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The Coming End of the Culture Wars

Ruy Teixeira July 2009



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Contents

1 Introduction

4 The demographics of the culture wars' decline

- 4 The rise of the Millennial generation
- 5 The decline of the white working class
- 8 Toward a majority-minority nation
- 9 White college graduates
- 10 Single and college-educated women
- 10 Professionals
- 11 Increasing religious diversity

12 Culture wars issues

- 12 Gay marriage
- 13 Gender roles and family values
- 14 Race and diversity
- 15 Immigration
- 17 Abortion
- 18 Stem cell research
- 20 Guns

21 Conclusion

22 Endnotes

Introduction

The term “culture wars” dates back to a 1991 book by academic James Davison Hunter who argued that cultural issues touching on family and religious values, feminism, gay rights, race, guns, and abortion had redefined American politics. Going forward, bitter conflicts around these issues would be the fulcrum of politics in a polarized nation, he theorized.

It did look like he might have a point for a while. Conservatives especially seemed happy to take a culture wars approach, reasoning that political debate around these issues would both mobilize their base and make it more difficult for progressives to benefit from their edge on domestic policy issues such as the economy and health care. This approach played an important role in conservative gains during the early part of the Clinton administration and in the impeachment drama of the late 1990s, which undercut progressive legislative strategies. And the culture wars certainly contributed to conservative George W. Bush’s presidential victories in 2000 and 2004.

Yet these issues have lately been conspicuous by their absence. Looking back on Barack Obama’s historic victory in 2008, culture wars issues not only had a very low profile in the campaign, but where conservatives did attempt to raise them, these issues did them little good. Indeed, conservatives were probably more hurt than helped by such attempts—witness the effect of the Sarah Palin nomination.

Attempts to revive the culture wars have been similarly unsuccessful since the election. Sarah Palin’s bizarre trajectory, culminating in her surprise resignation from the Alaska governorship, has only made culture war politics appear even more out of touch. And culture warriors’ shrill attacks on Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor have conspicuously failed to turn public opinion against her.

Is this just a temporary breathing spell in the culture wars due to the sudden spike in concern about other issues—first Iraq, then the economy—or is a fundamental shift in our politics taking place? I believe the latter is the case since, as this report establishes, ongoing demographic shifts have seriously eroded the mass base for culture wars politics and will continue to erode this base in the future. That means that the advantage conservatives can gain from culture wars politics will steadily diminish and, consequently, so will conservatives’ incentive to engage in such politics.

There are numerous examples of how demographic change is undermining the culture wars. First, Millennials—the generation with birth years 1978 to 2000—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. The number of voting age Millennials will increase by about 4.5 million a year between now and 2018, and the number of Millennials who are eligible voters will increase by about 4 million a year. The 2020 presidential election will be the first where all Millennials will have reached voting age, and at that point the generation will be 103 million strong and have about 90 million eligible voters. Those 90 million Millennial eligible voters will represent just under 40 percent of America’s eligible voters in that year.

Second, the culturally conservative white working class has been declining rapidly as a proportion of the electorate for years. Exit polls show that the proportion of white working-class voters—scoring just 46.3 out of a 100 on the Progressive Studies Program comprehensive 10-item progressive cultural index covering topics ranging from religion, abortion, and homosexuality to race, immigration, and the family—is down 15 points since 1988, while the proportion of far more culturally progressive white college graduate voters (53.3 on the index) is up 4 points, and the proportion of minority voters (54.7 on the index) is up 11 points. State after state since 1988 has replicated this general pattern—a sharp decline in the share of white working-class voters accompanied by increases in the shares of minority voters and, in most cases, of increasingly progressive white college graduate voters.

Other demographic trends that will undermine the culture warriors include the growth of culturally progressive groups such as single women, and college-educated women and professionals, as well as increasing religious diversity. Unaffiliated or secular voters are hugely progressive on cultural issues and it is they—not white evangelical Protestants—who are the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States.

These demographic trends are having their greatest effects in America’s metropolitan areas, especially the largest ones, and it is here that the culture wars are dying down the fastest. Residents in metro areas that have a population greater than 1 million, which contain 54 percent of the U.S. population, scored 53.6 on the Progressive Studies Program’s cultural index, while residents in metro areas with between 250,000 and 1 million in population—another 20 percent of the population—scored 51 on the index. In contrast, small town rural residents scored 45.4, and deep rural residents scored just 44.6. These cultural leanings are one important reason why America’s populous metros have been moving so heavily toward progressives. For full details on this shift, see the Progressive Studies Program’s updated [New Progressive America map](#), which provides trend data on America’s top 175 metros, and my companion report, [“America’s Progressive Metros.”](#)

Nowhere is the influence of demographic change clearer than on gay marriage. Millennials are so much more favorable to legalizing gay marriage than older generations that, by sometime in the next decade, there will be majority public support for legalizing gay marriage as

Millennials fully enter the electorate and take the place of much older, far more conservative voters. Other areas where big demographic effects can be observed are on gender roles and family values, and on race, where rising demographic groups' proclivities will tilt the country even further toward tolerance, nontraditionalism, and respect for diversity.

Immigration is another issue where demographic change will mitigate culture war conflict. For quite a while, polls have been showing public support for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship, and a relative lack of enthusiasm for an enforcement-only approach. That support should grow over time, as should positive feelings about immigrants and immigration, since the white working class, which has relatively negative feelings in this area, is being supplanted by groups such as Hispanics, white college graduates, and professionals, whose feelings about immigration are far more positive. And then there is the rise of the Millennial generation. About three quarters (73 percent) of 18- to 29-year-old Millennials supported giving illegal immigrants “the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements” in an April 2009 *Washington Post/ABC News* poll, which is 31 points higher than support among seniors.

