



# The Political Ideology of the Millennial Generation

A National Study of Political Values and Beliefs Among 18- to 29-Year-Old Adults

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# Introduction

Of all the storylines emerging from the historic 2008 elections perhaps none has more impact on the future of our country than the rise of the Millennial Generation. These young 18- to 29-year-old Americans born between 1978 and 2000 represent the largest and most diverse generation in American history. Last year, their record turnout and overwhelming support for Barack Obama—as well as Democrats up and down the ballot—delivered a decisive victory and signaled a turning point in our country’s political history.

What is most important about these voters is not their current predilection for Democratic candidates, however, but rather the deeply held progressive beliefs underlying their voting preferences. The progressive beliefs of these young adult voters could recast the core ideological battles that have defined our country’s post-Vietnam political discourse.

The presidency of George W. Bush marked the formative political experience for many of these younger Americans, and the results are not good for conservatives looking to gain support among this critical segment of the electorate. The combined effect of Bush’s social policies, the war in Iraq, his tax cuts, and the collapse of the economy clearly had a strongly negative impact on the ideological views of Millennial voters. Younger Americans today express broad and deep support for a progressive worldview on government, society, and world affairs and are ambivalent to outright hostile to many core elements of the conservative worldview.

Case in point: Of the 21 values and beliefs garnering majority support in our recently completed national study of political values and beliefs among young adults, only four can be classified as conservative.

This study and our companion national survey—both conducted by Gerstein/Agne Strategic Communications in conjunction with the launch of the Progressive Studies Program at the Center for American Progress—explore the essential ideological views of Americans on a sweeping range of critical issues. The complex attitudes revealed in the national survey and the country’s growing progressive tilt were explored in our inaugural report, “The State of American Political Ideology, 2009.” The accompanying youth survey reinforces the finding in that report that the youngest Americans are also the country’s most progressive generation, but there are deeper trends that reveal a more complicated dynamic.

Examining the core attitudes, self-identification patterns and ideological ratings measured throughout the study, it is clear that the conservative brand faces serious skepticism among Millennials. In contrast to findings among older Americans, this survey reveals that there is little, if any, residual strength for the conservative worldview among younger Americans—less than half of all young people rate a “conservative” approach to politics favorably while a “progressive” approach is the most highly rated. Similarly, a strong plurality of younger Americans, 44 percent, self-identify as either progressive or liberal compared to just 28 percent who call themselves conservative or libertarian.

Younger voters also view President Obama quite well and offer strong support for the broad ideological framework and many specific items in his ideological agenda. In general, it is fair to say that a new progressive generation is on the rise, and given electoral and attitudinal trends, this rise could have profound impacts on the future of American politics.

Whereas the country as a whole scored most progressive on attitudes toward the role of government and least progressive on cultural issues, voters under 30 are most progressive on cultural issues, exposing a massive generational rift on these issues that will surely move the country in an increasingly progressive direction as more Millennials reach adulthood. Americans under 30 are much more progressive than older Americans on issues surrounding international affairs and national security. While they are more likely to embrace progressive positions in this area—particularly on Iraq and the need for the United States to provide global leadership on climate change—the real generational divide on these issues comes in younger Americans’ complete rejection of conservative positions, particularly the primacy of military force in fighting terrorism, the need to compromise civil liberties to protect the United States from terrorism, and the need to refrain from criticism of government and military leaders in times of war.

Younger Americans largely mirror the progressive inclinations of their older compatriots on the role of government. The one area where they are far more likely to embrace a progressive position is the need for government to step in to protect the national economy when markets fail, reflecting their support for the policies of the Obama administration as it wrestles with the record deficits and far-reaching economic crises bequeathed by the Bush administration.

Similarly, Americans under 30 are less likely to agree with any of the conservative positions on the role of government tested in this survey, but the greatest drop-offs are on free-market solutions trumping government as a means of creating economic growth and limited government always being preferable to big government. Because of the market failures that created the current economic climate, it seems the Bush administration’s policies that enabled these failures have now created a greater openness to government among these Americans.

The area where younger Americans differ least from older Americans, and on which they score lowest on our progressive index by a significant margin, is on economic and

domestic policy. They are actually more likely to agree with a range of progressive positions, particularly the need for the federal government to guarantee affordable health coverage for all Americans. At the same time, their agreement with conservative positions holds steady, with one critical exception where they are more conservative than older Americans—those under 30 are much more likely to agree that we should reform Social Security to allow workers to invest some of their contributions in individual accounts.

