

FEBRUARY 2008

# THE MILLENNIAL PENDULUM

A New Generation of Voters and the  
Prospects for a Political Realignment

PETER LEVINE, CONSTANCE FLANAGAN, AND LES GALLAY

NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT INITIATIVE

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION



© 2009 New America Foundation

This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits non-commercial re-use of New America content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display and distribute New America's work, or include our content in derivative works, under the following conditions:

- **Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to the New America Foundation, and provide a link back to [www.Newamerica.net](http://www.Newamerica.net).
- **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from New America.
- **Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit [www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org). If you have any questions about citing or re-using New America content, please contact us.

## Summary

Today's young people have considerably more progressive opinions about economic issues than do their elders. Under-30s voted very strongly for Barack Obama in 2008 and expressed liberal views about the economy (and about other issues) in pre-election polls. Observers and strategists are now asking whether we will see a lasting change in American politics as a result of the Millennials' arrival. It is possible that they are liberal because they are young, and they will move to the right as they grow older. But analyses of the trajectories across time of several recent generations, summarized in this paper, suggest that the Millennials have a more progressive identity than did previous generations at their age and are likely to move the country leftward on economic and social issues for decades to come.

## Contents

Summary.....	3
Issue Preferences.....	8
Confidence in Major Institutions .....	10
Social and Moral Issues .....	13
Millennials and the Social Contract .....	14
Summary and Implications.....	15
About the Next Social Contract Initiative .....	17



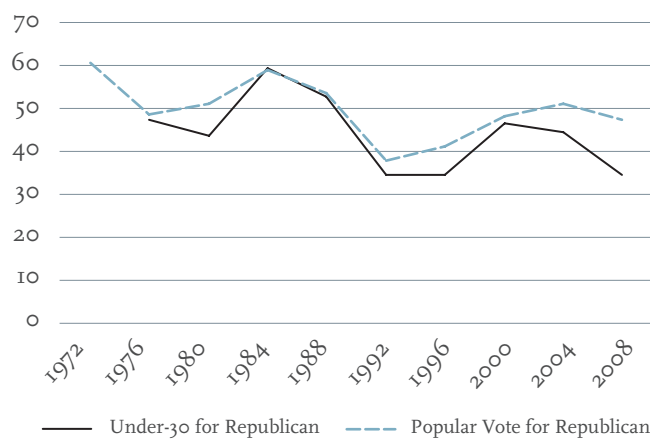
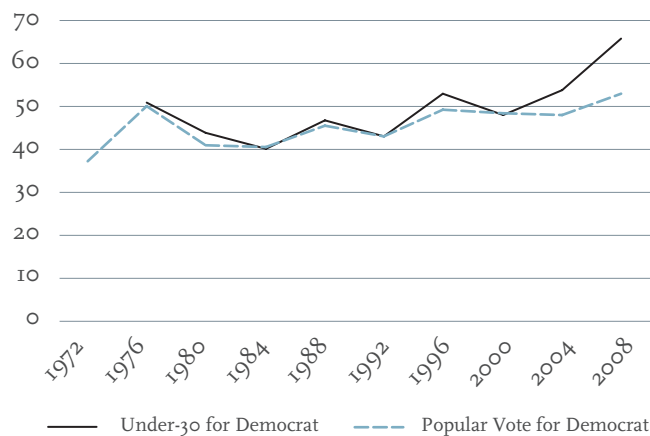
Since the year 2000, a new generation of young voters has taken the stage in American politics, and these ‘Millennials’ (as some have called them) have had a significant impact on recent elections. David Madland and Amanda Logan concluded a recent report for the Center for American Progress:

Millennials’ views are more progressive than older people’s today, and than those of previous generations, and they stand in especially stark contrast to the more conservative views of Generation X. On many economic issues, Millennials are more progressive than any previous generation. These views about the economy and government are likely to have profound effects on politics today and into the future.<sup>1</sup>

Madland and Logan wrote before the 2008 election and predicted that the Millennials’ participation would benefit the Democrats. They were correct: Barack Obama scored an unprecedented victory among young Americans, taking 66 percent of the under-30 vote nationally. Thirty-two percent of the young voters called themselves “liberals” in the exit polls (versus 22 percent of all voters), and 26 percent said they were “conservative” (versus 34 percent for all voters). Forty-five percent of the young voters identified as members of the Democratic Party (versus 39 percent of all voters).<sup>2</sup>

As Graphs 1 and 2 illustrate, in most presidential elections, under-30 voters have chosen the same candidate as older voters. Prior to 2004, only in 1980 and 1996 were young voters less likely than their elders to vote for the Republican candidate. However, during the last two presidential elections a new pattern has emerged: a generational gap in partisan preferences opened in 2004 and widened in 2008. This year, there was a 15-point difference between youth support for Obama/Biden and the Democrats’ share of the whole popular vote.

Graphs 1 and 2: Youth Vote and Popular Vote for Democratic and Republican Presidential Candidates Since 1972



In a second study conducted before the 2008 election, Logan and Madland showed that, today, young adults of all races and ethnicities shared progressive opinions about economic issues, in contrast to past decades when young people of color were considerably to the left of their white agetates.<sup>3</sup> Again, the 2008 election result reinforced Logan and Madland’s claims. According to the exit polls, majorities of young African-American, Latino, and White voters chose Barack Obama. In contrast, white voters over the age of 30 supported John McCain by a large margin. Young voters were also a strikingly diverse group: just 64% were White (compared to 72% of voters between age 30 and age 45, and 85% of voters over the age of 65). The diversity of young voters is a good reflection of the changing demographics of young Americans in general. Analyses of the Current Population Survey showed that between 1968

and 2006, the share of 18–25 year olds who were White declined from 88% to 62%.<sup>4</sup>

If the 2008 changes in voter preferences reflect generational shifts in political attitudes, then they portend a sea change in American political opinion as the Millennial generation replaces its elders as a share of the voting public. There is a precedent for such a change: people who reached voting age in the early 1980s shifted public opinion for several decades. In 1984, President Reagan won 59 percent of the youth vote and, as that generation matured, they remained conservative and contributed to a Republican realignment of American politics.

To assess whether there is likely to be a generational shift underway, we must consider three different theories that were not compared or tested in the studies cited above:<sup>5</sup>

1. **Age effects:** Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, “If you’re not a liberal when you’re 25, you have no heart. If you’re not a conservative by the time you’re 35, you have no brain.” Leaving aside Churchill’s value-judgment, this could be an accurate developmental theory. Perhaps people grow more conservative as they move through life. Indeed, cross-sectional snapshots comparing younger vs. older adults within an era support Churchill’s view. Compared to contemporary elders, younger adults tend to be more open to the ideas that are swirling at a particular time and typically are more critical in their commitments and tactics.