Demographic changes are generally reducing the salience of culture wars issues to politics, even when they are not shifting the distribution of public views. That is the case with abortion. Millennials want to see a smaller role for religiously motivated social views—64 percent in the PSP youth survey say “religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice, and peace and less on opposing abortion or gay rights.” This will reduce the influence of conservative abortion views on politics. So will the rise of Hispanics, whose lack of interest in voting on the basis of abortion has been well documented.

The culture wars, far from coming back, are likely coming to an end as a defining aspect of our politics. This is good news for progressives, both because tolerance and equal rights will increasingly be the ethos of the country and because progressives will increasingly be able to make their case on critical policy issues without significant interference from “hot-button” social issues promoted by conservatives.

The demographics of the culture wars' decline

The decline of the culture wars is nicely encapsulated in a finding from the 2009 Pew Values survey. That survey constructed a five-item social conservatism index using items on homosexuality, women's roles, the nature of good and evil, and family and marriage, and found that the index has dropped from 3.0 to 2.4 between 1987 and 2009—where 5 is conservative responses on all items. Put another way, 62 percent gave three or more conservative responses to these items in 1987, compared to 46 percent today.

Demographic trends have been a big contributor to this decline and, as these shifts continue, they will produce further decline in the levels of most conservative cultural views. Moreover, even where conservative cultural views remain, they will decline in political salience, since the rising demographic groups typically do not vote on the basis of such views.

The rise of the Millennial generation

Millennials—the generation with birth years 1978 to 2000—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. Reflecting these views, Millennials were the least conservative generation as measured by Pew's five-item social conservatism index—2.1 on a scale of 0 to 5, compared to a range of 2.4 to 3.5 for older generations.

CAP's Progressive Studies Program's ideology survey similarly found that 18- to 29-year-old Millennials were the most progressive generation by far on a comprehensive 10-item progressive cultural index covering topics ranging from religion, abortion, and homosexuality to race, immigration, and the family. Each item on this index had a 0-10 point range, with the most progressive response on each item receiving 10 points and the most conservative response receiving zero points¹. Millennials scored 56.6 out of 100 on the index, compared to a range of 46.4 to 52.9 for older generations.

Millennials' progressive cultural leanings are already having a large effect on damping down the culture wars. That effect will only increase as more of this generation enters adulthood. Between now and 2018, the number of voting age Millennials will increase by about 4.5 million a year, and the number of Millennials who are eligible voters will

Millennials

generally display little interest in fighting over the divisive social issues of the past.

TABLE 1

Millennial voting-age population, eligible voters and estimated actual voters, 2008–2020

Year	Millennial voting-age population	Millennial eligible voters	Millennial percent of eligible voters	Estimated millennial actual voters	Estimated millennial percent of actual voters
2008	55 million	48 million	23	25 million	20
2012	74 million	64 million	29	35 million	26
2016	93 million	81 million	36	46 million	33
2020	103 million	90 million	39	52 million	36

increase by about 4 million a year. There will be 103 million Millennials in 2020—the first presidential election where all Millennials will have reached voting age—and about 90 million of them will be eligible voters. Those 90 million Millennial eligible voters will represent just under 40 percent of total eligible voters in the country.

The diversity of this generation is also important. 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. 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. The high and increasing proportion of minorities among Millennial adults contributes to Millennials’ progressive cultural profile. Black and especially Hispanic Millennials score higher on the progressive cultural index than white Millennials—55.7 and 61.6, respectively, compared to 55.1—and far higher than the population as a whole.

But it is worth stressing that white Millennials, while not as culturally progressive as their minority counterparts, are still much more progressive than the overall population. Both white college graduate (56.1 on the PSP index) and white working-class Millennials (54.2) are more culturally progressive than older white college-graduate (53.5) and especially white working-class (45.6) adults.² The difference between white working-class Millennials and older generations of the white working class is particularly important since it suggests that the white working class as a whole will become significantly less culturally conservative as culturally progressive white working-class Millennials replace conservative older white working-class voters in the electorate. This will severely undercut the popular appeal of culture wars politics, since this segment of the population has provided the bulk of support for such politics.

The decline of the white working class

It’s not just that the culturally conservative white working class will become less culturally conservative over time. Even more important is that this group has been declining rapidly as a proportion of the electorate. According to exit polls, the proportion of white

TABLE 2

Change in shares of minority, white college graduate and white working-class voters by state, 1988-2008

State	Share of voters		
	Minorities	White college graduates	White working class
California	19	-2	-18
Connecticut	14	2	-17
Florida	12	4	-17
Illinois	9	6	-17
Indiana	5	8	-14
Iowa	6	12	-18
Maryland	17	-3	-15
Massachusetts	15	0	-14
Michigan	2	1	-5
Minnesota	6	11	-17
Mississippi	13	7	-21
Missouri	8	8	-15
Nevada	19	4	-24
New Jersey	7	5	-14
New Mexico	11	5	-17
New York	14	3	-17
North Carolina	6	0	-6
Ohio	6	8	-15
Oregon	5	9	-14
Pennsylvania	8	16	-25
Texas	9	7	-17
Vermont	1	12	-14
Washington	7	8	-16
Wisconsin	5	6	-11

Source: Authors' analysis of 1988 CBS/New York Times and 2008 NEP state exit polls.

Note: Only states where both 1988 and 2008 data are available are shown.

working-class voters—who score just 46.3 on the PSP progressive cultural index—is down 15 points since 1988, while the proportion of far more culturally progressive white college-graduate voters (53.3 on the index) is up 4 points, and the proportion of minority voters (54.7 on the index) is up 11 points. State after state since 1988 has replicated this general pattern—a sharp decline in the share of white working-class voters accompanied by increases in the shares of minority voters and, in most cases, increasingly progressive white college-graduate voters.

Consider these results from contested states in the 2008 election. The share of white working-class voters in Florida has declined 17 points since 1988, while the share of white college graduates has risen 4 points, and the minority share is up by 12 points.

Even more spectacularly, white working-class voters are down 25 points in Pennsylvania over the time period, while white college-graduate voters are up 16 points and minorities have increased by 8 points.

