Generational Values and Political Participation in Recent U.S. Elections

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share results from a survey that leveraged Cultural Theory to understand the relationship between generational values and political participation in recent U.S. elections. Specifically, this paper explores how generational values were associated with voter turnout in the 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections and with presidential candidate preference during the 2016 and 2020 elections. This paper presents a cohort analysis of cross-sectional survey data collected in the spring of 2020 matched with validated voter files. The findings are a first attempt to build theory about how generational values may be associated with political engagement and how the values of Millennials and Gen Z, in particular, have influenced voter turnout and presidential candidate preferences in recent U.S. elections. I find a weak correlation between value type and turnout, but a much stronger relationship between value type and presidential candidate preference. Across generations, those with egalitarian values were more likely to support Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020; those with individualistic or hierarchical values were more likely to support Trump in both elections. While the association between value type and presidential candidate preference holds across generations, there is more value polarization in candidate preference among the older generations than in the Gen Z/Millennial generation, signaling that the political divisiveness surrounding recent presidential elections may be driven by older age cohorts.

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For years, researchers and pollsters have documented how Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are entering the political arena with distinct attitudes and behaviors that differ from older generations (Della Volpe, 2022; Fisher 2018, 2020; Heys, 2024; Rouse & Ross, 2018; Twenge, 2023). For instance, studies and popular polling have found that Millennials and Gen Zers are notably more progressive than previous generations (Della Volpe, 2022; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Rouse & Ross, 2018), with many young people from across the political spectrum signaling more left-leaning views on policy issues like climate change and universal health care and on social issues like racial justice and LBGTQ+ rights (Pew Research Center, 2018). Their progressive views have even helped Democratic candidates win elections such as the 2022 midterms (CIRCLE, 2022), and the 2020 Presidential election when young people turned out in record numbers and Joe Biden won roughly 60 percent of voters 18-29-years-old and flipped important battleground states to take the presidency (Igielnik, Keeter, & Hartig, 2021). Despite their progressive views and record setting turnout levels in recent elections, young people tend to have the lowest turnout rates of any age group. Reasons for this are many, but recent national surveys by nonprofit organizations highlight startling cultural trends that young people feel disillusioned with the political system and think their vote does not matter and will not make a difference in their lives, and that voting is ineffective or perpetuates a broken system (Change Research, 2022; CIRCLE, 2020b; Thomson-DeVeaux, Mithani, & Bronner, 2020). Recent polling has also found that young people think that much in their lives is outside of their control, are pessimistic about their own futures and the fate of the country (Change Research, 2022).

While existing research has done much to uncover emerging trends in the unique outlook of Millennials and Gen Z, the systematic study of generational values that shape young people's political behaviors and preferences has not been recently explored. This paper shares results from a national survey launched during the 2020 presidential election that used Cultural Theory (Swedlow, Ripberger, Liu, Silva, Jenkins-Smith, & Johnson, 2020) to understand the relationship between generational values and political participation. Specifically, this paper uses survey items developed by Cultural Theory researchers to explore how the values of different generations were associated with voter turnout during the 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections, alongside presidential candidate preference in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. This study presents a cohort analysis in cross-sectional survey data collected in the spring of 2020 matched with validated voter files from recent U.S. elections. The study is limited in that it does not attempt to disentangle the age, period, and cohort effects commonly associated with the study of generations (for example, Neundorf & Niemi, 2014). However, this study

makes an important contribution in that it is a first attempt at identifying how generational values may be associated with voter turnout and presidential candidate preference in recent U.S. elections.

I find a weak correlation between value type and turnout. Specifically, I find that young people with fatalistic values were less likely to vote in all election years than young people who did not express fatalistic values, but the effects diminish when controls for education, gender, income, race, and ideology are added. Baby Boomers who expressed fatalistic values were also less likely to vote in all election years, in both the base and full regression models. There was a much stronger correlation between value type and candidate preferences. Across generations, those with egalitarian values were more likely to support Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020; those with individualistic or hierarchical values were more likely to support Trump in both 2016 and 2020. While the association between value type and presidential candidate preference holds across generations, there is more value polarization in candidate preference among the older generations than in the Gen Z/Millennial generation, signaling that the political divisiveness surrounding recent presidential elections may be driven by older age cohorts.

Literature Review

What accounts for young people's political behavior?

