996: some] other company paid plans). (1996, 2004: Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some people have opinions somewhere in between at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6.) Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"
- 18 In some years, other age groups had higher levels of intense support for government provision of healthcare.
- 19 Note that in 1992, there was a slight and temporary increase in support for government insurance, most likely arising because Bill Clinton made universal health care a focus of his presidential campaign and first year in office. But even in 1992, support among young people for government health insurance was well below 2000 and 2004 levels.
- 20 Exact question wording: "Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say "much more," it might require a tax increase to pay for it." Response choices: "spend much more; spend more; spend the same as now; spend less; spend much less; can't choose; no answer; not applicable."
- 21 Demos, 2008.
- 22 Project on Student Debt, "Quick Facts about Student Debt." Online at [www.projectonstudentdebt.org](http://www.projectonstudentdebt.org). College Board. Trends in Student Aid: 2006; Deanne Loonin, "Paying the Price: The High Cost of Private Student Loans and the Dangers to Borrowers," National Consumer Law Center, March 2008.
- 23 Exact question wording: "Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say "much more," it might require a tax increase to pay for it." Response choices: "spend much more; spend more; spend the same as now; spend less; spend much less; can't choose; no answer; not applicable."
- 24 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



- 25 Exact question wording varied slightly from year to year, but was nearly identical to the 2002 version: "Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Which is closer to the way you feel or haven't you thought much about this?" Response Choices: "1 Yes, government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living; 2 Yes, should let each person get ahead on his own; 9 Depends; other; both; no opinion; DK; no interest; haven't thought much about this"
- 26 Exact question wording: "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one?" Response choices: "definitely should be; probably should be; probably should not be; definitely should not be; can't choose; no answer; not applicable."
- 27 Exact question wording: "Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. (2004: Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. (2004: Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.) Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"
- 28 Exact question wording: "Here are some things the government might do for the economy. ... Cut government spending. Circle one number for each action to show whether you are in favor of it or against it." Response choices: "strongly in favor of; in favor of; neither in favor nor against; against; strongly against; don't know; no answer; not applicable."
- 29 Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 1987–2007.
- 30 Exact question wording: "Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?" Response Choices: "a lot; some; not very much; don't know."
- 31 Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 1987–2007.
- 32 Mark Hugo Lopez, Peter Levine, Deborah Both, Abby Kiesa, Emily Kirby, and Karlo Marcelo, 2006.
- 33 Exact question wording varied slightly from year to year, but remained very similar to this 1976 question: "We'd also like to get your feelings about some groups in American society. When I read the name of a group, we'd like you to rate it with what we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees–100 degrees mean that you feel favorably and warm toward the group; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably towards the group and that you don't care too much for that group. If you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward a group you would rate them at 50 degrees. If we come to a group you don't know much about, just tell me and we'll move on to the next one."  
  
Exact question wording: "Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Circle one number for each action to show whether you are in favor of it or against it." Response choices: "strongly in favor of; in favor of; neither in favor nor against; against; strongly against; don't know; no answer; not applicable."
- 34 Exact question wording varied slightly from year to year, but remained very similar to this 1976 question: "We'd also like to get your feelings about some groups in American society. When I read the name of a group, we'd like you to rate it with what we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees–100 degrees mean that you feel favorably and warm toward the group; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably towards the group and that you don't care too much for that group. If you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward a group you would rate them at 50 degrees. If we come to a group you don't know much about, just tell me and we'll move on to the next one."
- 35 Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 1987–2007.
- 36 Greenberg and Gershkoff, 2007.
- 37 This was tested with a simple regression model with support for privatization as the dependent variable and age and a dummy for Millennial Generation as the dependent variables. Because the dummy variable is not significant, there is nothing unique about the views of Millennials. In contrast, when this model is run with many (but not all) of the other policy questions used in this report as dependent variables, the views of Millennials are shown to be unique.
- 38 Exact question wording "If you had a say in making up the federal budget this year, for which(1986 AND LATER: of the following) programs would you like to see spending increased and for which would you like to see spending decreased: Should federal spending on [Social Security] be increased, decreased or kept about the same?" Response choices: "increased; same; decreased; cut out entirely (volunteered); don't know."
- 39 Exact question wording: "Listed below are various areas of government spending. Please indicate whether you would like to see more or less government spending in each area. Remember that if you say "much more," it might require a tax increase to pay for it." Response choices: "spend much more; spend more; spend same as now; spend less; spend much less; can't choose; no answer; not applicable."
- 40 Pew Research Center, 2007.
- 41 New York Times, CBS News, and MTV. 2007.
- 42 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.
- 43 Paul Starr, 2008.
- 44 Schmitt, 2005.
- 45 The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2007.
- 46 Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, Sylvia Allegretto, 2006/2007.
- 47 Draut, 2008.
- 48 Draut, 2008.

49 Note that teasing out whether and how feelings about President Bush affect policy views requires a far more thorough treatment than is given here. It seems most likely that there is a complex interplay between policy views and feelings about Bush with causation running in both directions—with opposition to Bush leading to opposition of conservatism and progressive views leading to opposition of Bush. It is also likely that partisanship mediates the relationship between these variables. Very preliminary support for the theory that opposition to Bush leads to progressive policy views comes from a regression model that uses the policy questions in this report as dependent variables, and age, Bush thermometer rating and a dummy variable for those under 30 as its independent variables. For most, but not all of the policy questions in this paper, the dummy variable is not statistically significant, indicating that once people's feelings about President Bush are controlled for, Millennials do not have distinctive opinions. Even adding partisanship to this simple model leads to similar results for some of the independent variables.

50 See for example: Danigelis, Nicholas L., Melissa Hardy, and Stephen J. Cutler, 2007; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Alwin and Krosnik, 1991; Jennings and Niemi, 1975; Niemi and Sobieszek, 1977; Somit and Peterson, 1987; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008; Saprio, 2004; Hooghe, 2004; Bartels 2001; Markus 1986; Glass, Bengston and Dunham, 1986.

51 See for example, Alwin and Krosnik, 1991; Jennings and Niemi, 1975, Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, 2008; Saprio, 2004.

52 Monk, Abraham, ed. 1990.

53 Glenn, 1977.

54 Nicholas Danigelis, Melissa Hardy, Stephen J. Cutler, 2008.

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