

# Millennial's Political Activism

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Political activity is a telling behavior about a generation, influencing how policy makers in the U.S. do their jobs and how budgets are set. A generation without any political activity risks missing out on benefits from activity, while an active generation may help shape the institutions and traditions in a political culture. There are significant challenges to measuring individual political activity, and the question isn't simply "how politically active are you?" A tool traditionally used to address this challenge is a seven-point scale based on the correlation between an individual's party identification and political activism. This measurement allows polltakers to label themselves as strong or weak for either major party, independent leaning Republican/Democrat or truly independent. For a deeper look, scholars can gauge political activism by examining a number of sub-levels of activism, rather than relying simply on a seven-point scale. Social identity has become an important way to measure levels of partisanship and interest amongst the citizenry.

Political scientists Leonie Huddy and Lilliana Mason argued that social identity in fact leads to political identity, with which they were able to predict a generation's involvement and level of activism. There's consensus among

scholars that this correlation holds, but there's a deeper truth that isn't revealed by the seven-point scale. In the last decade, the politically active population has become significantly more "partisan, strident, vitriolic, and polarized." <sup>1</sup> Politics *seem* to be decreasingly important, and one would think that, under these circumstances, this generation would be less active and less involved in the political process. However, it's quite the opposite. The distinction made here focuses on the public's perception of political activism, and the ways in which political activism has changed. This creates confusion as to whether millennials are truly involved in political activity or are a lazy generation glued to the computer screen. There are some clear distinctions between the millennial

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generation and its politically active forefathers. These distinctions can be found in the means by which this generation chooses to express political activity, and the need to update the common conceptualization of political activism. As the methods to achieve political activism evolved, the millennial generation adopted them. However, the traditional notions of political activism, have not changed.

Generational theorists William Straus and Neil Howe, in a paper published in 2001, define two possible types of dynamic generations.<sup>2</sup> The first category is idealist generations. These generations are characterized by a strong fundamental sense of right versus wrong, and its members are unlikely to compromise on issues that fall on those lines. Moreover, idealist generations tend to result in decades of policy “gridlock... [and] atrophy in government institutions.” They leave in their wake a society that has failed to address and resolve major political issues.<sup>3</sup> According to Straus and Howe, the latest example of this type of generation is that of the baby boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964. After their parents’ generation essentially brought prosperity back to the country after the Great Depression and WWII, the boomers incurred a huge

national debt that is still on the rise, starting with serious inflation and a decline in productivity in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The baby boom also put immense stress on the social welfare programs created by their forefathers, with many boomers retiring in a relatively brief span of time. Because the boomers historically saved less than other generations, causing lower investment spending and less productivity, the money funneling into programs like Medicare and Social Security has declined.<sup>4</sup> As the number of baby boomers turning 65 increases every year, there’s concern that their need for Social Security or Medicare will exceed the amount available in those funds. By leaving this issue unresolved, the baby boomers could potentially bankrupt the programs and drastically change working life of the millennial generation as life expectancy and retirement age are increasing.

The second type of dynamic generation is the civic generation. This variety is characterized by “upbeat, optimistic, and group-oriented” individuals.<sup>5</sup> Their time periods are known for the growth of governmental and nongovernmental institutions, and the resolution of important social issues. It’s interesting to note that the oldest members of the

millennial generation were just reaching voting age when that paper was published in 2001. This begs the question of just how accurate Straus and Howe’s prediction was that the millennials were going to have many of the same attributes as older, similar generations. Describing a time with an empowered civic generation, author Kurt Andersen profiled the United States as it was in 1848, the year he believed it “came of age”:

Miraculous new communications technologies have suddenly appeared, transforming everyday life. Everything is moving discombobulatingly fast. Globalization accelerates Wall Street booms...The new media are scurrilous and partisan. Marketing spin and advertising extend their influence as never before. A fresh urban-youth subculture has emerged, rude and vibrant, entertainment-fixated and violence-glorifying...Both major American political parties seem pathetically unable to deal with the looming, urgent issue of the day.<sup>6</sup>

