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New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation

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Introduction and summary

The 2008 election saw strong shifts toward progressives among almost all growing demographic groups in the United States. Conversely, conservatives typically retained strength only among stagnant or declining groups. The result is a demographic landscape sharply tilted toward progressives, a tilt that is only likely to increase in years to come.

There are many components to the new demography, as outlined in the recent Progressive Studies report, “[New Progressive America](#).” One of the most important is the rise of the strongly progressive Millennial generation (birth years 1978-2000). Last November’s election was the first in which the 18- to 29-year-old age group was drawn exclusively from the Millennial generation, and they voted for Obama by a 34-point margin, 66 percent to 32 percent, compared to a 9-point margin for Kerry among 18- to 29-year-olds in 2004 when that age group was not exclusively Millennials.

Behind this striking result is a deeper story of a generation with progressive views in all areas and big expectations for change that will fundamentally reshape our electorate. We can start with the sheer size of this generation. Between now and 2018, the number of Millennials of voting age will increase by about four and a half million a year, and Millennial eligible voters will increase by about 4 million a year. 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 voters.

The diversity of this generation is as impressive as its size. Right now, Millennial adults are 60 percent white and 40 percent minority (18 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, 5 percent Asian, and 3 percent other). And the proportion of minority Millennial adults will rise to 41 percent in 2012, 43 percent in 2016, and 44 percent in 2020 (21 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, 6 percent Asian, and 3 percent other). This shift should make the Millennial generation even more firmly progressive as it fully enters the electorate, since minorities are the most strongly progressive segment among Millennials.

But this generation’s progressive leanings are not confined to minorities. White Millennials are far more progressive than the population as a whole in every area, on cultural, economic, domestic policy issues, and more. In 2008, they supported Obama by 54-44, a 21-point shift toward the progressive candidate compared to 2004. Not only

did Obama win white Millennials overall, but he also won both white Millennial college graduate and noncollege voters (by 16 and 6 points respectively). The latter result includes a 12-point (54-42) margin for Obama among the overwhelmingly working-class 25- to 29-year-old white noncollege group, a stunning 40-point swing relative to Kerry's 35-63 drubbing among the same group in 2004. This suggests that as relatively progressive white working-class Millennials replace older white working-class voters in the electorate, the white working class as a whole could become less conservative and more open to progressive ideas and candidates.

One likely consequence of the Millennial generation's rise is an end to the so-called culture wars that have marked American politics for the last several decades. Acrimonious disputes about family and religious values, feminism, gay rights, and race have frequently crippled progressives' ability to make their case to the average American. Millennials support gay marriage, take race and gender equality as givens, are tolerant of religious and family diversity, have an open and positive attitude toward immigration, and generally display little interest in fighting over the divisive social issues of the past. Almost two-thirds agree that religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice, and peace in society, and less on opposing abortion or gay rights.

Millennials are also notably progressive on foreign policy issues. As a generation, they are more oriented toward a multilateral and cooperative foreign policy than their elders. They are highly likely to believe that a positive image of America abroad is necessary to achieve our national security goals and that America's security is best promoted by working through diplomacy, alliances, and international institutions. They have also generally been the age group most hostile to the war in Iraq and to former President George W. Bush's handling of it. Exit polls from the 2008 election showed that only 22 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Millennials approved of the Iraq war, compared to 77 percent who disapproved.

Millennials, more so than other generations, want a stronger government to make the economy work better, help those in need, and provide more services. They decisively reject the conservative viewpoint that government is the problem, and that free markets always produce the best results for society; instead they support a more balanced approach to the economy. When asked in the 2008 National Election Study whether we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems or whether the free market can handle these problems without government's involvement, Millennials demonstrated an overwhelming preference for strong government by a margin of 78 to 22 percent.

Millennials are particularly resolute on the need for universal health care and, more than older generations, they want to see bold, decisive action toward this goal. Seventy-one percent agree that the federal government should guarantee health care coverage for all Americans. Millennials are also supportive of efforts to ensure that workers get their fair share of economic growth, such as labor unions, the minimum wage, and progressive taxation. They strongly back increased investment in our public schools and college access.

And they believe we need to move away from dependence on fossil fuels, embracing the need for major investments in new energy technologies. By about 3:1, Millennials think we should make major investments now to invent the next generation of clean-energy solutions, rather than continue on our current path, and gradually shift the mix of sources used to meet our energy needs.

Finally, Millennials are neither antibusiness nor antitrade. They are, however, very clear that the government needs to regulate business in the public interest. What's more, they are more worried than older Americans that we will do too little to require fair trade and enforce worker and consumer protections and less worried that we will go too far in burdening free trade accords with protections for consumers and labor.

Millennials' progressivism has already had a large political impact, and these beliefs are not likely to fade as the generation ages. People's opinions certainly do change throughout life, but they are more likely to hold onto existing views than to reverse them. Further, Millennials are much more progressive on many issues than previous generations when they were younger. This is true not just on social issues such as gay marriage but also on issues concerning the role of government and policy goals such as achieving universal health care. In all likelihood, Millennial progressivism is here to stay.

This report provides a detailed portrait of the Millennial generation, covering the generation's size, voting behavior, demographics, and views on cultural, foreign policy, role of government, and economic issues. The weight of this evidence strongly suggests that Millennials are indeed an unusually progressive generation and that they will have a strong and durable impact on our nation's politics. We are on course for a new progressive America, and the rise of the Millennial generation is one main force behind this transformation.

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