Moving to the Midwest, the share of white working-class voters in Ohio fell by 15 points between 1988 and 2008, while white college graduates rose by 8 points and minorities by 6 points. White working-class voters in Iowa are down 18 points, while white college graduates are up 12 points, and minorities are up 6 points. In Minnesota, white working-class voters have fallen by 17 points, while white college-graduate voters have increased by 11 points and minorities by 6 points. In Indiana, the share of white working-class voters is down by 14 points over the time period, while white college-graduate and minority voters are up 6 points and 9 points, respectively. And in Missouri, which Obama lost by only one-eighth of a percentage point, white working-class voters have declined by 15 points, while both white college-graduate and minority voters have risen by 8 points.

In the Southwest, the changes in Nevada have been remarkable. White working-class voters are down 24 points since the 1988 election, while white college-graduate voters are up 4 points and minorities an amazing 19 points. New Mexico has also seen big changes, if not quite as dramatic as in Nevada. The white working-class vote share in that state has fallen 17 points, while white college-graduate and minority voters have increased by 5 and 11 points respectively.

In the Northwest, both Oregon and Washington have seen substantial shifts that follow the general pattern. White working-class voters in Oregon have declined by 14 points since 1988, while white college-graduate voters are up by 9 points and minority voters by 5 points. And in Washington, white working-class voters are down 16 points over the time period, while white college-graduate and minority voters have risen by 8 and 7 points respectively.

These shifts tell us a great deal about why culture wars politics have been losing their bite and failed to save conservatives in the last election, including and especially in contested states. The decline of the white working class is rapidly shrinking the mass base for such politics. Moreover, it is inevitable that the white working class will continue to decline. The shrinking white population share combined with continued educational upgrading among whites ensures that outcome. The only question is the rate of decline.

Exit polls over the last two decades have shown a decrease of three-quarters of a percentage point per year in the white working-class share of voters. A slowdown in educational upgrading among whites could certainly reduce this rate of decline, though this has so far not happened. But even if the rate falls to half a percentage point per year, that's quite enough to chip away significantly at the white working-class share of voters every election cycle. These seemingly modest decreases add up over time. By 2020, for example, the white working-class share would be 6 points lower than it was in the last election—even under this reduced rate of decline.

Toward a majority-minority nation

Minorities are much more culturally progressive than whites (54.7 versus 49.2 on the PSP cultural index). This includes blacks (53.3), Asians (55.2), and Hispanics (58), who are the most culturally progressive of all the race-ethnic groups.³ What's more, even where minorities do retain some conservative cultural beliefs, they do not vote on that basis.

And minorities are the most rapidly growing part of the U.S. population. The minority share of voters in the national exit poll rose from 23 percent in 2004 to 26 percent in 2008. That share was just 15 percent back in 1988. That is a rise of 11 percentage points over the 20-year time period, or about half a percentage point a year.

There is also no sign that growth in minority voters is likely to slow. The percent of minority voters grew between 2000 and 2006 in every one of 10 battleground states studied by William Frey and Ruy Teixeira⁴—Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Virginia—including spectacular growth of a percentage point a year in Nevada. More generally, minority populations have grown by 19 percent in this decade, accounting for more than four-fifths of all U.S. population growth.⁵

Minority growth, in turn, has been mostly driven by growth in the Hispanic population. Hispanics have grown by 32 percent since 2000 and account for about half of U.S. population growth this decade.⁶ Of course, it is true that Hispanics' population strength is not currently matched by its voting strength, due to the large proportion of Hispanics who aren't citizens and therefore can't vote or are simply too young to vote. As a result of these factors, only 39 percent of Hispanics overall are eligible to vote, compared to 77 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 66 percent of African Americans.⁷

Still, the proportion of Hispanics among the voting electorate has grown steadily and will continue to grow. Only 2 percent of voters in the early 1990s were Hispanic; that portion rose to 9 percent in 2008, and within 10 years may approach the level of black voters, whose share of the population is growing very slowly as a proportion of actual voters.⁸

Asians are the other significant contributor to minority growth. In terms of rates of growth, Asians were America's fastest-growing minority group in the 1990s—faster even than Hispanics, growing 59.4 percent in the 1990s compared to Hispanics' 57.9 percent growth. And they have not been far behind in this decade, either, with 30-percent growth compared to Hispanics' 32 percent.⁹ Asians right now make up 5 percent of the population and about 2 percent of voters.¹⁰ Both figures will increase in the next 10 years, due to this group's fast rate of growth. But because they start from a much smaller base than Hispanics, their effect on the population and voting pool will be far more limited.

Looking more long term, we are rapidly approaching being a majority-minority nation. People tend to think of 2050 as the year America will become majority minority. But it's

closer than that—the latest U.S. Census projections put the tipping point dates at 2042 for the entire population and at 2023 for the population under 18. By 2050, the United States will actually be 54-percent minority. Four states and 303 counties are already majority minority. These totals will grow with every passing year, making it more and more likely that the average American will either live in such a state or county or live right next to one.

Hispanics, above all, will drive minority long-term growth. Their numbers will triple to 133 million by 2050, from 47 million today, while the numbers of non-Hispanic whites will remain essentially flat. And as a percentage of the population, Hispanics will double from 15 percent to 30 percent. Asians will also come close to doubling, going from 5 percent to 9 percent. Blacks will grow only from 14 percent to 15 percent of the population, making them only half the size of the Hispanic population by 2050. Reflecting the growth of non-black minorities, the percentage of foreign-born members of the population will also grow. About one in five Americans will be foreign born by 2050, up from one in eight today.

White college graduates

White college graduates are far more culturally progressive than white working-class voters (53.3 versus 46.3 on the PSP cultural index), and they are a growing constituency, especially in the suburbs of America's most dynamic metropolitan areas. Their share of voters has gone up by 4 points since 1988, even as the share of white voters has declined overall.

