

### **“The Quiescence Is Over: Issue-Based Voting Among the Millennial Generation”**

Rising levels of turnout and participation among young Americans in recent presidential elections have attracted the bulk of scholarly attention on youth voting behavior over the last decade. However, an intriguing development that has been under-studied is the age gap in presidential vote choice that has endured since the 2004 presidential election. From 2004 through 2012, 18-29 year olds have voted for the Democratic Party’s presidential candidates at much higher proportions relative to older Americans.<sup>1</sup> The emergence and persistence of this gap is puzzling because the vote preferences of young people had been fairly equal to those of older Americans for the two decades prior. So what is the underlying cause of this age gap in presidential vote choice? And why has it persisted over the course of multiple elections?

Understanding the reason for the divergence in vote choice is important, for both practical and theoretical purposes. The cohort of voters recently entering the electorate is much more Democratic in their preferences (almost 2 to 1) than the generation of voters they are replacing, arguing that a real change in the distribution of preferences in the electorate is occurring. The decisive role that young people play in presidential elections, particularly in battleground states where their votes have tipped the scales in favor of the Democratic candidate, makes it critical to understand this new challenge to our existing conceptions of how motivation and engagement influence political behavior. More broadly, the implications of this study will provide a better understanding of the social and psychological processes that regulate political socialization and produce divergent patterns of opinions and behavior across political generations.

Political socialization research investigates the process through which a citizen matures politically, most often focusing on the development of political attitudes and preferences through the transmission of political beliefs (including party identification) from parents to their children (e.g. Dawson et al. 1977; Jennings and Niemi 1991). Political views are influenced most by events that transpire during the adolescent years, so in quiescent times we should expect the distribution of party identification and political beliefs of young and older generations to be relatively similar. This had been the case for decades prior to the turn of the 21st century, including the period during the Clinton administration.

However, generational theory suggests that people of the same age share important learning experiences during their formative years through exposure to political events that shape their partisan attitudes and beliefs (Beck 1975; Miller 1992). Critical events—things like depressions, wars, or mass movements— may create turbulence in the political environment of such magnitude to produce generational effects among young cohorts of voters just coming of political age (Beck 1984). While these significant events rarely have a lasting effect on the more durable partisan attachments of older voters, they can alter the partisan balance in the electorate by shaping the newly forming, still-malleable partisan attachments of young adults as they develop views of the political world that differ from previous age cohorts. The contested election results of 2000, 9/11 attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Great Recession of 2008 would certainly qualify the 2000s as politically turbulent times that could explain the distinct attitudes and behavior of the Millennial generation, resulting in the age gap in vote choice we see today.

As such, I posit that this age gap in vote choice appeared due to a change in the issue context surrounding the presidential elections from 2004 and 2012, particularly the escalation of the wars

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<sup>1</sup> According to the American National Election Studies Time Series surveys, there was a 15-point disparity in 2004 for Kerry (60% of 18-29 year olds to 45% of citizens over 30), a 9-point disparity for Obama in 2008 (66% to 57%) and a 12-point gap for Obama in 2012 (65% to 53%). These gaps are quite large relative to, for example, no gap in 2000 for Gore (45% to 45%), a 1-point disparity for Clinton in 1992 (45% to 46%), and a 3-point disparity for Carter in 1980 (35% to 38%)

in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic recession. Negative performance evaluations of George W. Bush and the Republican Party on these issues, combined with social and moral issue preferences that better align with Democratic candidates, drove young Americans away from the Republican candidates in recent presidential elections. Thus, young people are voting in higher proportions for Democratic presidential candidates because the Republicans have lost their credibility among this cohort in their ability to handle foreign policy and economic issues, and the policy preferences of the young on social issues better match those of the Democrats.

Evidence for my theory will be found utilizing open-ended responses from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series surveys from 1996 to 2012, which allow me to examine the way in which citizens think about an election. Adapting a model from Kessel (2004), party and candidate-likes and -dislikes responses will be used to create valence measures of partisan advantage (whether they lean Republican or Democrat) on a number of issue, party, and candidate domains for two groups—18-29 year olds and everyone over 30. These valence measures will then be used as variables in models of vote choice, for young and older Americans alike, for 1996 through 2012.

Funds from the Patricia Witherspoon Research Award will be used to pay the hefty application fee for access to the restricted verbatim open-ended ANES responses for 1996 through 2004, which first need to be recoded due to problems found in the original coding scheme for the 2004 data. The remaining funds will be used to offset some of the costs associated with conducting focus groups of Millennial respondents, the data from which will allow for a better understanding of the nuances underlying youth opinion. I expect to receive the ANES data in June, which will be coded and analyzed by August. The full report will be delivered by the beginning of September.

These data will allow me to determine whether there has been a significant change in the standards of evaluation young people use when evaluating presidential candidates and the parties in recent elections. I expect to find that issues, both prospective policy preferences and retrospective evaluations of Republican Party performance on foreign and economic policy issues, mattered more for vote choice for the young relative to older Americans from 2004 to 2012. Older Americans, who have been exposed to politics longer and hold more concrete political beliefs, are expected to weight party identification and other partisan cues more heavily in their vote choice.<sup>2</sup>

Electoral behavior studies focus little attention on the political environment when explaining vote choice. By developing a better understanding of how young people react to the issue context of the time they come of age politically, I will be able to offer suggestions for how to increase their levels of engagement and participation in politics.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Party identification has been heralded as the single best predictor of vote choice (e.g. Bartels 2000). Party identification is insufficient to explain the voting behavior of young adults, however, as upwards of 45% identified as Independent between 2004 and 2012 according to the ANES.