There are typically three approaches researchers use to understand young people's political behavior, known as 'age', 'period', and 'cohort' effects. Researchers who study age effects posit that voting habits develop as a person ages. Leaders in this field find that once people launch their careers, find a spouse or establish a family, they typically become more embedded in social networks that increase their exposure to norms and resources that encourage them to engage in politics (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Individuals may also come into closer contact with government programs and services as they age, which may account for higher voting rates among older age cohorts (Campbell, 2003; Delli Carpini, 1989; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Young people, on the other hand, may have lower levels of turnout because they often undergo major life transitions at 18-years-old by breaking away from family homes and local communities, which can interrupt the social networks that would otherwise encourage young people to engage politically (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Relatedly, another line of research shows that there are 'institutional barriers' that prohibit young people from voting in the first few years that they are eligible during the volatile and vulnerable transition to adulthood period (Juelich & Coll, 2020). For example, as first-time voters, young people may move more often or struggle more to find the time to vote, to plan ahead to vote, and to balance

voting with other competing life priorities (Hill, 2020). Despite the fact that young people report caring about politics and often intend to vote (Holbein & Hillygus, 2022), many fail to follow-through because young people are less likely to have information that is necessary to vote, such as knowing how to register, where to go vote, or where to find information about candidates. Barriers to voting have undoubtedly increased in recent years with more restrictions in some states placed on voter ID laws, same-day voter registration, and absentee or mail-in voting, which disproportionately affect young people (Bonica, Grumbach, Hill, & Jefferson, 2021; Grumbach & Hill, 2022; Hill & Grumbach, 2019; Juelich & Coll, 2020).

Yet existing evidence questions whether age or lifecycle models of political behavior can fully explain the political behavior of younger generations. Recent research has found that the Millennial and Gen Z generation today are not necessarily inheriting the political attitudes and behaviors of their parents or grandparents as scholars in the political socialization literature would suggest, signaling the emergence of a unique political generation (Della Volpe, 2020; Fischer 2018, 2020; Rouse & Ross, 2018; Smets, 2016; Stoker, 2014).[1] For example, young people today have been found to have a different conception of citizenship than older generations and are less likely to see voting as a civic duty and more likely to place emphasis on holding those in power accountable as a motivation to vote (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Heys, 2024; Inglehart, 2018; Martin, 2012; Wattenberg, 2020). While young Millennials have shown to become more conservative as they age (Cohn, 2023), it does not appear that Millennials are growing as conservative as previous generations as they age through the lifecycle (Griffin, Frey & Teixeira, 2020). Young people are also choosing different political parties than their parents—fewer than half of young people who grew up in conservative households call themselves Republican today, and only about 60 percent of young people who grew up in liberal households claim the Democratic Party (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2023).

Traditional lifecycle arguments of political behavior are also being upended by younger generations. For example, researchers from the Berkeley Institute for Young Americans (BIFYA) found that traditional indicators of voter turnout—such as marriage, homeownership, employment, and union membership—are not predictors of voter turnout for younger generations in recent elections as they

[1] Throughout this paper, Millennials and Gen Z are grouped together for two reasons. Research indicates Millennials and Gen Z are likeminded on their political attitudes and preferences and therefore there is reason to believe they may share a similar generational culture (Della Volpe, 2022; Fisher 2018, 2020; Rouse & Ross, 2018). Secondly, the research team had difficulty recruiting Gen Z participants for the survey and interviews, and therefore have a smaller sample size of Gen Z. Members of the Greatest and Silent generations are also grouped together in the analysis due to small sample size across the survey and interview data.

are for older generations (Anzia & Hawkins, 2020). The lifecycle research would suggest that attachments to these traditional institutions would encourage greater political participation; however, such findings signal that younger generations' patterns of political engagement are fundamentally different from older generations. Researcher Kaat Smets (2012, 2016) has investigated this phenomenon further, and argues that the traditional lifecycle model is at odds young people today who are delaying major life events like marriage, homeownership, or child rearing that may influence traditional forms of political engagement.