Recent trends suggest that white college graduates will continue to increase as a share of voters in the immediate future, which should benefit progressives. The percentage of white college-graduate voters grew in every one of the 10 battleground states studied by Frey and Teixeira between 2000 and 2006, with the highest growth rate recorded in Pennsylvania, interestingly enough.

Yet the durability of this trend is open to debate, unlike the minority voter trend. The basic issue is how long the white adult population's educational upgrading will continue to outweigh the decline of whites overall, producing a net increase in the white college-graduate share of voters. Educational upgrading of the white adult population depends on two factors. The first is whether and at what rate young whites' educational credentials—in this case, attaining a four-year degree or more—are increasing. The second is the replacement of older, less-educated whites in the white population by younger, more educated whites.

Census Bureau data indicates that both factors continue to be relevant—the educational credentials of younger whites are still rising,¹¹ albeit more slowly than in the 1990s, and generational replacement is still exerting significant upward pressure on education credentials. It therefore seems likely that the share of white college graduates as a portion of the adult population will continue to increase for quite some time,¹² which, amplified by this group's relatively high turnout, should result in significant ongoing increases in the white college-graduate share of voters.

White college graduates are far more culturally progressive than white working-class voters, and they are a growing constituency.

Moreover, since public policy can potentially boost college completion rates—and there is plenty of economic room to do so, as Massachusetts Institute of Technology labor economist Paul Osterman points out¹³—these projected increases in white college-graduate voters could be even stronger than they appear today.

Single and college-educated women

Single and college-educated women are both strongly progressive on cultural issues (54.3 and 55.6 respectively on the PSP cultural index). Single women now account for almost half, 47 percent, of adult women, up from 38 percent in 1970.¹⁴ Their current size in the voter pool—more than a quarter of eligible voters¹⁵—is nearly the size of white evangelical Protestants, conservatives’ largest base group. And since the current growth rate of single women is so fast—double that of married women—the proportion of single women in the voting pool will continue to increase.¹⁶

College-educated women are also a rapidly growing population group. They have more than tripled, from just 8 percent of the 25-and-older female population in 1970 to 28 percent today.¹⁷ This trend should continue in the future due to continued educational upgrading and because college attendance and completion rates are increasingly skewed toward women. More young women are attending college than young men right now: 56 percent of today’s undergraduates are women, compared to 44 percent who are men. Women now earn 170,000 more bachelor’s degrees each year than men do.

Professionals

Professionals are another growing constituency that is strongly progressive on cultural issues (57.1 on the PSP cultural index). Professionals made up only about 7 percent of the workforce in the 1950s. But the professional class has expanded as the United States has moved away from a blue-collar, industrial economy toward a post-industrial one that produces more ideas and services. Today professionals constitute just under 17 percent of the workforce. And in another 10 years, they will be 18 percent to 19 percent of the workforce.

Their very high turnout rates make them an even larger percent of voters—and not just of employed voters, but voters as a whole. They account for about 21 percent of voters nationwide. And they are likely one-quarter of the electorate in many Northeastern, Intermountain West, and Far Western states, with even higher representation in these states’ most dynamic metropolitan areas.

Increasing religious diversity

Unaffiliated or secular voters are hugely progressive on cultural issues (63.7 on the PSP cultural index). And they are the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States—not white evangelical Protestants. The percentage of adults reporting no religious affiliation almost tripled from 1944 to 2004, rising from 5 percent to 14 percent. Projections indicate that by 2024 about 20 percent of adults will be unaffiliated.¹⁸

This trend, combined with growth among non-Christian faiths and race-ethnic trends, will ensure that in very short order we will no longer be a white Christian nation. Even today, only about 55 percent of adults are white Christians, and that figure will be down to 45 percent by 2024.¹⁹ That means that the United States will cease to be a white Christian nation by the 2016 presidential election—or the one in 2020 at the outside. Moreover, by 2040, white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population, and conservative white Christians only about a third of that—a minority within a minority. The shock troops of the culture wars will simply not have the social weight to cause much turmoil in the larger society.

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Culture wars issues

Gay marriage

Views on gay marriage, perhaps the most contentious culture wars issue in recent years, are being heavily influenced by ongoing demographic changes. Support for gay marriage is averaging around 41 percent right now and has been increasing at about a percentage point a year.

The key demographic contributor to this trend is generational change. May Gallup data found 59-37 support for legalizing gay marriage from 18- to 29-year-old Millennials, compared to 57-40 opposition among 30- to 49-year-olds, 61-37 opposition among 50- to 64-year-olds, and 66-32 opposition among those 65 and over. An April *Washington Post*/ABC News poll similarly found that 66 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds supported legalizing gay marriage, compared to 48 percent of adults ages 30 to 64 and only 28 percent of those 65 and over. Consistent with recent trends, a simple generational replacement analysis suggests that by the time the last Millennials reach voting age in 2018, if not before, a majority of adult Americans will favor allowing gay marriage.

Shifting views on this issue, particularly among the younger generation, have not gone unnoticed by conservative strategists. They rightly fear that conservatives' emphasis on opposing gay marriage is out of step with where the country is going and will contribute to the loss of an entire generation to progressives. Steve Schmitt, chief strategist in the McCain campaign, has argued that conservatives are in danger of losing younger voters unless they come to understand how issues such as gay marriage do or do not resonate with them. Schmitt warned against "being defined by positions on issues that I don't believe are among our core values, and that put us at odds with what I expect will become, over time, if not a consensus view, then the view of a substantial majority of voters."

Of course, this does not mean that conflicts over gay marriage will die out overnight. There will continue to be attempts on the state level to keep gay marriage illegal through the initiative process. Such initiatives have met with considerable success, including the recent passage of Proposition 8 in the progressive state of California. Yet a simple regression model developed by Nate Silver suggests that such initiatives have been losing support at the rate of roughly 2 percentage points a year. This time trend, combined with a

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couple of other variables on state religiosity, indicates that California would fail to support such an initiative by next year and only a handful of Deep South states should be expected to support gay marriage bans by 2016.