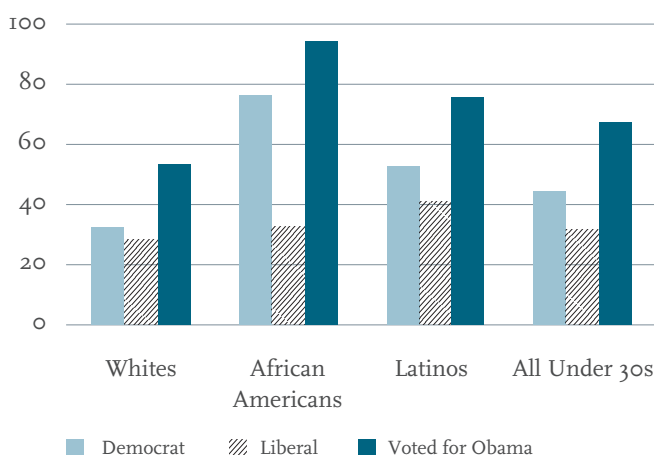
2. **Period/Historical effects:** It could be common for everyone in a population (regardless of when they were born) to change their opinions at the same time, in response to major events such as economic crises, social movements, pivotal elections, or political leaders. For example, many individuals—regardless of how old they were at the time—may have moved to the left in the 1960s and to the right in the 1980s. And, in the wake of 9/11, Americans of all ages were supportive of national security measures.

3. **Cohort effects:** It could be that people born around the same time are permanently influenced by events, movements, or leaders that arise when they are young and impressionable, so that their generation acquires a durable ideological character that is still evident decades later. For instance, people who came of age in time to fight in World War One were always more alienated and prone to radicalism than those who came before or after.

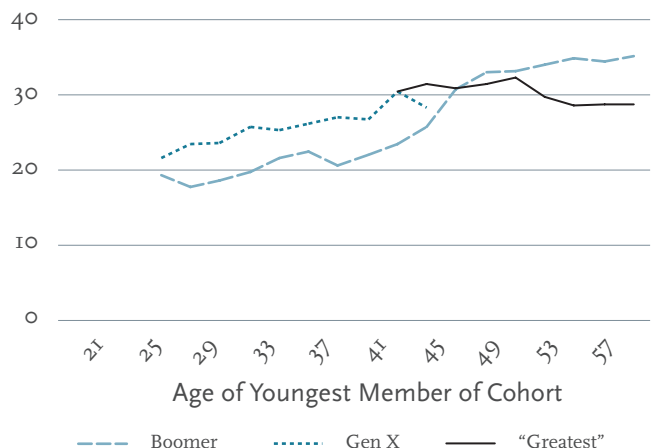
The potential for a realignment will be greatest today if *cohort effects* dominate, because then we might be seeing an “Obama Generation” that will vote for progressive candidates for 50 years to come. Of course, it will matter how they define “progressive” politics—what particular issues and positions motivate them. If *age effects* or *historical effects* are more important, then a progressive realignment is less likely.

We can test Churchill’s theory against its rivals most directly by examining ideological identities over time.

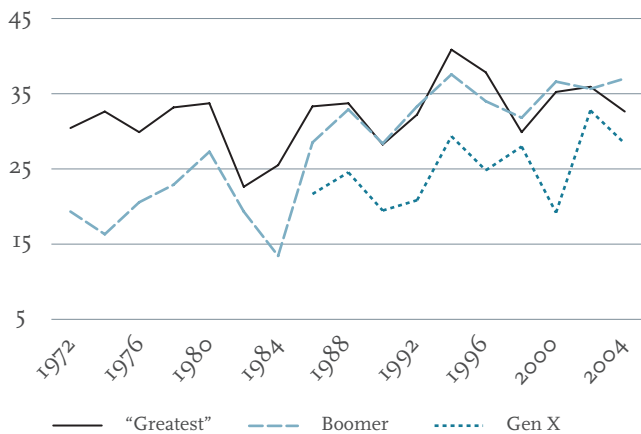
Graph 3: 2008 Youth Vote by Race/Ethnicity



Graph 4: Conservative Identity by Age (Four year moving averages)



Graph 5: Conservative Identity by Generation and Year



Graph 4 shows the proportion of three separate generations that identified themselves as “conservative” during the period 1972-2004.<sup>6</sup>

This graph provides evidence of a Churchill-style *age effect*, because both Generation X and the Baby Boomers grew more conservative—at very similar rates—during their thirties and forties. It also provides some evidence of a *cohort effect*. Members of Generation X were always about 5 points more conservative than Baby Boomers had been at comparable stages of life. Thus the growing conservatism of the American electorate as a whole was due in part to generational replacement as Generation Xers became a larger share of the electorate.

Graph 5 displays the same generations over the same time period, but now by the year when public opinions were surveyed.

This graph is helpful for displaying short-term *historical effects*. For example, between 1992 and 1996 all three generations became more conservative, and it was in 1994 that the Republicans gained control of Congress. At any given time, members of Generation X were less conservative than their elders. But that is because they were younger. As Graph 4 showed, Gen X consistently self identified as more conservative than their elders had at similar times in their own life cycle.

In sum, all three kinds of effects can be traced over the last thirty years. *Cohort effects* are of greatest interest because

Graph 6: Liberal Identity



they suggest how public opinion may shift with generational replacement. If the political orientation of a generation as it comes of age is carried by that generation as it ages, then the attitudes of Millennials today will portend what public opinion will look like for years to come.

Graph 6 shows that, so far, Millennials (labeled here as “Early 2000s,” because “Millennials” are defined in inconsistent ways in the literature) have been much more liberal than the other cohorts over the last 30 years.

In the following graphs we present comparisons of public opinion data for different generational cohorts collected across a span of years. These data are not longitudinal, i.e., they are not based on surveys of the same individuals over time. Rather, they are based on the responses of a representative sample of different generational cohorts collected during specific years.

Since a generation (such as the Baby Boomers) is born over 20 years, its members come of age over several different presidential elections. Therefore, throughout the rest of the paper, we use narrower definitions of cohorts based on important presidential elections that occurred when the cohort were in the youngest group of eligible voters (ages 18–24). When interpreting the graphs, it is important to remember that the cohort is not defined by the politics of the president; in some cases, the influence may be negative.

- The “Early 1960s cohort,” born in 1940-1946, was between 18 and 24 when Lyndon Johnson won a land-

slide election in 1964. This was also the cohort that was most active in the liberal social movements of the 1960s.

- The “Early 1980s cohort,” born 1960-1966, was between 18 and 24 when Reagan won 59% of the youth vote in 1984. This formative experience would be expected to make them lastingly more conservative.
- The “Early 2000s” cohort, born 1980-1986, was between 18-24 when George W. Bush was reelected. Polls showed that young people strongly *disapproved* of this president, and only 44% voted for him in a high-turnout election. Partly in reaction to his administration, they may become lastingly more progressive, especially if the Obama election of 2008 cements their views.

Graph 7 shows that the Early 1960s cohort had already become fairly conservative by the Reagan years and has been more conservative than the average US voter ever since. (Note that the stereotype about the liberal “sixties” generation refers to those who came of age in the late 1960s.) This is probably an *age effect*, although it is possible that some members of the Early 1960s cohort became more conservative as a reaction to their early experiences in the 1960s.

