



The Progressive Future Is Here

November 6, 2008 David Madland, Director, American Worker Project

Young voters—long a group with significant political potential—made their mark on the 2008 presidential election by turning out in near record numbers. Just as important as their sheer numbers are the reasons they voted. The Millennial Generation—young Americans between the ages of 18 and 29—care most deeply about economic issues and strongly support a progressive agenda to get the economy back on track.

Millennials are united across race and ethnicity in their belief that the government can be a force for good in the economy and that increased investments in health care, education, and other areas are necessary to ensure strong and sustainable growth. These beliefs are likely to shape politics and policy for years to come.

More than 20 million Americans between 18 and 29 years old voted on Tuesday, an increase of over 2 million compared to the election of 2004. Preliminary estimates indicate that the youth turnout will not quite surpass the record 55 percent turnout of 1972—the first presidential election in which 18-year-olds could vote—but a very high percentage of young people voted yesterday. Final counts will not be released for some time, but preliminary estimates indicate that this will be the third straight election with increased youth turnout. Estimates put the 2008 turnout of 18- to 29-year-olds between 49.3 and 54.5 percent—an increase of between 1 and 6 percentage points from 2004.¹ In 2004, 48 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted, a 7 percentage point increase from 2000.² And in 2006, turnout was up 3 percentage points from the previous mid-term election.³

This participation increase is especially important because Millennials are a large generation that is nearly as big as the baby boomers—or even larger depending on which years are used to define the generations. Combine their large size with their increased turnout, and Millennials are a potent electoral force. Eighteen to 29-year-olds already comprise 22 percent of all eligible voters—nearly 44 million in total—and as older generations pass away, their influence at the polls will only grow.⁴

The economy was clearly the dominant issue in the election. Exit polling shows that 63 percent of voters think the economy is the most important issue facing the country. Older Americans have only recently become so worried about the economy, but young adults

have felt this way for several years. Gallup tracking polls show that about the same number of Americans ranked Iraq, energy, and the economy as “extremely important” to their vote for president in February 2008.⁵ Only in August did the economy become the top issue for most Americans.

But for young people, the economy has been the most important issue for some time. Twenty-three percent of voters under 30 years old cited the economy as the most important issue in the 2006 election, compared to only 14 percent of the rest of the electorate.⁶ And a 2003 survey of 15- to 25 year-olds found that “jobs and the economy” was the most important problem facing the country, nearly double the number that said the war in Iraq.⁷

Surveys conducted in the months before the election shed a bit more light on young people’s concerns about the economy and indicate how worried young adults are about finding good jobs. A CBS News/UWIRE/Chronicle poll of college undergraduates conducted from October 6 to October 19 showed 76 percent of respondents saying that the economy and jobs were the most important issues affecting their vote, and more than 90 percent said the economy was fairly bad or worse.⁸ Only 32 percent of undergraduates were very confident about getting a job after school. Of these respondents, 48 percent said they were going to vote for the very first time on Election Day, 2008.

A September 2008 poll of 18- to 29-year-olds by Rock the Vote found similar results; 41 percent of respondents said that the economy was the most important issue this election, compared to 24 percent saying the Iraq war, and 9 percent saying health care and prescription drugs.⁹ On a scale of 1-10, 51 percent said that “creating jobs” was a 10, or most important, in helping them decide who to vote for. These economic concerns were high across all groups of 18- to 29-year-olds, including men, women, whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.

Young adults care most about the economy because they face more significant economic challenges than other recent generations such as lower rates of health care coverage, worsening job prospects, and higher levels of student loan debt. Twenty eight percent of 18- to 29-year-olds do not have health insurance, more double the rate for the rest of population, according to Census Bureau estimates.¹⁰ Median real weekly earnings dropped 27 percent for young men and 9 percent for young women between 1973 and 2004. Men aged 18 to 24 earned three quarters as much as men 25 and older in 1967, but by 2004, they made only half as much.¹¹ A 2004 Nellie Mae study found that the average college student has almost \$20,000 in student debt.¹² And as Campus Progress Action’s Erica Williams pointed out in her June 26 testimony before the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit, “If there is one common experience that college students share, it is the experience of living in debt. Compared to previous generations, today’s young adults have not only been forced to borrow for their education but also for their expenses while in college.”¹³