Fights will continue on the gay marriage issue, but the outcome of these struggles is not really in doubt looking 10 years or so down the road. And neither is the decreasing usefulness of this issue to the conservative culture warriors.

Gender roles and family values

If gay marriage is on its way to acceptance, nontraditional households and gender roles are already there. Consider how much our society has changed since the early 1970s. In the early 1970s three-quarters of American adults were married²⁰. That proportion declined to 56 percent in the 2000s. The average age of first marriage has gone up over the same time period, from the early twenties to 27 years old for men and 25 years old for women. And the divorce rate has doubled. Married couples with children now account for fewer than one in four households, a share that has been cut in half since 1960. And the share of children being raised by continuously married couples declined from 73 percent in 1972 to 50 percent in 2006, while the proportion being raised by single parents increased from 5 percent to 16 percent.

At the same time, there has been a huge decline in the traditional gender role family, where the husband works and the wife keeps house. Fifty-three percent of all married couples fit that definition in 1972, but just 26 percent do today. And the proportion of married couples where both work outside the home has risen to 52 percent from 32 percent over the same time period. The traditional gender role family has even declined among married couples with children to 32 percent from 60 percent, while the modern arrangement has increased to 62 percent from 33 percent.

These transformations in gender roles have had a tremendous effect on public attitudes. Gender equality is rapidly becoming a nonissue, especially with the rising Millennial generation. The 2008 National Election study asked respondents to place themselves on a 7-point scale relative to the following statements: “Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. Others feel that women’s place is in the home.” One represented the strongest support for women’s equal role and 7 was the strongest support for women’s place being in the home. Two-thirds of Millennials selected 1, the strongest support for women’s equal role, and 90 percent of Millennials picked 1, 2, or 3 on the 7-point scale, indicating they felt closer to the equal role statement than to the women’s place in the home statement. Both figures are higher than for any other generation.

If gay marriage is on its way to acceptance, nontraditional households and gender roles are already there.

Another NES question in 2004 asked whether government should see to it that women receive equal treatment on the job—Millennials (18- to 26-year-olds in their 2004 survey) were significantly stronger than other generations in the women’s equality direction; 85 percent of Millennials felt that government should do this, compared to 68 percent of Generation Xers and 71 percent of Boomers.

Millennials are truly responding to the lived reality of their generation—gender equality is a “fact on the ground,” as it were. Indeed, women are not only equal in Millennials’ experience, but frequently taking the lead. For example, today girls tend to outperform boys in elementary and secondary school, getting higher grades, following more rigorous academic programs, and participating in advanced placement classes at higher rates. They also now outnumber boys in student government, honor societies, school newspapers, and debating clubs.

In terms of higher education, women now earn 170,000 more bachelor’s degrees each year than men do. And while fewer than 10 percent of medical students and 4 percent of law students were women in 1970, women today are roughly half of the nation’s law and medical students, not to mention 55 percent of the nation’s professionals as a whole.²¹

The evolution away from traditional family forms and family values will continue unabated in the future. This is because the trends away from tradition reinforce one another—nontraditional family forms promote nontraditional values and vice versa—and because younger generations such as the Millennials are so much more likely to embrace non-traditional values than older generations. This dynamic will push most family values in a nontraditional direction for many years to come. The political appeal of positions based on traditional values will therefore steadily diminish in the future.

Race and diversity

Conflicts around race have certainly not disappeared. But they have been dramatically damped down, as the election of our nation’s first African-American president suggests. There is no longer a debate about racial equality, and taboos such as interracial dating are not taken seriously anymore, particularly among the younger generation. Indeed there is essentially universal acceptance (94 percent) of interracial dating and marriage among Millennials.²² Back in 1987-88, just 56 percent of white 18- to 25-year-old Gen Xers agreed with this idea.²³

And Millennials today are twice as likely to completely disagree with the statement “I don’t have much in common with people of other races” as Gen Xers were in the late 1980s.²⁴ Race is “no big deal” for Millennials, an attitude that will increasingly characterize the society as a whole as the Millennials age and our march toward a majority-minority nation continues.

But there is one issue around race where there is unresolved debate, and that is affirmative action—not so much as a general concept, which the public supports, but as a spe-

cific policy that involves preferences in hiring, promotions, or college admissions. When phrased in this way, the public is strongly opposed. The most recent Pew Values survey found that just 31 percent said, “we should make every effort to improve the position of blacks and other minorities, even if it means giving them preferential treatment,” compared to 65 percent who disagreed. And in an early June Quinnipiac poll, only 36 percent supported the continuation of affirmative action programs that give preferences to blacks and other minorities in hiring, promotion, and college admissions, while 56 percent were in favor of abolishing such programs.

The Pew figure is only slightly higher than it was about 20 years ago. And there is a huge gap between blacks and whites on the issue, with 58 percent of blacks favoring this approach compared to 22 percent of whites.

The Millennial generation does feel differently about this issue. The Pew survey showed that 44 percent of Millennials support preferential treatment as part of the effort to improve minorities’ position, which is far higher than among other generations. If they maintain this position over time—Gen X did not, starting out relatively supportive of preferential treatment and then falling off in support as the generation aged—that would help increase support for affirmative action programs, as will the continuing rise in the Hispanic population. But, based on past trends, we should not expect rapid changes in overall public opinion on this issue.

More important have been a variety of court decisions and referenda that have removed the legal basis for such programs and seem unlikely to be overturned anytime soon. This has made the issue moot in many areas of the country and certainly taken the edge off the controversy. Colleges and employers have concurrently shifted their focus to special recruitment efforts designed to further affirmative action goals, but without specific and quantifiable preferences. The issue has shifted away from the front lines of the culture wars as a result of these policies combined with the decline of the chief constituency for whom the issue was salient (the white working class) and the rise of Millennials, for whom the issue is not salient (even where they oppose such programs).

