



# The Generation Gap on Government

Why and How the Millennial Generation Is the Most Pro-Government Generation and What This Means for Our Future

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Guy Molyneux and Ruy Teixeira, with John Whaley July 2010

Center for American Progress



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Based on a nationwide survey conducted by Hart Research Associates for the Center for American Progress and its Doing What Works project

doing  
what works

This publication is a product of CAP's Doing What Works project, which promotes government reform to efficiently allocate scarce resources and achieve greater results for the American people. Doing What Works specifically has three key objectives: (1) eliminating or redesigning misguided spending programs and tax expenditures focused on priority areas such as health care, energy, and education; (2) improving government's ability to execute by streamlining management and strengthening operations in the areas of human resources, information technology, and procurement; and (3) building a foundation for smarter decision making by enhancing transparency, performance measurement, and evaluation. Doing What Works publications and products can be viewed at [http://www.americanprogress.org/projects/doing\\_what\\_works](http://www.americanprogress.org/projects/doing_what_works). This project is undertaken in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation's Campaign for American Workers.

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# Executive summary

Young Americans today across the ideological spectrum share a far more favorable view of the federal government than do their elders. Importantly, this so-called Millennial Generation may hold the key to reversing historic declines in public confidence in government—the major finding from a new survey commissioned by the Center for American Progress.

The May survey of 2,523 adults conducted by Hart Research Associates found that young Americans age 18 to 32 give the government more positive performance ratings and more strongly favor a significant role for government in addressing national challenges than does the public at large. Millennials' distinctly pro-government outlook may well be a leading indicator of a nascent rebound in public confidence in government.

Despite their relatively positive outlook, though, Millennials do share their elders' concerns that the federal government is often poorly managed and spends money inefficiently, the survey found. And there is no guarantee that their more favorable disposition toward government won't sour as they age. The message for politicians and policymakers who would seize on the opportunity presented by relatively pro-government Millennials: Make government better, not smaller.

Young adults are particularly receptive to a reform agenda that would strip wasteful spending and focus on improvements in the delivery of government services. Millennials will reward politicians who adhere to these principles with their votes, young respondents say.

Millennials have been the subject of intense interest among political scientists and strategists since the group's strong support and turnout helped carry Barack Obama into the White House in 2008. The CAP poll, which surveyed these young adults, is the first to extensively probe Millennials' view of the role and performance of the federal government. What it found was a remarkable generation gap:

- Sixty-two percent of Millennials—compared to just 46 percent of non-Millennials—believe “we need a strong government to handle today’s complex economic problems”
- Half of Millennials say government should do more to solve problems, while only a third of non-Millennials share that view
- Just under half of Millennials report a favorable view of the federal government, though that is a considerably higher approval rating than the 30 percent of non-Millennials who have a favorable view of Washington
- Forty-four percent of Millennials voice confidence in the federal government’s ability to solve problems, 14 points higher than do older generations. This generation gap in confidence has grown dramatically over the past decade
- Millennials are 21 percentage points more likely than non-Millennials to call for increased government involvement in improving public schools (75 percent to 54 percent), and 17 points more inclined to favor more governmental involvement in making college affordable (73 percent to 56 percent)

The roots of Millennials’ more pro-government outlook appear to stem from their more positive assessment of government performance. Young adults are more likely than their elders to believe government spends money efficiently. Millennials are also more likely to see their own values aligned with government policies. Three demographic patterns also contribute to Millennials’ support for government:

- They are more ethnically diverse, boasting an especially large number of generally pro-government young Hispanics
- They are less susceptible to class divisions; notably, young whites without a college degree are less hostile to government than are older working-class whites
- Young Republicans and conservatives are less anti-government than their older ideological counterparts

These findings about Millennials are part of a broad public opinion poll commissioned by the Center for American Progress to explore American attitudes toward government. The survey found that while confidence in government is at an all-time low, clear majorities of Americans of all ages want and expect more federal involvement in priority areas such as energy, poverty, and education.