Millennials are also more likely to embrace free trade, reflecting the more global perspective of a generation raised with the Internet, but much less likely to see tax cuts as the key to economic growth, which is another key finding in the context of the current economic debate. Some additional findings from the study include:

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### Overall ideological trends

- Based on responses to 40 ideological statements grouped in four areas (role of government, cultural/social values, economic and domestic policy, and international affairs/national security), we calculated an aggregate measure of ideological positioning based on a scale of “0” to “400,” with “0” being the most conservative position on the continuum and “400” being the most progressive. Younger Americans as a whole record a mean ideological score of 221.6, with the youngest group, ages 18 to 24, coming in more progressive in aggregate (224.6) than those in their mid- to late twenties (217.6).
- Younger Americans overall are noticeably more progressive than older Americans. Notably, the youngest voters in the electorate, those ages 18 to 24, are the most progressive of any age grouping in all four ideological areas.
- Younger Americans are most progressive (56.6) on cultural and social values and the least progressive on economic and domestic policy (53.1). In contrast, older voters are most progressive on the role of government (53.6) and the least progressive on cultural beliefs (50.1). Young people not only embrace progressive ideas about culture and society, but they also firmly reject most conservative ideas in this area.
- As with the population at large, there are no ideological outliers among key groups of younger Americans—the range of composite ideological scores in the youth survey runs from 179.1 for conservative Republicans to 245.9 for liberal Democrats. The ideological distribution among young people is both more progressive overall and more compressed than the ideological range among the total population. This suggests greater accord among young people about many of the progressive values and beliefs that shape politics than exists in the population at large.
- More than two in three younger Americans agree with progressive perspectives on energy, sustainable living, and climate change, government efforts to protect people

and the economy, and new steps to fight inequality. Strong agreement tops 40 percent on many of these progressive beliefs. Many of these areas of agreement align with the findings from the national survey, suggesting that there is genuine cross-generational consensus on the fundamental values that should guide our country.

- Of the 21 statements with majority support among young people, only four are classified as conservative ideological viewpoints.
- We find weak support, ambivalence, and outright skepticism about many conservative teachings—agreement ranges from only 44 to 50 percent on key conservative ideas about deficits, limited government, and tax cuts. In contrast, majorities of Americans in the national survey expressed agreement with many of these same elements of the conservative framework.
- Majorities of self-identified young conservatives and Republicans agree with all five progressive arguments on the role of government, four out of five progressive positions on economic and domestic policy, and three out of five progressive beliefs about international affairs and national security.
- The views of younger people are fairly well aligned across educational classes, further reinforcing the generational harmony among younger Americans around many progressive ideas.
- There are major divergences in opinions between younger and older Americans, however. On the cultural front, for example, far fewer younger Americans than older Americans agree that changes in the traditional family have harmed society (-16 points) while many more believe that the country has gone too far in mixing politics and religion (+15 points).
- Similarly, far fewer younger Americans than older ones agree that military force is the most effective way to keep America safe (-16 points); that restrictions on civil liberties and torture are okay in order to protect us from terrorism (-16 points); and that it is unpatriotic to criticize leaders during war (-16 points).
- Younger Americans are much more likely than those who are 30 years or older to believe that government must step in to protect the national economy when the market fails (+12 points) and that society has contributed greatly to the wealth of rich people (+11 points).
- Conversely, young Americans are far less likely than older Americans to agree with conservative notions that stronger regulation of business does more harm than good (-7 points); that free-market solutions are better than government at creating jobs and economic growth (-18 points); and that limited government is always better than big government (-12 points).