Immigration

If affirmative action has faded as an issue, another racially tinged issue—immigration—has raised in profile. But to what end? The striking thing in recent years is how poorly it’s worked for conservatives as a culture wars issue. It failed for conservatives in 2006, where candidates with hard-line enforcement-only immigration stances lost almost all competitive races where immigration was a high-profile issue.²⁵ It failed for them in 2007 when Virginia conservatives played the immigration card in campaigns for the State House and Senate only to lose ground in both. And it failed in 2008, where conservatives lost 20 of 22 battleground races where they attempted to use immigration as a wedge issue against progressive candidates.²⁶

The reason for the failure of a hard-line anti-immigration stance is simple: It's not popular among the general public who view it as punitive and impractical, and it is less popular still among rising demographic groups in the country, who are particularly sympathetic to immigrants and immigration reform. Polls have for quite some time been showing public support for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship and a relative lack of enthusiasm for an enforcement-only approach.

For example, a May 2006 Gallup poll asked: "Which comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States? Should the government deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time?" Sixty-one percent of the public selected the option of allowing illegal immigrants to stay in the United States and possibly become citizens if they meet "certain requirements," compared to 15 percent who favored the limited-time option, and 21 percent who wanted to deport all illegal immigrants.

A March 2006 *Time* magazine poll similarly found that the public endorsed "allowing illegal immigrants now in this country to earn U.S. citizenship if they learn to speak English, have a job, and pay taxes" by a 78-21 margin. Another question, also from that *Time* poll, gave respondents this choice: "(1) Make illegal immigration a crime and not allow anyone who entered the country illegally to work or stay in the United States under any circumstances. OR (2) Allow illegal immigrants to get temporary work visas so the government can track them and allow them to earn permanent residence after six years if they learn English, pay a fine, pay any back taxes, and have no criminal record." That produced a 72-25 majority for the second option.

More recently, 61 percent in an April *Washington Post*/ABC News poll supported a program to allow illegal immigrants now living in the United States to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements, compared to 35 percent who opposed such a program. And in the just-released 2009 Pew Values Survey, 63 percent favored "providing a way for illegal immigrants currently in the country to gain legal citizenship if they pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs," compared to just 34 percent who are opposed. Both questions show more support for immigration reform than in 2007, despite the hard economic times, which might have been expected to promote increased hostility toward immigrants.

Support for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship tends to be higher, by and large, if it is presented as something illegal immigrants are required, not allowed, to do. A May 2009 Benenson Strategy Group poll for America's Voice found that 58 percent strongly support allowing illegal immigrants to apply for citizenship if they register with the government and meet certain requirements, including working, paying taxes, and

Polls have for quite some time been showing public support for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship and a relative lack of enthusiasm for an enforcement-only approach.

learning English. But that number jumped to 74 percent when the language was changed from “allowing” to “requiring.” This reflects the fact that the public’s chief concern about illegal immigrants is not cultural, but rather the possibility that they are using social and educational services without contributing to the support of these services.

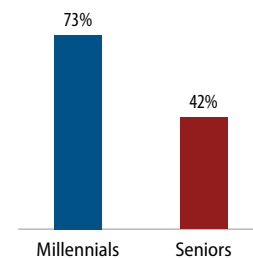
Public support for immigration reform is likely to grow over time, as are positive feelings about immigrants and immigration. The declining white working class, for example, agrees by 55-23 that, “immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs and abuse government benefits,” according to the PSP survey. But rising groups such as Hispanics (26 percent agree versus 58 percent disagree), white college graduates (35 percent agree versus 46 percent disagree), and professionals (23 percent agree versus 60 percent disagree) feel quite differently.

And then there is the Millennial generation, which has consistently demonstrated an open and positive attitude toward immigration. A 2006 Pew Gen Next poll found that 18- to 25-year-old Millennials, by 52-38, said immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talent, rather than are a burden on the country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care. This is compared to very narrow pluralities in this direction among Gen Xers and Boomers, and a 50-30 sentiment in the other direction among those 61 and over.

A 2004 Pew survey similarly found that 67 percent of 18- to 25-year-old Millennials thought the growing number of immigrants strengthens American society, and only 30 percent believed this trend threatens our customs and values—again, a much stronger positive sentiment than among any other generation. And in terms of immigration reform specifically, 2007 Pew data indicated that roughly two-thirds of Millennials support providing a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.²⁷ Consistent with this finding, 73 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Millennials supported giving illegal immigrants “the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements” in an April 2009 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll—31 points higher than support among seniors.

Generational divide on immigration

Support for giving illegal immigrants “the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements”



Abortion

The remarkable thing about public views on abortion is how stable they have been. Despite occasional findings that indicate change—most recently a May Gallup finding that more Americans were calling themselves “pro life”—such findings are quickly superseded by others that indicate stability.²⁸ Thirty-six percent of respondents in a June CBS/*New York Times* poll said abortion should be “generally available,” 41 percent said it should be available but with stricter limits, and 21 percent wanted it prohibited. CBS/*New York Times* asked this question 16 times between 1993 and 2008, receiving an average response of 36 percent generally available/39 percent available with stricter limits/22 percent prohibited.²⁹ These figures are essentially identical to the most recent response.

There are also no signs that support is growing for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, conservative culture warriors' chief goal. If anything, there may be increased opposition to doing so. A CNN poll in 2006 found that 62 percent said they would not like to see the Supreme Court overturn its *Roe v. Wade* decision; and in May 2009 68 percent of respondents to the CNN poll were opposed to a Supreme Court reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

There is little evidence that the abortion issue is cutting to the advantage of conservative candidates right now. In fact, it may be the opposite. As Alan Abramowitz has shown,³⁰ voters who were generally conservative, but progressive on abortion rights, had a significant tendency to defect to the progressive candidate in the 2008 election. But there was not a significant tendency for voters who were generally progressive, but conservative on abortion rights, to defect to the conservative candidate.