Another area of research suggests that youth voter turnout is influenced by unique 'period' effects or major events that affect young people differently from how older adults experience the same events (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Debevec, Schewe, Madden, & Diamond, 2013; Park, Twenge, & Greenfield, 2014; Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014). For example, Baby Boomers who joined the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s were left with unique left-leaning political attitudes that distinguished them as they aged (Jennings 1987, 2002). Millennials and Gen Z were also uniquely exposed to events during the transition to adulthood that distinguish their generation. The falling of the Twin Towers on 9/11, the 2008 Great Recession, the election of President Obama and President Trump, the growth of social movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, and the COVID-19 pandemic are just some of the major events that have left a lasting cultural imprint on young people's lives and influenced their political leanings and behavior. Of course, all living generations experienced these same events, but the argument follows that those who experienced such unique events during the formative years of adolescence and young adulthood were more likely to be influenced by them because of their social location at that particular time in the life course (Mannheim, 1952). In turn, exposure to major events during or leading up to election years may influence turnout rates and voter preferences (Ghitza, Gelman & Auerbach, 2022). High stakes elections, such as the 2020 presidential election, tend to draw-in more voters than elections where the outcome is a foregone conclusion, and younger voters may be more likely to participate in close races or highly polarized elections since they are still developing turnout habits (Franklin, 2004). Yet period effects alone may not be sufficient to explain the consistent high-level turnout of young adults in recent U.S. elections.

Living through a series of shared and meaningful social, political, economic, and historical events—especially during the impressionable years of adolescence and early adulthood--may leave a lasting imprint on young people's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In turn, this may create a 'cohort effect' that can define the culture of a generation and influence a generation's overall outlook

and orientation toward politics (Fischer 2018, 2020; Nemčok & Wass, 2021; Stoker, 2014). Evidence is accumulating that the Millennial and Gen Z generations are emerging as a unique political cohort that is distinct from older generations. For example, Millennials and Gen Zers have been found to be notably more left leaning than previous generations (Fisher 2018, 2020; Rouse & Ross, 2018), and are more likely to share a collective identity (Munger & Plutzer, 2023). Young people from across the political spectrum are also more likely to express progressive attitudes on policy issues like climate change and Health Care for All, as well as social issues like racial justice, immigration, and LBGTQ rights (Pew Research Center, 2018; Latifi, 2022). There is also evidence suggesting that young people's attitudes toward the role and scope of government differs greatly from older generations, with young people across ideologies more likely to think that government should do more to solve society's problems (Pew Research Center, 2018; Rouse & Ross, 2018), even if it means higher taxes for all (Heys, Hawkins, & Swanbeck, 2020).

Yet despite their more progressive and left-leaning views, many young people report being 'disillusioned' with politics and the traditional two-party system (Thomson-DeVeaux, Mithani, & Bronner, 2020). Likewise, young people have also been found to have lower interest in the news and politics than older generations (Martin, 2012; Wattenberg, 2020), and are less likely to engage in 'traditional' forms of political engagement, such as joining or donating to a political party or contacting elected officials (Dalton, 2017; Wattenberg, 2020). Young people have also been found to be more isolated and detached from social networks than previous generations—they are less likely to join or engage with unions, religious groups, or other community-oriented institutions that traditionally foster civic behaviors (Dalton, 2014; Wray-Lake, 2019)--which in turn may influence their willingness to engage politically (Putnam, 2000; Sander & Putnam, 2010). Notably, while trust in the President, Congress, and other political and social institutions has been on the decline for decades across age groups, young adults are more likely than older age groups to refrain from political participation due to their distrust (Shea, 2015). Despite these pessimistic indicators of young people's outlook on politics, young people are more likely to engage in alternative forms of political participation by attending protests, signing petitions, or engaging in online activism (Dalton, 2017; Sloam & Henn, 2019; Wattenberg, 2020).

Why study generational values and political participation?

Given the growing evidence base suggesting that Millennials and Gen Z are emerging as a unique political generation, this paper explores the relationship of young people's values with their political behavior in recent U.S. elections, an important cultural aspect of younger cohorts that has been

overlooked in recent research. While some scholars near the turn of the century made progress studying generational values (Abramson & Inglehart, 1987; Putnam, 2000; Sander & Putnam, 2010; Strauss & Howe, 1997), the topic has been under-theorized in recent research, especially when it comes to understanding the distinct values of the Millennial and Gen Z generations in connection with their turnout and voting preferences. Drawing on what is known about the values of younger generations, there is evidence that the values of Millennials and Gen Z are fundamentally different from older generations, especially as their values relate to their political participation. Young people have been found to be more egalitarian and altruistic (Gregg, 2018; Heys, 2024), and may have a more critical perspective regarding democratic citizenship than older generations (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Foa, Klassen, Wenger, Rand & Slade, 2020). Younger generations also differ in that they do not necessarily share the same values around work, personal responsibility, and individualism that are embodied by older generations (Pew Research Center, 2010; Strauss & Howe, 1997).[2]