During the Reagan Administration, members of the Early 1980s cohort were more liberal than older voters were at the same time. They were young then, and Churchill was correct that people tend to grow more conservative as they age. Nevertheless, more of the Early 1980s cohort were conservative than were liberal, and Reagan took nearly six

in ten of their votes. As the years progressed, they became more conservative than the population as a whole. Part of this was an *age effect*, but they may also have been influenced by their formative experiences around 1984. That would be a *cohort effect*.

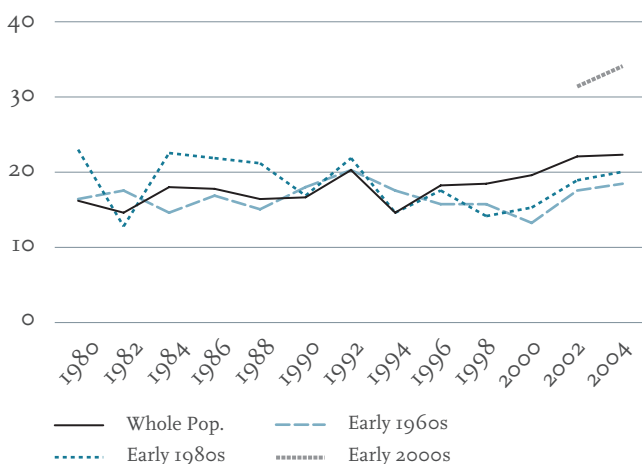
Finally, Graphs 6 and 7 suggest an emerging new cohort effect. The Millennial cohort which came of age in time to vote for or (more frequently) against George W. Bush in 2004 has been *considerably* more liberal than its predecessors so far. More than 30% identify themselves as liberal, higher than any other group when they first began to vote. Although we only have a limited number of data points, we will see this liberal cohort effect repeated for this group in the subsequent analyses.

## Issue Preferences

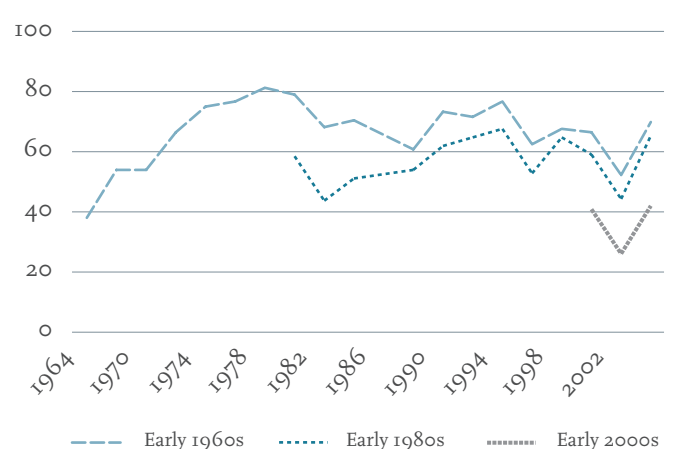
Thus far, we have compared age groups and cohorts based on their self-identified partisan preferences and political positions. We can add some specificity to these abstract categories by comparing the political attitudes, beliefs, and policy preferences of various cohorts over time.<sup>7</sup> For example, Ronald Reagan made government waste a defining issue for conservatism. Graph 8 displays beliefs that “government wastes a lot of money,” by cohort.

This question has been asked for an unusually long period, so we are able to see that the Early 1960s cohort was quite unconcerned about government waste when they were young and Lyndon Johnson was president. Their con-

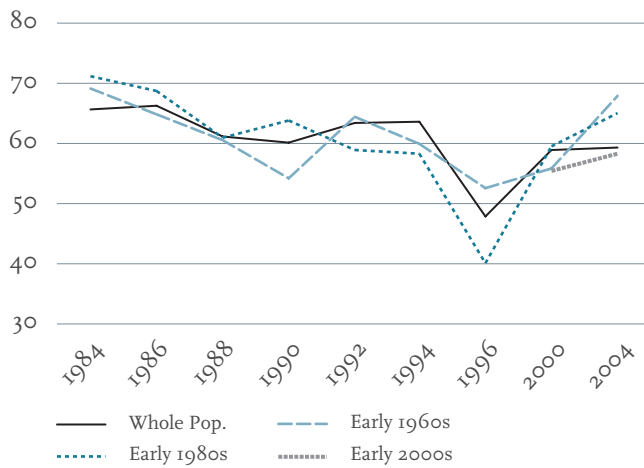
Graph 7: Liberal Identity (Version 2)



Graph 8: Government Wastes a Lot of Money



Graph 9: Society Should do Anything Necessary to Guarantee Equality of Opportunity



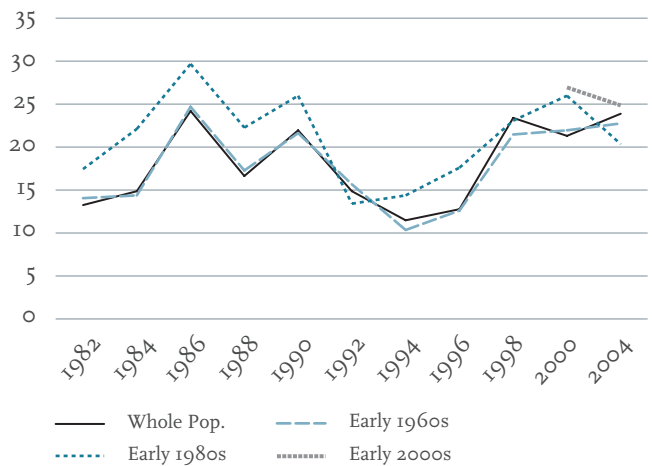
cern had reached record high levels, however, by the time Reagan was elected in 1980. The Early 1980s cohort was also fairly unconcerned about government waste when they were young, and they remained less concerned than the Early 1960s cohort (perhaps because they were 20 years younger). Both groups changed their minds depending on short-term historical events—for example, they worried less about waste in 2002, presumably as part of the aftermath to 9/11.

Finally, the Early 2000s cohort was much less inclined to believe that government wasted money. Between 30–40% of this generation endorsed this belief during the same years that 45–70% of their elders did. Furthermore, comparing this cohort with the 1960s and Early 1980s generations when those groups were young, we see that the Millennials appear to be a unique cohort—less likely than young voters in earlier eras to contend that government wastes money.

Another question that often divides liberals and conservatives is whether society should guarantee everyone equality of opportunity. That value has also been asked as a separate survey question over a number of years.