The key lesson embedded in these seemingly paradoxical results is that people would rather improve government performance than reduce its size. They are extremely receptive to a reform agenda that would eliminate inefficient government programs, implement performance-based policy decisions, and adopt modern management methods and information technologies.

The takeaway for policymakers: A better-run government will increase public confidence in public institutions. That could expand public support for smart government solutions to pressing social problems. The survey found substantial support for a government reform plan organized around three core elements:

- Eliminating inefficient programs and redirecting support to the most cost-efficient programs
- Carefully evaluating the performance of individual programs and agencies, and making that information available to the public
- Using more modern management methods and information technologies

Millennials are especially likely to believe this plan will improve government effectiveness, improve the quality of government services, and reduce the federal budget deficit.

Rather than a rejection of big government, the poll reveals a rejection of incompetent government. Public mistrust in government's ability to solve problems is more closely related to perceptions of government performance than it is a function of partisan affiliation or political ideology, the survey found.

The message to politicians and policymakers is clear. Government will not regain the public trust unless it earns it. But there is a silver lining: A majority of respondents indicated they would be more likely to support political candidates who embrace a reform agenda of improving government performance, effectiveness, and efficiency. That support is stronger among Millennials, suggesting they hold the key to a new era of public confidence in government—if public officials learn to spend taxpayers' dollars more carefully, and do what works.

# Introduction and key findings

A new survey commissioned by the Center for American Progress finds that Americans' confidence in government is at an all-time low, with negative feelings about government ascendant in the public mind. But the survey of 2,523 adults also detected an important and surprising countervailing trend—a large generation gap exists between the so-called Millennial generation and older Americans on attitudes toward government.

Millennials, ages 18 to 32, have more confidence in government and rate its performance higher than do older adults. Young adults are also strongly receptive to a reform agenda that would strip away wasteful spending and focus on improvements in the delivery of government services. Millennials will reward candidates for public office who adhere to these principles, respondents say.

This report reviews the survey's key findings about Millennials. The poll was conducted May 10-22, 2010, by Hart Research Associates, a national survey research firm, and consisted of extensive interviews with a total of 2,523 American adults, including 911 members of the Millennial generation. For an analysis of the poll's broader findings, please consult the companion report, "Better, Not Smaller: What Americans Want From Their Federal Government."

The remainder of this paper—and this introductory summary of key findings—is organized around the three questions that undergird the survey's exploration of Millennial attitudes:

- How do Millennials view the federal government?
- Why do Millennials have more confidence in the government than do older Americans?
- How do Millennials react to CAP's government-improvement plan?

Let's unpack the survey to answer each of these questions in turn.

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## How do Millennials view the federal government?

### Young Americans have relatively high confidence in government

Public confidence in government is at an all-time low. Yet among Millennials, 44 percent still voice a lot or some confidence in Washington, which is a higher confidence level than any other generation—14 percentage points higher than for older generations overall. Likewise, the proportion of Millennials who say they have “no confidence” in government is 20 percent, or 15 points lower than non-Millennials.

### The confidence generation gap has widened in the last decade

Ten years ago, 55 percent of adults aged 18-32 said they had confidence in the government, according to an NPR/Harvard/Kaiser poll, compared with 51 percent of the overall public. Today, that four-point spread has grown to 11 percentage points.

### Millennials are more likely to have a favorable view of government

While two-thirds of non-Millennials view the government unfavorably today, young adults are evenly divided on the question, with 47 percent holding a favorable view and 48 percent an unfavorable view.

### Millennials have a broader agenda for government

About half of Millennials say that government should do more to solve problems, a sharp contrast with the 60 percent of older Americans who say government is doing too much. Likewise, 62 percent of young Americans want a strong government to handle the current economy, compared with only 46 percent of non-Millennials.

### Education is Millennials' top priority for government intervention

Millennials are 21 points more likely to call for more government involvement in improving public schools, and 17 points more inclined to want more involvement in making college education affordable, than are older Americans.