There is also evidence that the political party identification of younger age cohorts is changing, which may signal underlying values change among young adults. Despite their progressive views, young people are not necessarily identifying more with the Democratic Party; the majority of Millennials now identify as Independent voters rather than identify as members of either major political party (Jones, 2022). There is also some indication that young people's values may be transforming to the point that traditional political parties are struggling to capture their vote (Gomez & Daniller, 2021). Researchers at the Berkeley Institute for Young Americans find that the values of young conservatives, in particular, are changing, with young conservatives more egalitarian and fatalistic in comparison to older age cohorts of conservatives (Heys, 2024). This changing value structure may play out in the attitudes of young conservatives, who have been found to hold more liberal views on issues like racial equality, climate change, universal health care, and abortion (CIRCLE, 2021).

Recent national surveys by nonprofit organizations also highlight startling trends regarding the relationship between young people's beliefs and attitudes and their political behavior. Young people are more likely to report that their vote does not matter in elections and will not make a difference in their

[2] Researcher Jean Twenge (2014) documents a trend of "Generation Me," arguing that young Americans are more entitled, individualistic, narcissistic, and assertive/confident than previous generations. However, this research is limited as its findings largely draw from the college-educated class of young people; the literature is also debated within the field of psychology, with some arguing for a cooperative and activist "Generation We" (see Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010).

lives, and that voting is ineffective or perpetuates a broken system; others feel that they do not know enough to vote or feel unqualified to vote (Change Research, 2022; CIRCLE, 2020b; Thomson-DeVeaux, Mithani, & Bronner, 2020). Recent polling has also found that young people think that much in their lives is outside of their control, are pessimistic about their own futures and the fate of the country, and are feeling pessimistic about the American Dream, believing that while it was once true, it is no longer within reach for younger generations (Change Research, 2022). To this point, a recent study finds that Millennials and Gen Z are more likely to express 'fatalistic' values than other generations, meaning that they feel little agency and control over their own lives and fate (Heys, 2024).

Why use Cultural Theory to study generational values?

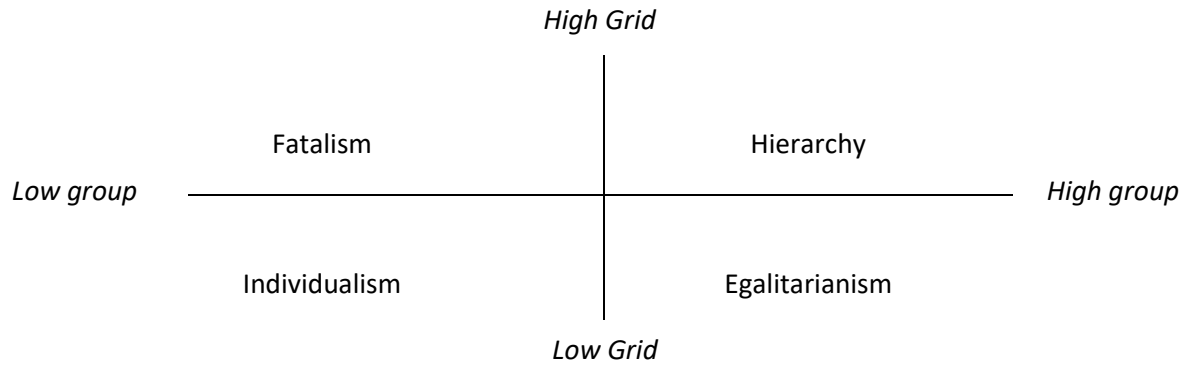
This study explores the relationship between generational values and political engagement using advances in Cultural Theory (Swedlow, et al., 2020). Over the last several decades, scholars have developed Cultural Theory (CT), or rather a theory of culture that makes it possible to study the shared worldviews, values and beliefs that develop among individuals engaged in specific patterns of social relationships. To elaborate: as argued by cultural theorists, individuals have different structural positions in society that are shaped by social relationships and institutions that both influence and reflect their cultural identities (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983; Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky, 1990; Thompson, Grendstad, & Selle, 1999). Depending on an individual's social position and the relationships they hold, the argument follows that different cultural contexts will shape an individual's worldviews, values, and beliefs, or rather, 'cultural biases'. Together, cultural biases and social relationships create 'cultural solidarities.' In turn, the theory posits that the cultural biases created within each cultural solidarity will influence (either consciously or subconsciously) individual norms, attitudes, and behaviors, perceptions of external risks, preferences for specific technologies, public policies, and ultimately will influence prevailing institutions in society (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020).