As Graph 9 shows, the Early 1960s cohort has tracked the national average on this question since 1984. They were probably more liberal when they were younger, although the survey question was not asked before 1984. Compared

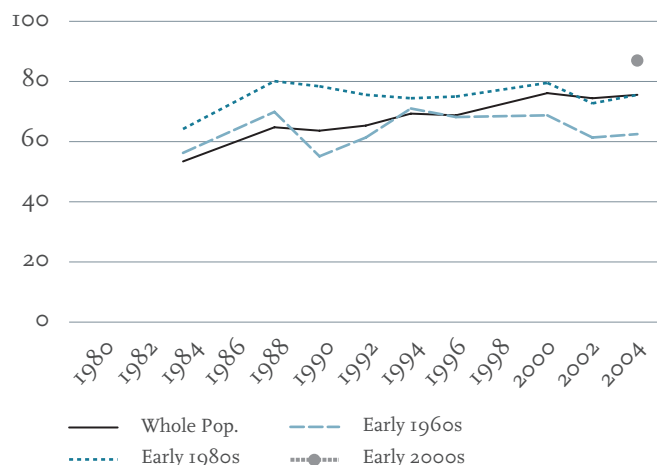
Graph 10: Favor More Government Spending on Services Such as Health Care and Education



to their elders, the Early 1980s cohort was slightly more liberal on this question when they were young (during the Reagan Administration), but they became considerably more conservative as they aged during the Clinton years. This is evidence of a conservative cohort effect. In addition, we also see evidence of a historical effect between 1994 and 1996, as all groups were less likely to endorse this belief during a period of legal attacks on affirmative action (e.g., Proposition 209 in California). Finally, the Millennial cohort entered the scene as not especially supportive of equality when they first began to vote in 2000 but had become more supportive by 2004. (This result is something of an outlier; on most other questions about economic and social policy, the Millennials are more liberal than other cohorts. Their low responses in 2000 might have been a left over historical effect from the affirmative action battles of the 1990s.)

A more concrete question is whether there should be more government spending to support more government services, such as education and health care. Graph 10 shows that the majority of Americans do not favor more government spending on health care and education. Nonetheless, during the Reagan years, when the Early 1980s cohort was young, they were more favorable toward such spending than their elders. As they aged their opinions trended with the population as a whole and, between 2000 and 2004 they became more conservative than the population as a whole. The Early 1960s cohort tracked the national aver-

Graph 11: Increase Federal Aid to Schools

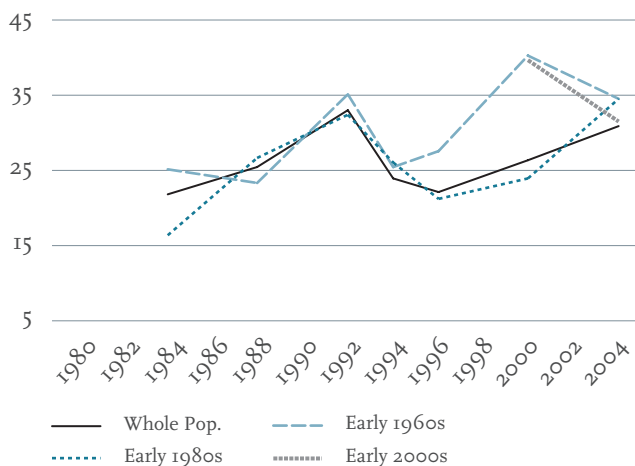


age. Of most interest is the fact that those who came of age in 2000 were slightly more ‘liberal’ on government spending than the rest of the population.

Graphs 11 and 12 separate public opinion on education from that on health care. Taken together they show that the public is more supportive of government aid to education than to health insurance and that there are life cycle differences in these attitudes. Across time, the Early 1980s cohort was more supportive of federal aid to schools than was the Early 1960s cohort. But they also were more likely to be raising school age children during these years. Notably, when the Millennials entered the scene in 2004, they were 15 percentage points higher than the average and nearly 30 points higher than the oldest (Early 1960s) generation. In fact, the Millennials’ 2004 endorsement of increased federal aid to schools was the highest of any generation at any time during the last twenty years.

Health care is a different life-cycle story, as shown in Graph 12. The Early 1960s cohort became distinctly more favorable as they entered their fifties in the Clinton years. The Early 1980s cohort tracked the national average but became somewhat more favorable in 2004, when they turned 38-44. It may be that concern about health coverage rises with age, as people become responsible for dependents and then face declining health. Yet it is interesting that in 2000 the Millennials were just as likely as the eldest cohort to endorse government provision of univer-

Graph 12: Government Should Provide Universal Health Insurance



sal health insurance, although by 2004 their endorsement had declined and was in sync with the public as a whole. It should be noted that young adults are the least likely age group to have health insurance. In 2006 one-half of all uninsured adults were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four.<sup>8</sup>

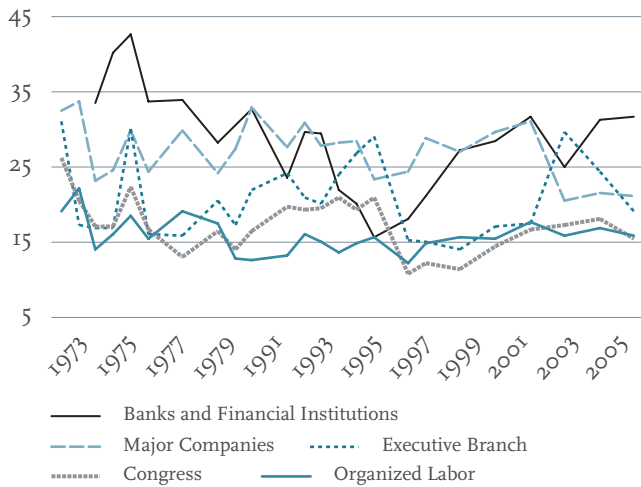
## Confidence in Major Institutions

Our confidence in institutions is relevant to our sense of the social contract. If, for example, an individual trusts Congress to be competent and fair, that person is likely to believe that federal legislation can be beneficial. This study suggests that today’s young people are confident in unions and the federal government—but they are also confident in corporations.

Between 1973 and 2006, the General Social Survey asked, “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?” Note that the GSS question emphasizes senior leaders. It is possible that a different formulation would find higher levels of trust in unions and Congress, because their top leaders are often singled out for criticism.

We show the proportion of Americans, ages 15 and older, who say they have a great deal of confidence in several of these institutions.

**Graph 13: Great Deal of Confidence in Major Institutions**

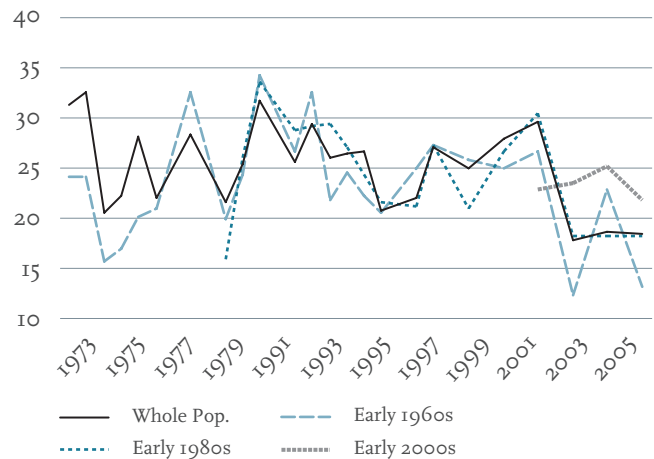


Graph 13 supports several observations:

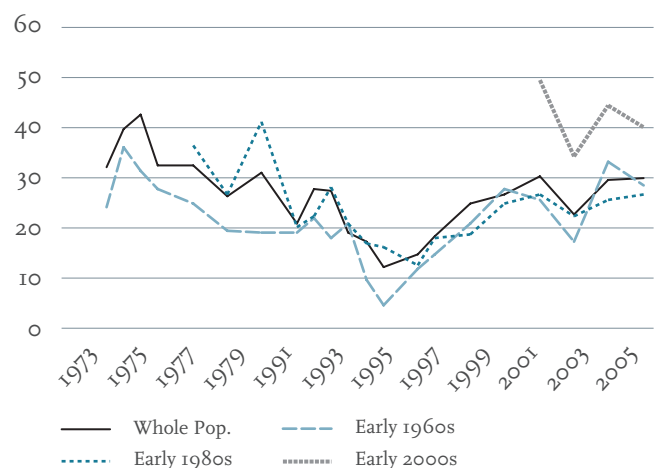
- The public has consistently put more confidence in banks and major corporations than in the government and unions. Combining these 30 years of data, we see that 27% of Americans have placed a great deal of confidence in the people running banks and financial institutions; 25% in major companies; 18% in the executive branch of the federal government; 14% in Congress; and 12% in unions.
- Every one of these institutions has lost public confidence between the early 1970s and 2006, but the greatest declines involve major companies and the executive branch. Unions are basically at the same level as in the 1970s.
- Confidence in the executive branch is volatile and seems correlated to major political events. It dropped from 29% to 14% between 1973 and 1974, as Watergate unfolded, and doubled from 14% to 28% between 2000 and 2002, probably as a result of the 9/11 attacks.
- Confidence in banks and financial institutions followed a large “v” curve. The low point was 1991, shortly after the peak of the Savings & Loan crisis. We do not have GSS data for 2007-8, when a new financial crisis unfolded and polls revealed low public confidence in Wall Street. The figure below does show that the public’s confidence is sensitive to such period effects. Enron’s collapse occurred in 2001 and, with curious exception of the Millennials, the proportion of the public expressing confidence in major companies plummeted.

Our focus is generational replacement and whether it can explain changes in fundamental attitudes. It appears that the answer differs depending on the institution. In the 1970s, the generation that came of age in time to vote for LBJ was less confident in *business* than most Americans were at that time—consistent with their reputation for liberalism or radicalism—but they moved close to the mean in the Reagan years. Today’s young people are somewhat more confident in business than average Americans, but feel about the same as young people did 40 years ago. There is not much evidence of a cohort effect, although confidence in business would be lower today absent the Millennials.

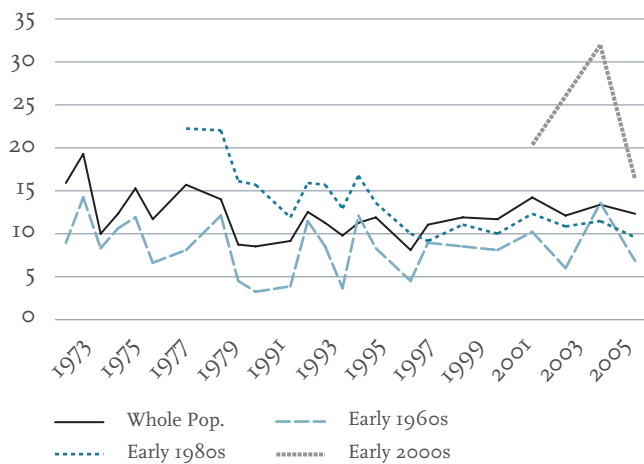
**Graph 14: Great Deal of Confidence in Major Companies**



**Graph 15: Great Deal of Confidence in Banks and Financial Institutions**



Graph 16: Great Deal of Confidence in Unions

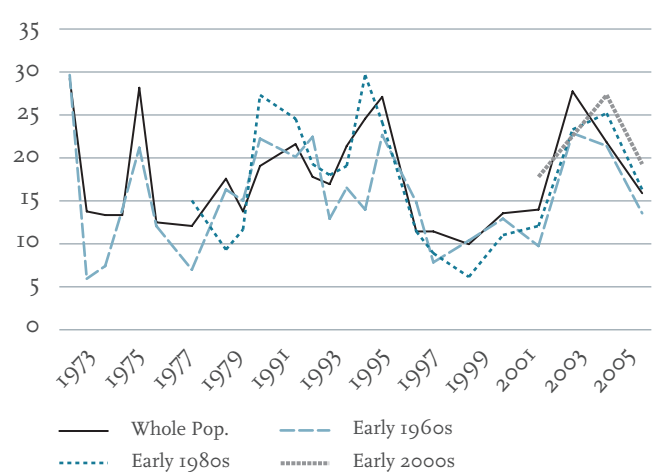


The same is true for *banks and financial institutions*, except that today's young people stand out more. They are far more confident in the financial sector than the other cohorts have been at any point in their lives since the 1970s. However, it remains to be seen whether the financial crisis that began in 2007 will have a lasting effect on their opinions. In a different study conducted before the 2008 election and before the crisis on Wall Street, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press had found that young people were less critical of government regulation than older people were and also less critical of corporations.<sup>9</sup>

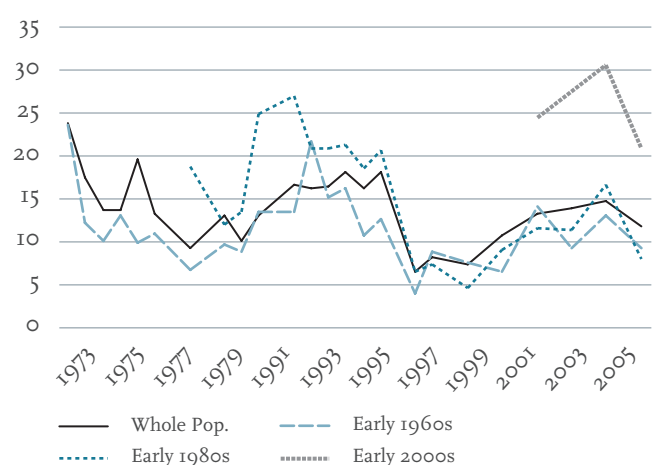
Today's young people also have substantially more favorable attitudes toward *unions* than the other two cohorts have ever had (although the volatility of the results for the Early 2000s cohort raises some doubts in our minds about how stable these data are). Nonetheless, even if we ignore the 32% figure in 2003, the percentage of the Early 2000s cohort that expresses a great deal of confidence in unions is higher than any other cohort in 2001 and 2005 or in most earlier years. This is surprising insofar as union membership has been on a steady decline and youth are less likely than other age groups to be in unions.

The cohort that came of age in time to vote for Ronald Reagan sounds a cautionary note, because they started above the mean but fell below it. Still, they were never nearly as confident as the Millennials have been recently.