At that time, the political culture was eerily similar to that of today. The generation at the time, also a civic generation, was very involved in political activities in a number of ways. Most importantly, they were the voters that, 12 years later,

elected President Abraham Lincoln. They were also highly active in the Civil War, which took over 600,000 lives. Their generation brought about governmental and institutional change that ended up completely realigning the party system of the country, ending slavery and driving forward Reconstruction. The GI generation, which grew up during the Great Depression, was also a civic generation. They were largely responsible for fighting in World War II and drafting veterans' rights legislation in its aftermath. This gives hope that the millennial generation has promise for courageous, notable and progressive achievements in the future.

Though both civic and idealist generations cause realignments, they do so for different reasons. Realignments adjust the power and importance of government and the role the citizenry have in the political process. Civic generations lead to policy change and, in the process of doing so, inspire members of that generation and the politically active populace to bring new policies to the public agenda. They restructure governmental and societal institutions to better meet their proactive needs. Idealist generations bring about realignments because they're stubborn and unforgiving with their

values. Public policy is rarely addressed, and if it is, it's done so inefficiently. Parties begin to lose their efficiency at attracting their political generation.

Unlike previous generations, the millennial generation has shown a major distinction between partisan identity and political ideology. Though these two are usually aligned, which is the case with the majority of older generations, millennials express rather moderate ideologies. Nevertheless, more than 90 percent voted for the party with which they're directly associated.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the millennial generation has seen a distancing from some traditional values that older generations normally cling to, including membership in the particular social groups those values relate to. Such groups include organized religion, ethnic groups, or traditional family-oriented culture. Because these are traditionally important social groups, proven to inspire activity in political groups, the millennial generation has had to find new ways to adapt and become active in the political structure around them.

The demographics of the millennials give insight into why they're so different from other generations and can help explain the hyper-individualism that exists

amongst the 18-30 year olds of today. The millennial generation is the most racially diverse generation alive in the United States today. Furthermore, half consider themselves politically independent and 29 percent say they're unaffiliated with religion. As a result, millennials have the "highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded for any generation in the quarter-century."<sup>8</sup> Pew addressed this question with a survey asking participants of all ages if they thought their generation had unique distinctions from others. Not surprisingly, more than half of every generation responded that they were unique.<sup>9</sup> The most important part of this survey was the follow-up question: "What makes your generation unique?" The silent generation, those born before 1928, felt that its members' greatest unique factor was their shared experiences, namely the Great Depression and World War II. The baby boomers thought that their work ethic was the most unique distinction of their generation. What makes the millennial generation unique, according to its members, is its use of technology. Nearly a quarter of millennials agreed that technology makes them unique, while eleven percent responded with pop culture, and another seven percent stating that a wave

of liberalism and tolerance is what makes them unique.<sup>10</sup>

The millennials have been dubbed “digital natives” because they’re the only generation to have grown up with advanced technology and not had to adapt to it. This gives the millennials an advantage in a world that utilizes and requires technology more every day. They’re adept to social media, available to fill the huge new labor sector required for technology goods and services. Additionally, they have access to more information and international communication than any generation in history has had.

Some could argue that there’s significant potential for a free rider dilemma to arise. This would encourage millennials not to participate in political activism because they can still receive the benefits of those that do. However, in the social media and online worlds, the opportunity to “go viral” is widespread. Any type of media can reach millions of viewers in a matter of days.

