

THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MILLENNIALS

Hollie Russon Gilman
and Elizabeth Stokes

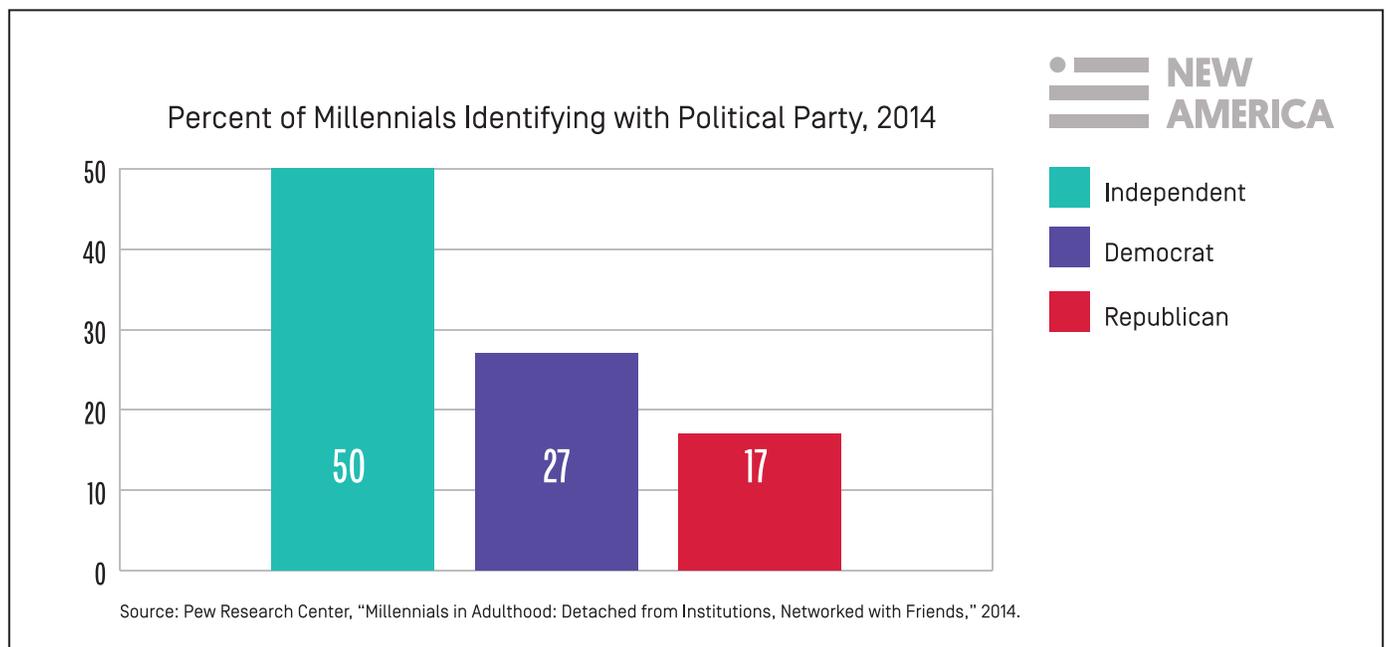
Millennials have come of age in a time of shifting landscapes and tumultuous change. Growing up in the Information Age, Millennials are empowered by information and demand transparency and authenticity. The explosion of customization and choice in the marketplace has contributed to a generation unhindered by brand loyalty. And as a cohort, Millennials have already confronted several major crises—from domestic terrorism to the Great Recession to climate change.