Graph 17: Great Deal of Confidence in the Executive Branch



Graph 18: Great Deal of Confidence in Congress



Confidence in Congress and the executive branch are shown together because the contrast is significant.

Both follow the same pattern in the period from Nixon through George H.W. Bush: confidence falling in the 1970s and rising in the Regan years. Confidence in these two federal branches rises in the later Clinton years, but then only the executive branch benefits from the feelings of support after 9/11. For the executive branch, the Millennials follow the same pattern as older cohorts—of increasing confidence after 9/11 followed by declining confidence by 2005. With respect to

the legislative branch, the Millennials express considerably more confidence than do older generations. For older adults, increased trust in the Bush Administration between 2002 and 2004 never transferred to the legislative branch.

In summary, today's young people place unusually high confidence in several major institutions, including business, Congress, and labor unions. They are more confident about these institutions than average Americans are today, and more confident than two important earlier cohorts were when *they* were young.

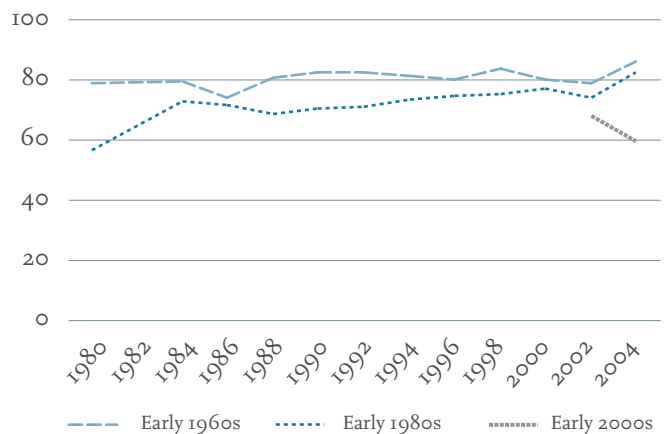
## Social and Moral Issues

The focus of the Next Social Contract Initiative is the modernization of public policy and institutions to restore economic opportunity and security for all Americans. These issues are politically significant; in the 2008 exit poll, 61% of young people identified the economy as their top voting issue (as did 63% of all voters). But, clearly, voters are also influenced by other issues. In the 2008 election, young people's support for Barack Obama might have been bolstered by their values, such as racial tolerance and civil libertarianism, as well as by the economic issues that they cited in the exit polls.

We therefore offer a few brief examples of generational shifts in attitudes toward social issues, simply to put the earlier findings in context. For example, religion is a powerful predictor of partisanship. Graph 19 shows that Millennials—while still religious—are less likely than their elders are in 2004 to endorse the personal importance of religion. This may be because they are young. In fact, their attitudes are comparable to those that the Early 1980s cohort held when that group was young. (For the Early 1960s cohort, we do not have data from their young-adult years.)

Graphs 20-22 display trends across time in five generations' support of free speech for various minority groups.<sup>10</sup> These questions are often used to provide insight into tolerance. The graphs show a classic *cohort effect*. Across time each generation maintains its position on free speech vis-à-vis the position of other generations. With the exception of Generation X, each successive generation is more civil-libertarian than its predecessors. At the same time, since the late 1980s Gen X has become

Graph 19: Importance of Religion to Self



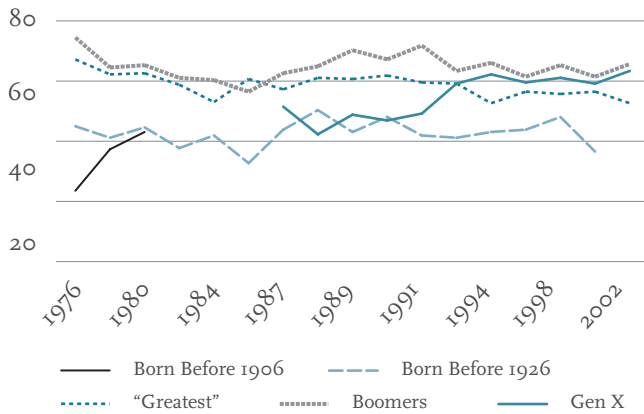
increasingly supportive of free speech for gays and anti-black racists. Other analyses of time trends in the General Social Survey provide additional evidence that public opinion shifted in a liberal direction between 1985 to 1997 on civil liberties, gender roles, racial equality, and secularism whereas it had moved in a conservative direction between 1973 to 1985.<sup>11</sup>

This section hardly exhausts the complex question of generations' attitudes toward social and moral issues, but it suggests that generations have enduring values and that *cohort effects* help to explain shifts in public opinion on matters such as race, religion, and civil liberties.

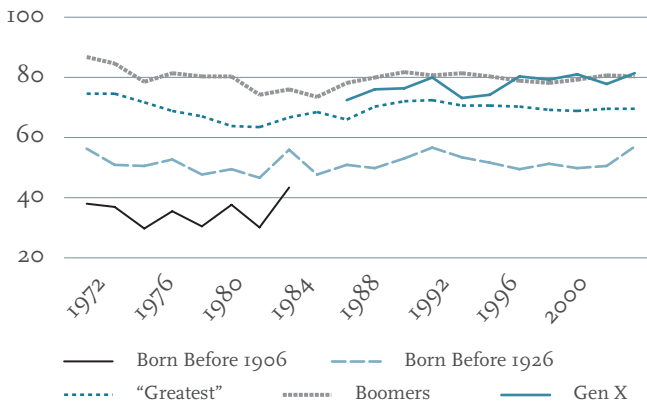
It is noteworthy in this respect that today's young people appear to be highly tolerant and favorable toward diversity. For instance, in CIRCLE's 2006 national survey, 53% of young people felt that homosexuality was a way of life that should be accepted—compared to 46% among older adults. More than half (57%) of young people felt that immigrants strengthened our country, compared to just 43% of older adults.<sup>12</sup> Similar age differences were found in a January, 2007 report from the Pew Center for People and the Press. In addition, according to that report, 18-25 year old whites were more likely than older whites to endorse affirmative action for minorities.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the Millennials' greater tolerance for diversity can be attributed to their more diverse demographic profile. On the other hand, young people are not consistently more civil libertarian than older Americans are today. Youth are more supportive of torture, for example, and less committed to freedom of the press.<sup>14</sup>

## Graphs 20-21: Tolerance for Minorities' Free Speech, by Generation

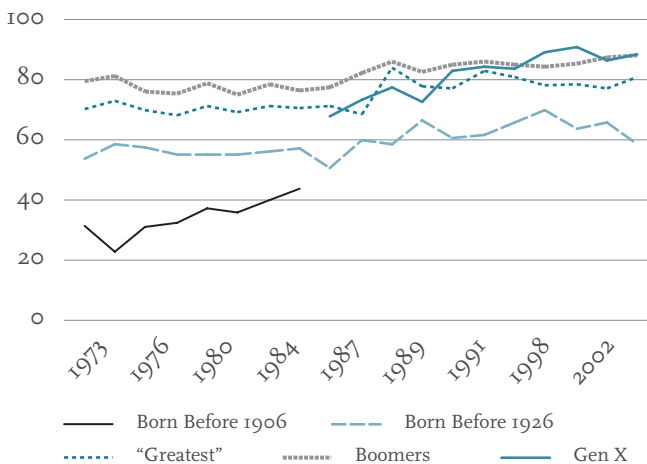
### Free Speech for Anti-Black Racists



### Free Speech for Opponent of Religion



### Free Speech for Gays



While Generation X was consistently less tolerant than the Baby Boomers, the Millennials are starting out as highly tolerant and favorable toward diversity. This suggests that parties and politicians who appear to be tolerant to minority groups will fare well with this new generation. It is less clear that strong support for civil liberties will pay political dividends with the Millennials.