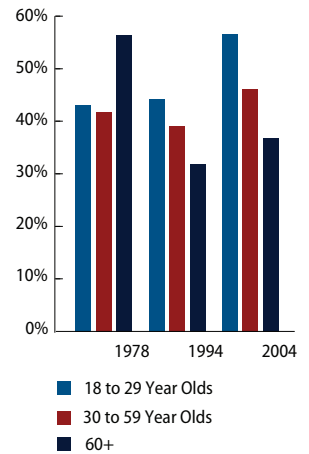
Conservative economic policies have not worked well for most Americans—especially young adults. Millennials are therefore supporting progressive economic policies to create jobs, grow the economy, and provide economic security. A recent Center for American Progress report, “The Progressive Generation,” finds that Millennials are more supportive of a progressive role for government in the economy than older Americans today and than previous generations were when they were younger.¹⁴ For example:

- Millennials are more likely to support universal health coverage than any age group in the 30 previous years the question has been asked, with 57 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds saying that health insurance should come from a government insurance plan.
- Eighty-seven percent of Millennials think the government should spend more money on health care even if a tax increase is required to pay for it, the highest level of support in the question’s 20-year history.
- An overwhelming 95 percent of Millennials think education spending should be increased even if a tax increase is required to pay for it, the highest level ever recorded on this question in the 20 years it has been asked.
- Sixty-one percent of Millennials think the government should provide more services, the most support of any age group in any of the previous 20 years the question was asked.
- Millennials are very supportive of labor unions, giving them an average ranking of 60 on a 0-to-100 scale (with 0 indicating a more negative view of labor unions and 100 being a more positive view), the second-highest level of support of any age group in the over 40-year history of the question.

Millennials—the most diverse generation ever—are also united across race and ethnicity in their support for progressive solutions to our economic problems. Another recent report by the Center for American Progress, “Millennial Economics,” found that although young blacks and Hispanics have historically been more progressive than young whites, young whites are closing the gap and have actually become more progressive in several areas.

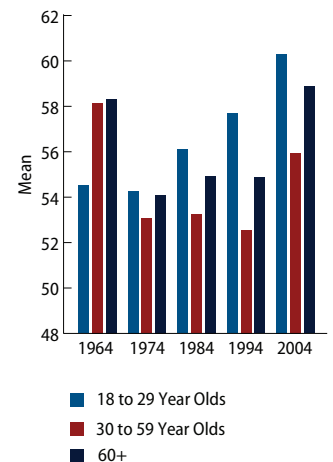
- An average of 86 percent of blacks aged 18 to 29 agreed over the past 20 years that labor unions are necessary to protect workers, while 72 percent of young whites agreed—a 14 percentage-point progressive gap. Today the gap is just 2 percentage points.
- Forty-six percent of young Hispanics over the past two decades believed that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure a good job and standard of living for all, while just 35 percent of young whites did—a gap of 11 percentage points. Today, the gap is less than 6 percentage points.

Percentage of respondents who believe that health insurance should come from a government plan rather than a private plan, by age and year



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Election Survey

Mean response to questions about feelings towards labor unions with less than 50 indicating more negative feelings and more than 50 indicating positive feelings, by age and year



Source: Authors’ analysis of National Election Survey

- An average of 55 percent of young blacks and 54 percent of young Hispanics over the past 20 years have supported universal health care provided by the government, while 45 percent of young whites held this view. Today, young whites are slightly more supportive of universal government-provided health care than young Hispanics and nearly as supportive as young blacks.
- An average of 88 percent of young blacks and 83 percent of young Hispanics over the past 20 years thought federal spending for education should be increased, compared to 78 percent of young whites. Today, Millennial generation whites have nearly cut in half the gap between themselves and young blacks and have overtaken Hispanics.
- An average of 85 percent of blacks, 72 percent of Hispanics, and 51 percent of whites aged 18 to 29 over the past two decades have supported increased federal spending for the poor—a gap of 34 percentage points between young blacks and young whites, and 21 percentage points between young Hispanics and young whites. Yet whites had reduced the gap with blacks by almost 10 percentage points in the most recent survey and had cut it in half with Hispanics.¹⁵

Young Whites Closing the Progressive Gap: A Comparison of the Views of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, Age 18–29