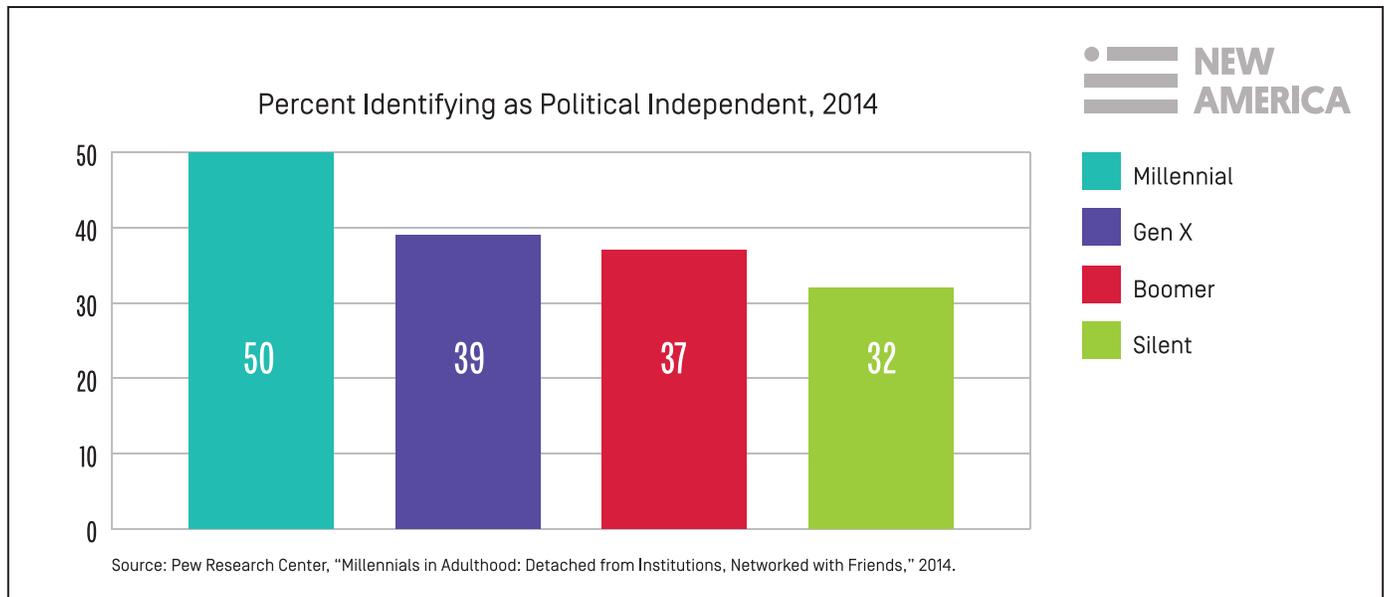
Millennials' unique historic experiences have shaped their relationship with politics and their communities. Given their sheer numbers, Millennials are a potentially powerful political force, yet they do not pursue traditional forms of civic engagement, such as voting, and are more likely to eschew party identity. Why is this? What real and perceived barriers to engagement exist? Despite their skepticism of old-school party politics, the generation is finding other and more accessible pathways to participate, most notably through volunteering, consumer activism, and civic uses of

social media. What are the consequences of pushing Millennials out of politics? What are the implications of alternative avenues of engagement? Most significantly, what is the relationship between current notions of Millennials' political engagement and the defining challenges of their time?

Current Conditions

Millennials have the potential to be a potent political force in our society. In sheer numbers, they will soon overtake Baby Boomers as the largest generational block. In the 2012 presidential election, 18 to 29 year olds made up over 21 percent of the eligible voting population.¹ Despite this, only 50 percent of these Millennials voted,² and an even smaller 23 percent are anticipated to vote in the upcoming 2014 midterm elections.³ According to a recent survey of likely Millennial non-voters conducted by Harvard's Institute of Politics, 43 percent said it did not matter who was elected because "Washington was broken;" 31 percent said it did not





matter because “none of the candidates represented their views;” and 25 percent said it did not matter because “the parties were more or less the same.”⁴

Those who did vote played a significant role in the coalition that elected President Obama in 2008. The Democratic ticket captured 66 percent of the share of young voters, aged 18-29, which was a dramatic increase over previous elections. Even though Millennials consider themselves more socially liberal, they also have a pragmatic streak that might undermine a long-term allegiance to one party. As a generation raised in a period of instant information and unlimited options, Millennials do not feel they have to be fixed in the economic marketplace or in politics.⁵ They want to know what works and are less concerned with whether the solution comes from Democrats versus Republicans or Government versus Business.⁶ Although they have continued to approve of President Obama’s performance at higher rates than other generations, their approval rate dropped eleven points between 2008 and 2012.⁷ Before the last presidential election, over half of Millennial voters believed that the Obama Administration had not always been effective in running government.⁸ Even though the majority of Millennials may continue to vote for Democratic candidates, they refuse to be pinned down by either political party, and half of Millennials now describe themselves as political independents.⁹