## Millennials and the Social Contract

To address whether the Millennial generation portends a sea change in attitudes toward the American social contract, we have drawn from data gathered over a period of several decades. This allowed us to separate age from period and cohort effects and to conclude, with some confidence, that the Millennials' incorporation into the body politic portends a sea change in American political views.

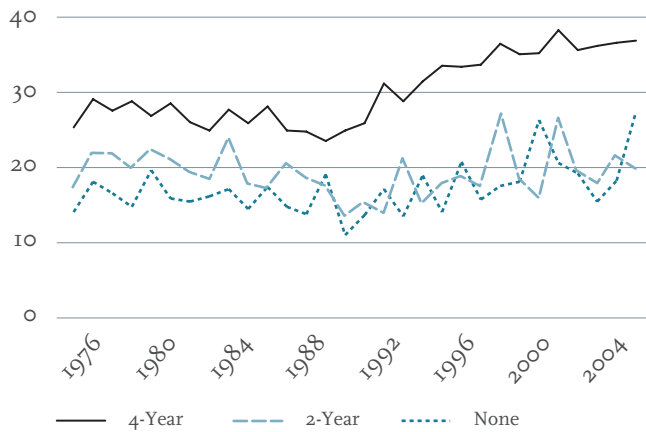
Given this context, it is interesting to examine the attitudes of today's young people compared to their elders today. Recent opinion polls conducted by Rock the Vote and the Pew Center for People and the Press and by the Harvard Institute of Politics found that youth were more likely than their elders to believe that the government can and should solve social problems and that the government should do more to address global warming and the economy.<sup>15</sup> Results of a poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 56% of young respondents wanted health insurance coverage for all Americans, even if that meant increased government spending. Trends of increasing tolerance on social issues also have been attributed to generational replacement over the past several decades.

Although 18-25-year-olds are not a large share of the adult population, the number of young people has grown in recent years and will continue to grow in the future. More importantly, compared to their elders, younger generations are considerably more racially and ethnically diverse, and are more likely to be of mixed ethnicity or of new immigrant stock.

Finally, it appears that young people are changing their own attitudes and expectations regarding work and civic participation. They seem to have, in some respects, lower expectations for the quality and stability of their own jobs, but are more likely to have habits of volunteer service.

According to 27 years of data from the Monitoring the Future study of high school seniors, young people appear

**Graph 23: Trends in Community Service by College Aspirations**



to be adapting to a less predictable labor market by considering stable work less central to their identities. Trends point to a decline since 1990 in the importance high school seniors attach to job stability and intrinsic rewards of work (jobs that are interesting), although the importance of extrinsic returns (jobs that provide the chance to earn good money) have remained stable.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, as the figure below shows, since 1990 there has been a steady increase in the institutionalization of community service with high-school seniors who expect to go on to college responsible for most of the increase.<sup>17</sup> Taken together, these trends suggest that, at least for college-bound youth at the brink of adulthood, a sense of purpose and direction for their lives may evolve out of community service experiences as youth adapt to changes in the labor market. In turn, it is likely that community service leads to voting and other forms of political engagement, at least when political leaders encourage youth to make that transition.

## Summary and Implications

What do the Millennials' attitudes toward government, volunteer service, and social values portend for the future political landscape and the terms of a new social contract?

Our analyses show a dramatic shift in political attitudes among young Americans. They are more liberal, more Democratic, more tolerant of others and more trusting of American institutions than their elders. It appears that we are witnessing a 'cohort change' in this new generation.

What this change means to young people's interpretation of the social contract remains to be seen, but clearly, changes are on the horizon.

By all accounts, youth were galvanized in this election, with a disproportionate share (66%) of the under-30 vote going to President Obama. And, despite the racial and ethnic diversity of the younger generation, the youth vote in every racial and ethnic group went for Obama. The youth vote reflected a clear preference for the Democratic presidential ticket but also a generational gap in partisan preferences that had begun in 2004 and widened in 2008: Compared to earlier eras, today's under-30 voters show a clear preference for the Democratic party. They identify as liberals, more so than the other cohorts when those groups were first-time voters.

The political attitudes and policy preferences of Millennials reinforce their liberal self-concept. They are far less likely than their elders and than the other generations when they were young to feel that the government wastes a lot of money. They had more progressive attitudes than the general population on federal aid to schools and were just as likely as the eldest respondents to say that the government should provide universal health insurance. Not only do these positions reflect progressive sentiments, they also are relevant for discussions of a new social contract. The first item asks about federal aid to schools, not specifying k-12 or higher education. Nonetheless, support for schools should be salient to youth insofar as they are more likely than their elders to be in post-secondary education or to be recent graduates from the k-12 system. Furthermore, more than older Americans, youth should be painfully aware of the rising costs of education as they (and in many cases their parents) weigh questions of college affordability and personal debt associated with attendance. With respect to views on universal health insurance, the young are less likely than their elders to face health care problems. Yet they were as likely to endorse universal health care as was the oldest age group who should be much more likely to be dealing with chronic health concerns. However, young adults are disproportionately represented in the uninsured. In 2006 one-half of all uninsured adults were between the ages of 18–34.

Contrary to the generally liberal pattern, a lower proportion of the Millennial generation endorsed the belief that society should do anything necessary to guarantee equality of opportunity. This item refers to "society" and not the

government or state. Nonetheless, it is difficult to square with the Millennials' otherwise progressive dispositions.

On civil liberties (support of free speech for gays, racists, and opponents of religion), Millennials reflect the increasing tolerance that has characterized successive cohorts of Americans. Likewise, public opinion on gender roles, racial equality, and civil liberties has been shifting since the mid 1980s in a more liberal direction. Cross-sectional studies also point to the greater tolerance and openness of youth: Compared to their elders, they are more accepting of homosexuality as a way of life, more supportive of affirmative action for minorities, and more likely to feel that immigrants strengthen the country. Compared to older Americans, the young express more confidence in the government (the Executive Branch and especially Congress), in major companies, financial institutions, and much more in unions.

So does the Millennials' enthusiasm for Obama and their more liberal attitudes outlined in this report portend a sea change in the future political landscape? Although people tend to become more conservative as they age and settle into roles (steady job, marriage, family), where they stand in young adulthood is a good barometer of their political views later on. The trends discussed in this paper suggest that, as the Millennials replace their elders, we should expect a greater openness to the role of government in providing services and addressing public problems, more confidence in the branches of government, increasing support for the civil liberties of diverse groups, and an increasing identification with service to the community as an integral aspect of personal identity.