The political and social activism of the millennial generation seem correlated to the growing use of technology. In an interview with NPR’s Michel Martin, Rashad Robinson clarifies the connection between the tools available to today’s younger generation and their activity levels. Robinson, the director of civil

rights organization COLOROFCHANGE.org, notes that there are two steps to activism that social media and technology help bridge. Now, potentially politically active youths are able to both gather necessary information and make a post about the issue available to their friends and the world. Never before has political activism been so easy. Millennials have the tools to: share their opinions; reach out to politicians, who are becoming more accessible through social sites; and read about the opinions of others from around the world. Higher engagement in civic and social associations online and through technology leads to higher political engagement. By having millions of people politically engaged, the millennial generation is able to update the policy agenda, specially catering that agenda to the issues important to it. Robinson believes that technology and newly available tools don’t change why people become politically active but do give the millennial generation the ability to achieve its goals faster.<sup>11</sup> Political scientists are able to use data to prove this relationship.<sup>12</sup>

The mutual influence technology and the millennial generation have on each other is immense. Being digital natives, millennials dominate the realms of technology. More than 75 percent

of the millennial generation has a profile of a social networking site (SNS), as compared the 41 percent of the general population. Something political on Facebook, for example, has the potential to reach 75 percent of 18-30 year olds. This gives a potential for mobilization that no other generation has enjoyed. Of those on SNSs, 66 percent say they have engaged in civic or political activities using social media as their vehicle. Another 25 percent say they have become more engaged with a political issue after reading posts about it or discussing it online. Nearly 40 percent have promoted political or social issues and 31 percent have directly encouraged others to take action about an issue.<sup>13</sup> This data show how much social engagement is inspired by technology and social media, proving that the millennial generation, in theory, has the ability to influence modern political institutions, nationally and internationally. And it’s clear, through a number of political demonstrations, that it’s capable of achieving this mobilization (e.g. the Arab Spring). Millennials also distinguish themselves from other politically active generations by the level of moderation in the generation’s ideology. Despite having some of the highest levels of activism, more people than ever

are in the middle of the political spectrum. Only 21 percent of social network users are involved in groups specifically dedicated to political issues.<sup>14</sup> Since the millennial generation isn't expressing its activism through direct support of ideology-based organizations, it must do so in other ways.

The two steps of gathering information and making a comment or spreading ideas have become much easier. Everyone can, if they choose, be a part of the technological wave sweeping younger political activists. One instance of technology's accessibility comes from Shelby Blakely. Blakely, in an interview with NPR, stated that she was a stay-at-home mom aware of the political situation around her, who wanted to become more active.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, she started to blog from her home. She had the resources easily available, and is now the journalist coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots. Technology provided Blakely with the social engagement and the tools to express her political activism both online and offline. This gives Millennials the unique ability to make political statements from behind a keyboard and enjoy more access to information that can change the way they live away from the computer as well.

President Obama's 2008 election campaign offers an interesting example of a politician embracing modern technology to inspire political activism. Voters were able to distinguish Obama from his opponents in part because of the strength of his YouTube campaign. Even prior to his official candidacy, Obama spoke to the nation via YouTube, emphasizing the need for political change and a focus on the "common interests and concerns" of the American people.<sup>16</sup> Intended for a generation that's highly optimistic, liberal, easy-going and online, Obama's campaign was targeted at millennials' energetic activist spirit and was able to blend the worlds of politics and social media in order to reach the masses.

Technology has also proved successful in turning local news into nationwide headlines, thereby allowing the millennial generation to access the public attention and the policy agenda. Recently, police brutality has been brought to the country's attention in small towns from across the cyber universe. Arrests, legislation and other events with particularly local flairs have grabbed the attention of users of social media, online news outlets and blogs from around the nation. Celebrity and media personalities have also gained similar national attention. In 2007,

radio host Don Imus made a quip about the Rutgers women's basketball team. This comment, which normally would have gone unpublicized on a national level, was spotted by a student employee for the basketball team specifically responsible for monitoring the media of the team. He quickly uploaded the broadcast to YouTube and Imus was the target of national outrage.<sup>17</sup> Technology played an important role in ensuring that everyone was aware of the news. Though Imus was famous well before this incident, previously being heard by 3 million radio listeners, this specific event led to his demise. Shortly after the remarks, Imus was suspended and his morning show was canceled, effective immediately. It's undeniable that what Imus said was inappropriate, but the punishment was courtesy of the powerful influence of social media. With improved technology and the diminished importance of physical borders, ideas and information spread at an impressive rate. But as COLOROFCHANGE.org's Robinson noted, technology doesn't change why activists are active, merely how they're able to be so. Access to technology may make the millennial generation unique, but it's the attributes of the generation and the ways in which

it uses technology that make it so powerful.