Question	Progressive answer	Young black–young white percentage-point difference: historical average	Young black–young white percentage-point difference: most recent survey	Young Hispanic–young white percentage-point difference: historical average	Young Hispanic–young white percentage-point difference: most recent survey
Do you agree or disagree with the statement that the government should guarantee every citizen enough to eat and a place to sleep? (PEW)	Agree	13.5%	12.6%	5.4%	-2.2%
Is it the government’s responsibility to ensure that everyone has a good job and standard of living? (NES)	Yes	18.8%	31.0%	10.8%	5.4%
Should the government provide many more or many fewer services? (NES)	More	18.8%	16.5%	9.6%	-3.8%
Should there be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses or should individuals and private insurance pay expenses? (NES)	Universal coverage	9.8%	0.2%	8.7%	-3.1%
What do you think should happen to federal spending for Social Security? (NES)	Increase	20.9%	14.6%	3.3%	3.5%
What do you think should happen to federal spending for public education? (NES)	Increase	9.4%	5.6%	4.6%	-5.1%
What do you think should happen to federal spending for child care? (NES)	Increase	16.0%	9.7%	6.9%	3.3%
What do you think should happen to federal spending for the poor? (NES)	Increase	34.1%	25.3%	20.8%	8.3%
Do you agree or disagree with the statement that labor unions are necessary to protect the working person? (PEW)	Agree	14.2%	1.6%	14.6%	17.8%
Labor unions thermometer (NES)	Mean rating	11.9	11.2	9.2	9.1

Source: Authors’ analysis of the PEW Values Survey and the National Election Survey. Notes: The oldest PEW Values Survey used in this report was conducted in 1987 and the most recent in 2007. The oldest National Social Survey used in this report was conducted in 1988 and the most recent in 2004. The percentage-point differences were calculated, for example, by subtracting the average percent of young white respondents who provided a progressive answer over the listed time period from the average percent of young black respondents who provided a progressive answer over the listed time period. The Labor Unions Thermometer lists means instead of percentage-point differences. See text of paper, related charts, and endnotes to view the “progressive answer” for each question in its entirety.

It is no surprise that progressive candidates made large inroads yesterday with the Millennial generation looking at economic issues through a much more progressive lens than previous generations. Sixty-six percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted for Sen. Barack Obama, while just 32 percent voted for Sen. John McCain. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, this is by far the highest share of the youth vote obtained by any candidate since exit polls began reporting results by age categories in 1976.¹⁶ Young voters previously diverged from the popular vote by less than 2 percentage points, though the gap opened to 6 percentage points in 2004.

Research suggests that the political opinions and voting patterns of young adults are likely to carry forward throughout their lives. The shared experiences of Millennials—like those who lived through the Great Depression and World War II—can form a lasting worldview that shapes their political views throughout their lifetimes. Evidence indicates that Millennials already have a distinct generational identity, with 69 percent of them thinking their age group is unique, compared to only 42 percent of Generation X, and 50 percent of baby boomers, who are now between 43 and 62 years of age.¹⁷

As a result, it is likely that young people will be important players in pushing for progressive economic policy for years to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, "National Exit Polls Report Youth Represented 18 Percent of Voters," November 4, 2008, available at <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=322>.
- 2 Karlo Barrios Marcelo and Emily Hoban Kirby, "Quick Facts about U.S. Young Voters," CIRCLE, October 2008.
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- 4 Marcelo and Kirby, "Quick Facts about U.S. Young Voters;" Peter Leyden and Ruy Teixeira, "The Progressive Politics of the Millennial Generation: The Emerging Evidence on Why the Younger Generation is Boosting Progressive Prospects for the early 21st Century," (Washington: New Politics Institute, 2007).
- 5 Lydia Saad, "Economy Reigns Supreme for Voters," Gallup, October 29, 2008. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/111586/Economy-Reigns-Supreme-Voters.aspx>
- 6 Anna Greenberg and Amy Gershkoff, "Forging the Ties that Bind: Reaching Out to the MySpace Generation, Democratic Stagiest, April 2007 available at http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/ac/2007/03/forging_the_ties_that_bind_rea.php.
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- 9 "New Rock the Vote Poll: Young Voters' Election Energy Intensifies, Spurred by Economic Concerns and Desire for Change" (Washington: Rock the Vote 2008) available at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/press-room/press-releases/new-rock-the-vote-poll-young.html>.
- 10 <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p60-235.pdf>
- 11 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.
- 12 Nellie Mae, "Undergraduate Students and Credit Cards in 2004: An Analysis of Usage Rates and Trends" (2005) available at http://www.nelliemae.com/pdf/ccstudy_2005.pdf.
- 13 Erica Williams, "Students Need Help Combating Credit Card Debt," Testimony before the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit (Washington: Campus Progress Action, 2007).
- 14 David Madland and Amanda Logan, "The Progressive Generation," (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008).
- 15 David Madland and Amanda Logan, "Millennial Economics: It Don't matter if You're Black or White (or Hispanic)" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2008).
- 16 Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, "National Exit Polls Report Youth Represented 18 Percent of Voters," November 4, 2008. <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=321>.
- 17 David Madland and Amanda Logan, "The Progressive Generation."