Demographic change is not likely to substantially change public views on abortion. Millennials, for example, are somewhat less likely to favor permitting abortion in some specific circumstances, but more likely to support abortion as a woman's right. The net of these effects does not seem likely to change the public's stance on abortion much one way or the other.

But the rise of Millennials and other demographic groups is likely to have an effect on the salience of conservative abortion views to politics. As noted above, these views may already be fading as an influence on political behavior. And Millennials, who wish to see a smaller role for religiously motivated social views—64 percent in the PSP youth survey say “religious faith should focus more on promoting tolerance, social justice, and peace and less on opposing abortion or gay rights”—will further reduce the influence of conservative abortion views on politics. Ditto for Hispanics, whose lack of interest in voting on this basis is well documented.³¹

Stem cell research

Stem cell research is an issue closely related to abortion, at least in the minds of conservative culture warriors. And there is no doubt that conservatives had high hopes that this issue would break in their favor and provide a fruitful line of attack against progressives. But that is not at all the way things turned out.

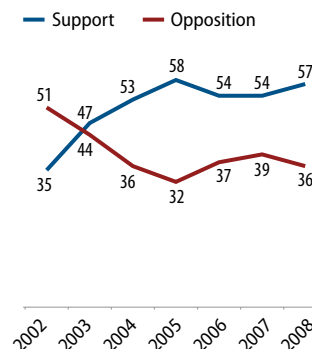
In fact, public support for stem cell research has increased substantially since Bush raised its profile by issuing a directive banning federal funding for research using new stem cell lines. A 2002 Virginia Commonwealth University survey found that 35 percent favored “medical research that uses stem cells from human embryos” and 51 percent were opposed. Support rose to 47 percent in favor and 44 percent opposed in 2003. Since then, all VCU surveys have showed majority support for stem cell research: 53-36 in 2004; 58-32 in 2005; 54-37 in 2006; 54-39 in 2007; and 57-36 in 2008.

Increase in opposition to overturning *Roe v. Wade*

Percent of respondents opposed to a Supreme Court reversal of *Roe v. Wade*



Support for stem cell research surpasses opposition



Other data confirm the public's generally favorable attitude toward embryonic stem cell research. A mid-January 2007 CBS News poll found that 65 percent said they approve of "medical research using embryonic stem cells," compared to just 25 percent who disapproved. And 61 percent in an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll around the same time said they support embryonic stem cell research, with only 31 percent in opposition.

If embryonic stem cell research is put in the context of the type of diseases it might help cure, support is even more overwhelming. Here's how NBC News and *The Wall Street Journal* posed the question in late June 2004:

There is a type of medical research that involves using special cells, called stem cells, that are obtained from human embryos. These human embryo stem cells are then used to generate new cells and tissue that could help treat or cure many diseases. I am now going to read you two statements about this type of research.

Statement A: Those OPPOSED to this type of research say that it crosses an ethical line by using cells from potentially viable human embryos, when this research can be done on animals or by using other types of cells.

Statement B: Those IN FAVOR of this research say that it could lead to breakthrough cures for many diseases, such as cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and spinal cord injuries, and this research uses only embryos that otherwise would be discarded.

Who do you agree with more: those opposed or those in favor?

Posing the question this way produced a 71-22 split in favor of embryonic stem cell research. A similar question in a June 2008 *Time* poll produced a similarly lopsided 73-19 split in favor of stem cell research.

The stem cell research debate has largely revolved around the level of government funding permitted for embryonic stem cell research. Given the views summarized above, it should come as no surprise that the public generally favors funding embryonic stem cell research. In an early May 2007 CNN poll, 53 percent said that the federal government should fund research using "newly created stem cells obtained from human embryos," compared to 41 percent who opposed such funding. A late October 2006 *Newsweek* poll found that 50 percent favored "using federal tax dollars to fund medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos," with only 37 percent opposed. An early August 2005 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll also found that 56 percent thought "the federal government should ... fund research that would use newly created stem cells obtained from human embryos," while 40 percent disagreed. Finally, the public in an early August 2004 Annenberg survey favored "federal funding of research on diseases like Alzheimer's using stem cells taken from human embryos" by 64-28.

The Bush administration, of course, took quite a different position, seeking to restrict such funding as much as possible. Yet the public has consistently favored easing these restrictions and expanding current funding. In a mid-April 2007 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll, 60 percent said they favored either no restrictions (22 percent) or easing restrictions (38 percent) on embryonic stem cell research, compared to 36 percent who favored the current restrictions (20 percent) or no funding at all (16 percent). A mid-January 2007 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 59 percent supported “increasing federal funding for embryonic stem cell research,” while just 32 percent opposed such increased funding. In an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll around the same time, the public, by 55-38, supported “loosening the current restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.” An AP poll in mid-December 2006 found that a 56-41 majority favored easing restrictions on using federal money for embryonic stem cell research. And the public endorsed “expanding federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, which is the practice of conducting scientific research on cells extracted from human embryos in an attempt to find cures or treatments for diseases” by 68-27 in a late July 2006 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey.

President Obama has now reversed Bush’s directive restricting stem cell research, consistent with the public’s wishes. Conservative culture warriors were not happy about this but in the end there was nothing they could do about it. And the issue is not likely to give culture warriors any more traction in the future, since rising demographic groups are strongly unsympathetic to their viewpoint.

Guns

One ray of hope for culture warriors is the guns issue. Support for stricter gun control laws has declined about 10 points since 2007 according to recent data from CBS/*New York Times*, ABC/*Washington Post*, and CNN. Here, at least, there are some signs of increased conservatism. Demographic data also do not suggest that we will see rising support for more gun control laws over time.

But this does not mean people want to loosen gun control laws. Just 15 percent wanted to do so in the CNN poll, and the figure is even smaller for laws on handguns. Instead, their focus is on stricter enforcement of existing laws. Most Americans (61 percent) in the 2009 ABC/*Washington Post* poll now favor stricter enforcement of existing laws rather than stricter gun control laws (27 percent) as a way of reducing gun violence.