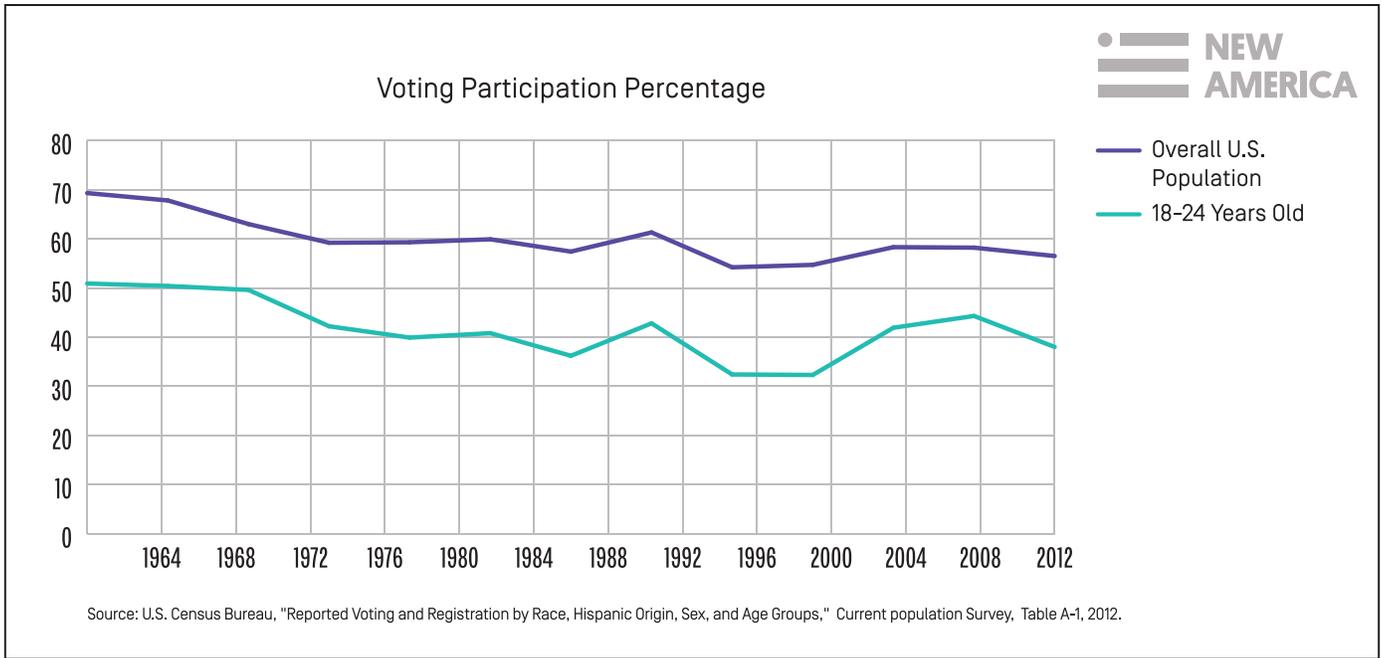
Although Millennials are critical of how efficacious and representative government is, they believe that government has the potential to be a positive force in solving societal problems. For example, 53 percent of Millennials are supportive of activist government—more than any other

generation.¹⁰ As a CIRCLE study succinctly sums up, Millennials are not eschewing politics as much as they do not see politics as a viable option for achieving the outcomes they believe are important.¹¹ Beyond voting, other traditional forms of civic engagement—including group and union membership, contacting public officials, attending public meetings, and working with neighbors—have also decreased for Millennials.¹²

Despite gravitating away from institutional forms of participation, this generation is finding other, more accessible avenues to participate in their communities and engage in the world.¹³ While the forms and levels of engagement vary among different education, race, and income cohorts, Millennials volunteer at a higher rate than other generations, engage in consumer activism, and are spearheading civic uses of social media.¹⁴ For example, 44 percent of Millennials who use social networking sites use social media to “like” or promote political material, 42 percent to post thoughts on issues, and 36 percent to encourage others to act.¹⁵

Policy Landscape

There are major implications for how Millennials approach and perceive politics, some of which may have long-term societal consequences. First, the pragmatic, “whatever works” approach to problem-solving public issues may have several implications. On the one hand, the fact that Millennials are willing to look past ideological divides in their quest for solutions may be just the antidote for the intense partisanship within today’s politics. On the other hand, the willingness of Millennials to move between institutions based on what is perceived as most effective,



raises important questions for the kind of long-term and collective commitment required for some types of democratic action and problem solving.