Two movements that have gained impressive steam at the hands of the millennial generation are the Go Green and LGBT revolutions. Go Green provides an example of millennials transitioning their activism on- and offline instantaneously and without apparent costs of doing so. As opposed to past movements centered on the environment, most millennials are not in the streets rallying about the trees. They aren't doing sit-ins in state parks and lying down in front of bulldozers like their activist forefathers. Instead, millennials relate the issue to every aspect of their lives — they recycle, promote environmentalism on social media, buy “green” products and support “green” companies — and in turn, they're able to push the country, on many different levels, with their “green” agenda. For example, if companies know that consumers want manufactured goods made with recycled material because they're conscious of the environment, companies will change their ways in order to supply healthier products. Though millennials may appear to be less active than other generations, it's because they incorporate the activism into their everyday lives. Nearly 45 percent of millennials say they try to practice “green”

habits on a daily basis.<sup>18</sup> Their movements may be less literally active, but their engagement in achieving their goals is still high.

Support for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community also provides an example of successful millennial activism. Though this movement started before many millennials were even born, it has evolved, grown and improved. Jeanne Cordova, an early leader of the LGBT movement, has seen the drive change. She believes that in order for the LGBT crusade to be successful, activists had to sacrifice their “feminist ideal of systemic overthrow of the power structure of the patriarchy” for a more reasonable approach through civil rights.<sup>19</sup> Social media and the millennials who use it are igniting this change. Facebook users can now tell their stories, appeal to widely diverse groups of people and see that their friends who are gay also have friends, families and lives. Social media, in this way, is helping humanize the issue of LGBT equality. The liberal movement in the millennial generation has taught them that sexual orientation is becoming less important as a classification mechanism, and the violations of LGBT rights are perceived as being more abhorrent. Before social media, LGBT activism had to follow in the footsteps of the

movements that set precedent for the LGBT equality campaign: feminism and civil rights. Each of those movements was a struggle that lasted hundreds of years. In order to achieve their goals and not fall into the long-term stagnate that their predecessors fell into, the LGBT rights movement needed to change. They needed to embrace the levels of liberalism across the country, especially in the millennial generation, and advocate liberal feminism and gay rights, as opposed to a “revolutionary assault of the policy agenda.”<sup>20</sup> In doing so, “the LGBT community probably will have achieved total victory in less than a half-century, making [it] the swiftest major social movement in history to achieve its goals.”<sup>21</sup> The efficiency and speed of this movement are indicative of the influence the millennial generation has. Through both the millennials' values and their use of technology as digital natives, they're able to address important social and political issues around the world.

The millennial generation is changing the game, so to speak. Political activism used to be interpreted as groups of young people rallying in the streets over a particular issue. Now young activists have the world at their fingertips, hundreds of different issues from around the world, and the ability to do something about it

immediately. Technology is providing millennials with the ability to participate in local activism in places which they don't live, or necessarily have any connection to. A common perception of the millennials is that they're not living up to the visibly active social movements of their parents. For the most part, millennials aren't in the street protesting or participating in what

is known as direct action. Instead, they're utilizing their freedom of speech and their access to technology, information and people from all over the world to be politically active. Some call the millennials lazy because of this. Rather, the perception and conceptualization of political and social activism hasn't changed, while the concepts in practice have changed considerably.

Instead of rioting about an issue, millennials are embracing liberal, hope-endorsing campaigns and finding success. Though millennials' activism looks different from that of other generations, it's because they're redefining political and social activism and reengineering the methods to achieve their goals.

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