Researchers have developed a 'grid-group' typology of different cultural solidarities that can be used to explain the interaction of the individual and society (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983; Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky, 1990). The "group" dimension is the degree to which an individual acts as part of a group or alone; a "high group" way of life is a culture that exhibits a high degree of collective control, whereas a "low group" culture emphasizes individual self-sufficiency. The "grid" dimension is the degree to which individual behavior is regulated by external, socially constructed prescriptions. A "high grid" culture is characterized by strict, hierarchical and often authoritative social structures that classify individuals and

regulates their interactions, whereas a "low grid" culture embraces equal positions in a social system with little to no external control.

With this grid-group typology, four primary cultural solidarities are established: hierarchical, individualistic, egalitarian, and fatalistic. Egalitarian cultural solidarities are low grid and high group, meaning that there tends to be high group involvement coupled with minimal external regulation. Hierarchical solidarities are high group, high grid, meaning that individuals are subject to both the control of others and the demands of socially imposed roles and restrictions. An individualistic solidarity is low group, low grid, and is characterized by individuals being relatively free from control by others. Lastly, the fatalistic solidarity is low group but high grid, indicating that the individual is isolated from group membership but constricted by external forces. Adherence to these social solidarities reflects an ongoing process of cultural conflict where culturally shared values and beliefs act to either legitimate or change the social order, and will often be pitted against one another in political conflict (Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky, 1990).

Figure 1 – CT's grid and group dimensions of social relations/cultural types



Drawing from CT also has the benefit of making the connection between the individual and social structure.[3] One could argue that major institutional relationships have changed for the youngest generations due to an era of globalization and neoliberal public management that arose in the 1980s just as the first cohort of Millennials were born (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2018; Rouse & Ross, 2018). Major institutional transformations to the administration of government programs and the marketplace

[3] This is the primary reason for using CT over other frameworks for the study of values, such as postmaterialism (Inglehart, 2018) or psychometric approaches (Jost, Basevich, Dickson & Noorbaloochi, 2016; Schwartz, 2012). Postmaterialism theory focuses on how values are socialized and internalized by individuals during their formative, adolescent years, rather than influenced by institutional or structural frameworks. Psychological approaches to values also disregard the cultural and institutional context individuals are embedded within.

have taken place since this time, alongside significant changes to the traditional family system (Esping-Anderson,1999; Hacker, 2019), resulting in new risks experienced by younger generations that define a unique generational culture (Green, 2017). In addition, new existential risks—such as climate change and Artificial Intelligence—have evolved as a result of societal progress (Beck, 1992) and may have the power to uniquely impact the culture of younger generations in the years to come.

In this paper, I focus on the 'cultural biases' side of CT, or rather, the shared worldviews, values and beliefs of different generations (cultural biases are referred to simply as 'values' throughout the paper). To the author's knowledge, CT has not yet been leveraged in the study of generations and political engagement, but is an appropriate theory to gauge the fundamental differences emerging among Millennials and Gen Z, who have been defined as a distinct political generation (Della Volpe, 2022; Rouse & Ross, 2018). As noted in the literature review, a growing body of research provides evidence that younger generations have distinct outlooks that are different from older generations but this topic has not been studied systematically in recent research. Leveraging CT offers the opportunity to study the values of different generations and potential differences in relationship to political engagement.

Methods

Using CT, the Berkeley Institute for Young Americans (BIFYA) administered a national survey with YouGov from April 29 – May 13, 2020 to understand whether generational values were associated with political behavior. Findings from this paper are part of a larger mixed methods project to research in-depth new concepts about generational values, risk perceptions, attitudes, and voting behavior that are not yet tested or well understood in existing literature. The main research questions guiding this portion of the project ask:

1. Are generational values associated with voting behavior in 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections?
2. Are generational values associated with presidential candidate preference in both the 2016 and 2020 elections?

Survey sample - BIFYA contracted with YouGov, a company that has a proprietary opt-in survey panel of 1.8 million U.S. residents who have agreed to participate in web surveys. YouGov used the criteria of age, race, geography, and gender to identify a nationally representative sample to recruit for the study. YouGov recruits its panel using Web advertisements, permission-based email campaigns, partner sponsored solicitations, telephone-to-Web recruitment sampling, and mail-to-Web recruitment.