While studies suggest Millennials believe in the theory of government as a powerful tool for addressing social problems, putting that theory into practice seems challenging if the so-called “startup generation” looks outside of government, forging individual pathways as entrepreneurs rather than investing collectively as citizens. This may be the result of Millennials’ experiences with government, as reflected in the Great Recession and its aftermath, congressional paralysis, the Affordable Care Act rollout and subsequent public criticisms, and extended foreign wars. The challenge will be to reengage this hopeful but disaffected generation and demonstrate there is a real space for them to make government into the positive and representative force they believe it can be.

Clearly, Millennials are finding other ways of engaging politically in the world beyond electoral politics. For example, the use of social media and online social networks like Twitter and Facebook is often argued to have revolutionized social activism by connecting and organizing otherwise disparate individuals. Social media has been effective at increasing engagement, particularly because it reduces the threshold of participation—often to just a click of a button. There are limits to this form of expression as a means to foster political debate, as social media naturally creates echo chambers of like-minded friends, saving one from conflicting viewpoints. However, social media platforms that provide a means to give-and-take with other

citizens, to invest time and energy, and to commit resources toward a collectively determined endeavor, can be a powerful tool to facilitate, rather than a substitute for, meaningful civic engagement and political participation in the 21st century.

The Challenges to Address

The main obstacle policymakers must address is not unique to Millennials, but applies to the body politic: the functioning and trust of the country’s democratic institutions. A 2014 Gallup Poll found that 30 percent of Americans say they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the Supreme Court, 29 percent in the presidency, and 7 percent in Congress. Evidently, the perception that Washington is broken is a view shared by all generations. Thus, when policymakers consider how to harness a generation that is disaffected, but powerful and persuadable, they must focus on policies that improve the accessibility, representativeness, and functioning of democratic institutions for all. For that effort to succeed, we need broad democratic reforms that revamp campaign finance, modernize electoral systems, and support more participatory and effective systems of governance.¹⁶

Policymakers must find ways to engage Millennials—particularly in democratic institutions and formal democratic processes. This requires keeping in mind the different ways in which engagement varies across demographic groups. Millennials who have not attended four-year colleges will not have the same access to concentrated civic communities. Thus, particular focus needs to be given to creating

alternative civic opportunities, such as in community colleges and national service programs.¹⁷ For example, there are benefits in creating more space for Millennials to directly participate in public decision-making through innovative processes such as participatory budgeting¹⁸ and participatory rulemaking.¹⁹ Community-driven initiatives, such as worker cooperatives and tool libraries, are also promising paradigms that can increase civic engagement. If pursued at scale, these models have the potential to enhance a level of citizenship for the Millennial generation, which in turn can lead to greater political participation over the long term.

Hollie Russon Gilman is a Civic Innovation Fellow at New America. Elizabeth Stokes is a former fellow with the Roosevelt Campus Network.

Endnotes

¹ National Conference on Citizenship, *Millennials Civic Health Index*, 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Institute of Politics at Harvard University, “Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service,” 2014.

⁴ National Conference on Citizenship 2013.

⁵ Michelle Diggles, “Millennials – Political Explorers,” Washington, D.C.: Third Way, 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election,” 2011.

⁹ Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends,” 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Abby Kiesa et al., “Millennials Talk politics: A Study of College Student Political Participation,” Washington, D.C.: CIRCLE, 2007.

¹² National Conference on Citizenship 2013.

¹³ Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “Understanding a Diverse Generation: Youth Civic Engagement in the United States,” Washington, D.C.: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2011.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Generation Next,” 2010.

¹⁵ Lee Rainie, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sidney Verba, “Social Media and Political Engagement,” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012 .

¹⁶ *See also* K. Sabeel Rahman, “Beyond the Free Market,” *Salon*, March 4, 2012.

¹⁷ Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten, “Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood,” Washington, D.C.: CIRCLE, 2009.

¹⁸ Hollie Russon Gilman, *The Participatory Turn: Participatory Budgeting Comes to America*, Doctoral Dissertation, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2013.

¹⁹ K. Sabeel Rahman, “Is Participatory Rule-Making Possible?” *The Nation*, April 9, 2012.