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## Core American values

- Expressing a profound optimism about their own futures, 77 percent of younger Americans believe that they have either already achieved the American Dream (10 percent) or will achieve it in their lifetime (67 percent), while only 12 percent feel that they will not achieve it over the course of their lives.
- White youth are more skeptical of their chances of achieving the American Dream (13 percent will not achieve) than nonwhite youth (9 percent will not achieve). Twenty percent of those young people earning \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year are skeptical of their life chances compared to only 8 percent of those earning \$75,000 per year or more.
- Asked to choose two American political values that are most important to them, 48 percent of young people say “opportunity” and 41 percent select “equality.” In comparison, their older counterparts favor “liberty” (41 percent) and “justice” (36 percent) as their top values.
- Young people are in basic alignment (although at lower levels of support) with older voters in the belief that “government should do more to promote the common good” (50 percent) rather than doing more “to promote individual liberty” (29 percent).
- Both younger and older Americans also agree with a notion of freedom grounded more in progressive arguments reminiscent of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Forty-eight percent of younger Americans believe that “freedom requires economic opportunity and minimum measures of security, such as food, housing, medical care, and old age protection,” compared to 37 percent of young people who believe the libertarian notion that “freedom requires that individuals be left alone to pursue their lives as they please and to deal with the consequences of their actions on their own.”
- A plurality of youth (42 percent) believes that “our current economic problems show what happens when you rely too much on the market and reduce regulations on corporations,” while 39 percent favor the argument that “corporations deserve a lot of the blame for our current economic problems, but the free market is still the best way to organize our economy.”
- Young and old are in agreement that government needs to play a larger role in the economy—60 percent of younger Americans and 61 percent of older ones say that “it’s time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American,” compared to 27 percent and 36 percent, respectively, who follow the conservative line that “turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good.”

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## Ideological perceptions of President Obama

- Overall, two-thirds of young people approve of President Obama’s job performance while only 16 percent disapprove. Younger Americans support the new president at higher rates than their 30-plus cohorts (56 percent approve).
- Approval of Obama’s presidency crosses partisan and ideological lines among young people, with a plurality of self-identified conservatives and Republicans rating Obama’s job performance favorably. This finding stands in contrast to the trends in our national survey, which showed hardening opposition to the president among conservatives and Republicans at large.
- In general, young people respect Obama’s personal characteristics and a large percentage view him as a significant agent of change. Thirty-four percent of youth offer a positive personal assessment while another 32 percent say that Obama represents a new direction.
- Older voters are more likely than younger ones to say something negative about Obama, with nearly one-fifth of those 30 or older saying he can’t be trusted or isn’t up to the job compared to less than 10 percent of those ages 18 to 29 who believe similarly.

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## Ideological ratings

- In our national survey, more than two-thirds of Americans rated a “conservative” approach to politics favorably with an equal percentage rating a “progressive” approach favorably. In contrast, less than half of young people (45 percent) in this study rate “conservative” favorably while both “progressive” and “liberal” score quite well.
- Noncollege young people (43 percent favorable) are even less positive about conservatism than are college-educated ones (48 percent). Traditional audiences such as Republicans (80 percent) and born-again Christians (67 percent) do retain strong sentiments for conservatism.
- The “progressive” label enjoys the highest favorable rating (54 percent) of the four approaches tested with one-half of younger Americans also rating “liberal” favorably. As in our national survey, the “libertarian” brand receives fairly low marks, with only 35 percent of young people rating favorably compared to 39 percent of those ages 30 or older.
- The libertarian label is largely unknown to younger Americans—a full 36 percent of those 18- to 29-years-old are unable or unwilling to offer an opinion of the approach.

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## Self-identification

- Younger Americans report high levels of self-identification as ideological progressives and liberals.
- Thirty-seven percent of younger Americans identify as either “liberal” (21 percent) or “progressive” (16 percent); 25 percent as either “conservative” (21 percent) or “libertarian” (4 percent); and another 38 percent as “moderate” (24 percent) or “other” (14 percent). After asking the moderate respondents to select between the remaining ideological approaches, we find a 16-point margin for progressive/liberal over conservative/libertarian with roughly an additional one-third remaining neutral as moderate/other.

The story throughout this survey is one of conservative decline and progressive ascendancy among young people. Just as the post baby boom Generation X broke heavily for Ronald Reagan and his brand of optimistic conservatism, the current Millennial Generation has found its ideological center in the policies and leadership of President Obama. As this Generation Progressive grows in electoral importance, the potential for significant realignment of political attitudes toward progressive views of government and society is strong.

The first half of this report will examine the overall ideological composition of the Millennial Generation and explore their beliefs about government, culture and society, economic and domestic policy and international affairs and national security. The second half of the report will focus on the core political values of younger Americans, their opinions about the president, and their own ideological ratings and identification patterns.



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### About the Center for American Progress

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values.

We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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### About the Glaser Progress Foundation

The Progressive Studies Program at CAP is made possible by the generous support and partnership of the Glaser Progress Foundation, created by Rob Glaser, CEO and Chairman of RealNetworks, Inc, and directed by Martin Collier. The foundation is focused on building a more just, sustainable and humane world through its work in four program areas: measuring progress, global HIV/AIDS, independent media and animal advocacy.

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