For the past decade, concerns have been raised that the younger generation had written off electoral politics. Whereas many were donating time in the volunteer sector, fewer were showing up to vote. However, the momentum among younger voters that was evident in the 2008 election had been building over the past few election cycles with upticks in youth participation in the 2004 presidential election and even in the mid-term election. In the 2008 election, the campaigns invited youth to the table and those youth responded by taking advantage of many old and new ways of participating—canvassing, building voter databases, blogging, and taking a gap year to work on campaigns. Not only are these youth now in the political party databases, life-span research on political engagement

shows that people develop a long term interest in public affairs once they engage in the political fray.

We feel compelled to say something about the role of “hope” in this election. It was the definitive theme in the Obama campaign and it was framed as a collective aspiration—together creating a better world and assuming responsibility for one another and for the world we inhabit. Trends during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s among college freshmen and the general population pointed to increases in self-interest and materialism and declines in public interest goals.

We are not aware of any studies suggesting that youth are less materialistic than their elders or pointing to declining materialism. However, as the Monitoring the Future trends suggest, this generation has grown up during a period when community service has become institutionalized. Since the early 1990s more and more high school seniors are reporting that they have engaged in service. The institutionalization of volunteer service since the early 1990s means that engaging in some form or forms of community voluntarism has become a more normative expectation about growing up. Trends in work values suggest not that work is unimportant but that youth may be adapting to an unpredictable labor market by considering stable work less central to their identities, at least at the tender age of 18.

One panel study of a representative community sample found that engaging in community service strengthens intrinsic work values and causes youth to rethink their vocational priorities.<sup>18</sup> In light of the protracted period that young adulthood has become, discussions of a new social contract should include new models for combining education, paid work, and voluntary service. Such opportunities in early adulthood should have a payoff in increasing the likelihood that young people will choose careers in, for example, public service. Given the trends in voluntarism and the research on it, there is every reason to expect that youth will respond to the call to service in President Obama's inaugural address when he urged us to “find meaning in something greater than ourselves” and “boldly enter a new era of responsibility”.

It seems noteworthy that, despite the crisis of confidence on Wall Street and the seemingly intractable war in Iraq, the theme of hope resonated—a kind of public hope in the

possibilities for a better world rather than a private hope about one's own prospects. According to analyses of trends in the Monitoring the Future study, a sense of public hope tends not to co-exist with beliefs, to paraphrase an earlier president, that government is the problem. Based on the opinions of high-school seniors surveyed between 1976 and 2005, at times when youth hold out hope for the world, they also trust the government to do what is right.<sup>19</sup>

Results from a representative sample of American adults conducted in the late 1980s suggests that the presidential election of 2008 and the historical events surrounding it may have particular resonance in the formation of the political identities of the youth of this era. Schuman and Scott asked respondents to report “the national or world events or changes over the past 50 years” that seemed to them especially important. Across generations, respondents were most likely to report events or changes that had occurred when they were adolescents or young adults.<sup>20</sup>

The late adolescent and early adult years are a formative time with life long consequences for political attitudes and action. This is a time when individuals take stock as they make decisions about their futures—reflecting on their own beliefs and values, a direction for their future, and a purpose for their lives. In the process, it is inevitable that they also take stock of their society—its opportunities and constraints, the principles of the social contract that bind members of that society together. As younger generations replace their elders as a share of the voting public, the beliefs and behaviors, the very identities of these younger generations, will shape the tenets of the social contract. ▣

## About the Next Social Contract Initiative

The New America Foundation launched the Next Social Contract Initiative (NSC) in 2007 to design and advance the framework for a 21st-century social contract, along with a detailed policy agenda to support it. The premise of this initiative is that, given the unimaginable changes of the last half-century, we should think from scratch about the appropriate roles of each sector of society—government, employers, individuals, and civil society. The programs and policies of a new social contract should be designed to support entrepreneurship and risk-taking, encourage long-term growth and broadly shared prosperity, and support individuals and families not as employees, but as citizens. Perhaps most importantly, NSC operates on the belief that economic security and opportunity are not mutually exclusive alternatives.

NSC draws on the strength of existing domestic policy programs at New America including the American Strategy, Asset Building, Economic Growth, Education, Fiscal Policy, Health Policy and Workforce and Family programs, as well as its own staff, to fulfill this mission. In the tradition of New America, NSC strives to develop innovative, principles-based solutions for a 21st Century economy and society. If individuals are to take advantage of the opportunities inherent in a dynamic economy, they will need the security provided by social insurance, individual assets, and portable benefits. In doing so, they will fulfill their own goals and bolster our collective faith in the continued vitality of the American Dream.

In the course of our research, analysis and outreach, it has become apparent that deeper, macroeconomic forces are also undermining the social contract. Indeed, one lesson from the growing financial crisis is that finding the proper balance of rights and responsibilities among the various sectors—including the proper allocation of economic risk—is not a philosophical luxury, but essential to a healthy economy and a stable society. This has led to an increased focus on developing policies that promote growth, innovation, and the reestablishment of the reciprocal connection between increases in productivity and higher wages.

## Notes

---

1 Madland and Logan, “The Progressive Generation How Young Adults Think About the Economy” (Washington: DC, Center for American Progress, May 2008), p. 19.

2 CIRCLE fact sheet, “Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election,” Nov. 24, 2008, via [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org). All exit poll analysis is drawn from this fact sheet.

3 Amanda Longan and David Madland, “Millennial Economics: It Don’t Matter if You’re Black or White (or Hispanic): Young Adults’ Opinions on Economic Policy Are Becoming More Alike and More Progressive” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008).

4 Lopez and Marcelo, CIRCLE fact sheet, “Youth Demographics”, November, 2006, via [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

5 Logan and Madland usefully show changes in public opinion over time by age. They show, for example, that people who were young in 1970 were less likely than older people to support government health insurance, but that pattern reversed after 1992. But they do not follow cohorts over time to see whether they have consistent values or whether people tend to grow more conservative over time.

6 Definitions: “Greatest,” born 1925-1944; Boomers, born 1945-1964; Gen X, born 1965-1984, Early 2000s, born 1980-1986.

7 Note that the years in which particular survey items were asked differ across the graphs. In each graph we have used the full set of years in which that survey item was asked.

8 Helen Levy, “Health Insurance and the Transition to Adulthood.” In S. Danziger and Cecelia Rouse (Eds.), *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood* (pp. 84-106). New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.

9 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2007” (March 22, 2007).



MAIN OFFICE

1630 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
7th Floor  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone 202 986 2700  
Fax 202 986 3696

CALIFORNIA OFFICE

921 11th Street  
Suite 901  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Phone 916 448 5189  
Fax 916 448 3724



NEW  
AMERICA  
FOUNDATION

[WWW.NEWAMERICA.NET](http://WWW.NEWAMERICA.NET)