This evolving consensus makes it less likely that tighter gun control laws will be on the legislative agenda, and more likely, as we have seen for several years, that gun control advocates will focus on implementation and carefully targeted modifications of existing laws. Thus, paradoxically, less enthusiasm for new gun control laws may actually make it harder for conservatives to use this issue for culture wars purposes.

Conclusion

The culture wars as we have known them are likely coming to an end. Demographic change is undercutting both the level and salience of conservative cultural views, thereby reducing the effectiveness of such politics. That will not prevent conservative activists around particular culture wars issues from continuing to press their case. Indeed, reaction to their current desperate plight may lead them to intensify their efforts in some states, especially where demographic change has been slow or where local right-wing culture war institutions retain strength. But there will be diminishing incentives for politicians to take up these causes for the very simple reason that they are losers.

The winding down of the culture wars will also not stop those with progressive and conservative cultural views from clustering at the progressive and conservative ends of politics. It will still be the case that voters will be attracted to the political “home” where they feel culturally most comfortable. Conservatives will attempt to capitalize on this by giving a cultural overtone to noncultural issues such as taxes and government spending. But the aggressive use of specifically cultural issues to divide voters will become less and less common. And the country will be a better place for it.

Endnotes

- 1 For more detail on this index, including exact question wording, see John Halpin and Karl Agne, "The State of American Political Ideology, 2009" (Washington, D.C.: Progressive Studies Program, Center for American Progress, March, 2009).
- 2 The pattern remains the same if analysis is confined to 25- to 29-year-old white Millennials to eliminate the problem of mixing students on track for a four-year degree with other white noncollege youth.
- 3 Only a small part of the difference between whites and Hispanics on this index could be accounted for on the one immigration question in the battery. Even without that question, Hispanics still scored much higher than whites on this index.
- 4 William Frey and Ruy Teixeira, "The Political Geography of Pennsylvania: Not Another Rustbelt State" (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, April 2008); William Frey and Ruy Teixeira, "The Political Geography of the Intermountain West: The New Swing Region" (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, August 2008); William Frey and Ruy Teixeira, "The Political Geography of Ohio, Michigan and Missouri: Battlegrounds in the Heartland" (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, October 2008); William Frey and Ruy Teixeira, "The Political Geography of Virginia and Florida: Bookends of the New South" (Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, October 2008).
- 5 William Frey, "Race, Immigration, and America's Changing Electorate." In Ruy Teixeira, ed., *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2008) and author's analysis of Census Bureau population estimates by race.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Roberto Suro, Richard Fry, and Jeffrey Passel, "Hispanics and the 2004 Election: Population, Electorate, and Voters" (Pew Hispanic Center, June, 2005) and Frey, "Race, Immigration, and America's Changing Electorate."
- 8 Author's analysis of CPS and exit poll data.
- 9 Frey, "Race, Immigration, and America's Changing Electorate."
- 10 Author's analysis of CPS and exit poll data and Frey, "Race, Immigration, and America's Changing Electorate."
- 11 This is both because higher percentages of recent cohorts of 25- to 29-year-olds have attained a college degree and because some in these cohorts who have not attained a college degree by 25 to 29 complete the degree later in life.
- 12 This assessment is consistent with that of a Census Bureau study from the beginning of this decade. See Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Kurt J. Bauman, "Have We Reached the Top?: Educational Attainment Projections of the US Population," Census Bureau Population Division: Working Paper Series No. 43 (May, 2000), which predicted continued educational upgrading through 2028.
- 13 Paul Osterman, "College for All!: The Labor Market for College-Educated Workers" (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, August, 2008).
- 14 Author's analysis of Census Bureau marital status data.
- 15 Women's Voices, Women Vote, "Unmarried America" (2007).
- 16 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, "A New America: Unmarrieds Drive Political and Social Change" (October 31, 2007).
- 17 Author's analysis of Census Bureau educational attainment data.
- 18 John Green and E.J. Dionne Jr., "Religion and American Politics: More Secular, More Evangelical or Both?" In Ruy Teixeira, ed., *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2008).
- 19 Calculations based on author's analysis of data in Green and Dionne, "Religion and American Politics: More Secular, More Evangelical or Both?" The Green and Dionne data include a grab-bag of religions in their other faiths category, ranging from Jews and Muslims to Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses to Unitarians, Humanists, and Ethical Culture. Since these groups cannot be disaggregated from the Green and Dionne data, they are all classified outside of the white Christian category.
- 20 Data in this and the next paragraph from Tom W. Smith, "Changes in Family Structure, Family Values and Politics, 1972-2006." In Ruy Teixeira, ed., *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2008).
- 21 Data in this paragraph from National Center for Education Statistics, *Condition of Education*; Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, "On the Pill: Changing the Course of Women's Education," Milken Institute Review, second quarter, 2001; Alvin P. Sanoff, "Competing Forces," *Prism*, October, 2005; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Occupations: 2000" (Census 2000 Brief, August 2003).
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- 23 Pew Research Center, "A Portrait of 'Gen Next'" (January 9, 2007).
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 See Joa Carlsson, "The Role of Immigration in 2006 Politics, Campaigns, and Elections," Immigrationpolicy.org, November, 2006.
- 26 America's Voice, "Republicans: Fenced in by Immigration" (December 2, 2008).
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- 28 For more on the stability of abortion attitudes, see John Sides, "Has the Public Become More Opposed to Abortion?" *Monkey Cage*, May 16, 2009 and Nate Silver, "Is Public Opinion Changing on Abortion?" *FiveThirtyEight*, May 14, 2009.
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- 30 Alan Abramowitz, "The Abortion Issue and Democratic Strategy," *The Democratic Strategist*, May 20, 2009.
- 31 Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, "2002 National Survey of Latinos" (December, 2002).

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