### Millennials are especially likely to believe the federal government could be more effective if better managed and to prioritize making these improvements

Over three-quarters (77 percent) of Millennials believe the government *could* be more effective with better management, while only 19 percent say the federal government is bound to be ineffective no matter what. In addition, while most Americans believe that better government rather than smaller government should be the priority for the future, the margin in favor of improving government is more than twice as large with Millennials (+45 points) as with older generations of Americans (+20).



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## Why do Millennials have more confidence in the government than do older Americans?

### Young Hispanics are a pro-government influence on Millennials

Hispanics make up 19 percent of the Millennial demographic, compared with just 8 percent of non-Millennials. The pro-government views of young Hispanics therefore contributes to the overall positive disposition of young Americans toward government.

### The white class divide is less pronounced among Millennials

Among older generations, non-college-educated whites generally express less confidence in government's capacity for solving problems, and a more negative attitude toward government, than do college-educated whites. This class divide appears to have shrunk or even reversed among Millennials. On most measures in the survey, non-college white Millennials hold views toward government that are as favorable, or more favorable, than those of whites with a college degree.

### Millennial conservatives are less anti-government

While younger Democrats and liberals generally share the pro-government perspective of their older partisan or ideological fellows, younger Republicans and conservatives are much less anti-government than their non-Millennial counterparts.

### Millennials find government to be less wasteful

Millennials and older Americans share concerns about ineffective government programs and inefficient spending. But a marked generation gap appears when we ask whether federal programs and agencies waste a lot of money. Just under half of Millennials (49 percent) find waste, compared with nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of non-Millennials.

### Millennials more likely to see government as helping people and representing their values

There is a tremendous age gap in the perception that the federal government helps people get ahead in life. Nearly a majority (49 percent) of Millennials think this description applies to the federal government (including 56 percent of those age 18-24), whereas only 28 percent of non-Millennials feel the same.

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## How do Millennials react to CAP's government-improvement plan?

Millennials across the political spectrum believe CAP's government reform plan would be effective

About two-thirds of Millennials say the overall program would improve government performance. The plan enjoys support even among young adults who self-identify as Tea Party followers and conservatives. More than half of Millennials who currently say they have no confidence in government believe the Doing What Works plan would still be effective. Moreover, all the specific elements of the Doing What Works plan (see box) also enjoy strong support among Millennials, with most being embraced by 70 percent or more.

### CAP's Doing What Works government-improvement plan

The Doing What Works project at the Center for American Progress recommends a government-wide initiative to improve government efficiency, performance, and management:

- Require federal agencies to set clear goals measured by real-world results
- Reform the federal budget process to make spending decisions based on objective evidence about what works
- Measure and compare state actions to determine which approaches work
- Consolidate federal programs where there is overlap
- Reform the federal procurement system to make it faster and easier to identify best vendors
- Reform federal hiring and firing practices to improve performance of work force
- Evaluate tax subsidies for effectiveness and eliminate wasteful ones
- Subject new policies to "try before you buy" pilot programs
- Establish rigorous measurement and evaluation systems to determine government effectiveness and guide future policy
- Modernize federal information technology systems for better service
- Apply the best private-sector management practices for improved government performance
- Create Internet tools that allow the public to monitor government performance
- Establish an online report card informing the public about national progress toward goals
- Institute a speedy up-or-down confirmation vote in U.S. Senate for presidential appointments
- Allow taxpayers to opt-in to a free, pre-filled IRS tax return

The Doing What Works plan would increase Millennials' confidence in government. Seventy-three percent of Millennials say CAP's reform plan for the federal government would increase their confidence in government, with more than half stating it would increase their confidence some or a lot.

#### Millennials would reward politicians who pledged to implement the Doing What Works plan

More than half of young adults say they would be more likely to vote for candidates who put implementing our reform plan at the top of their agenda. A majority of Republicans (53 percent), independents (54 percent), and conservatives/Libertarians (51 percent) all are more likely to vote for a candidate who supported and prioritized the Doing What Works initiative, the survey found.

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The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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