Primarily, YouGov targets respondents based on keyword searches, such as a Google search. They target difficult to recruit respondents by soliciting panelists in telephone and mail surveys. Since BIFYA is particularly interested in analyzing results by age or generation, the study was designed to oversample young people in the Gen Z and Millennial age group (18-39-year-olds). Demographic characteristics of the survey sample are listed in Table 1 of the Appendix, along with further description of the enrollment procedures and weighting of the data.

Survey items - The Berkeley Institute for Young Americans first measured differences in generational values in the 2020 survey using survey items developed by Jenkins-Smith and colleagues (Jenkins-Smith & Smith, 1994; Ripberger, Jenkins-Smith, & Herron, 2011). Researchers have developed several survey items in recent years to measure the four cultural solidarities identified by Cultural Theory (Swedlow, et al., 2020), but according to Swedlow and colleagues (2020), the strength of the Jenkins-Smith indices is that they focus on measuring the cultural biases side of CT, rather than the social relationship side of CT. Other questions in the YouGov survey included questions related to the 2018 and 2020 election and attitudes toward the safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic (results from the safety net questions will be documented in a separate paper). The research team also acquired validated voting files from YouGov that were matched to the participants who completed the 2020 survey; turnout data is available for 1,761 respondents from our survey in 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022. YouGov obtains validated voter files from TargetSmart for members of their panel. YouGov also provided self-reported presidential candidate data for the 2016 and 2020 election for our full sample of 2,270 respondents. The CT questions served as the foundation for this analysis, and the questions were used to explore correlations with the other questions asked on the survey such as voter turnout and presidential candidate preferences.

Naïve CT index construction – As noted in Table 1 below, the survey asked 12 questions aimed at identifying respondents' values, with three questions corresponding to each of the four value types established by Cultural Theory. Other researchers have conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the survey items to test whether the items are measuring the concepts identified by theory and find that the CT measures cluster as expected into four discrete concepts, with each of the three questions uniquely loading onto a single factor with no confounding (Johnson, Swedlow, & Mayorga, 2020; Johnson & Swedlow, 2024). Swedlow et al. (2020) also show that the Jenkins-Smith measures have high predictive validity in regression analyses, as theory would posit. They show that the Jenkins-Smith measures can predict concerns about policy issues and environmental views that were hypothesized by

the original theorists of CT (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990), and therefore there is a theoretical basis for exploring the relationship between the CT items and political behavior. Notably, other researchers also show similar predictive validity using the Jenkins-Smith measures when exploring their relationship with other policy issues and risk perceptions (Johnson, Swedlow, & Mayorga, 2020; Kiss, Lachapelle, & Montpetit, 2020; Nowlin & Rabovsky, 2020; Swedlow, et al., 2020).

Other studies using the Jenkins-Smith measures use the 12 CT survey items shown below in Table 1 to construct a naïve index by calculating the average score respondents assigned to each of the three items associated with each value type (Swedlow et al., 2020). I replicate this process by taking the average score respondents assigned to each of the three items associated with each value type; each of the 12 CT items in our survey used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. Next, to make the index more interpretable in figures showing regression analysis results, the naïve indexes were used to create a binary variable that was assigned a "1" if the index score associated with a given respondent was greater than three, and assigned a "0" if the mean value index score was less than or equal to three. If a respondent had an average index score greater than three, this indicated that the respondent had answered at least neutral to two questions associated with a given value type, and agreed or strongly agreed with at least one question (answered either a 4 or 5 on the survey question). The binary variable was used in regression analyses to show the association with voter turnout and presidential candidate preference.

Table 1. Jenkins-Smith worldview indices questions, as reported in Swedlow et al. (2020)

Egalitarianism	● Society works better if power is shared equally ● What society needs is a fairness revolution to make the distribution of goods more equal ● It is our responsibility to reduce differences in income between the rich and the poor
Individualism	● We are better off when we compete as individuals ● Even the disadvantaged should have to make their own way in the world ● Even if some people are at a disadvantage, it is best for society to let people succeed or fail on their own
Hierarchy	● Society would be much better off if the people in charge imposed strict and swift punishment on those who break the rules ● Society is in trouble because people do not obey those in authority ● The best way to get ahead in life is to work hard and do what you are told
Fatalism	● No matter how hard we try, the course of our lives is largely determined by forces beyond our control ● It would be pointless to make serious plans in such an uncertain world ● The most important things that take place in life happen by chance

Defining generations for analysis - This analysis uses the definition of generations provided by the PEW research center (Pew, 2015). Gen Z is defined as those born after 1996 (but who were at least 18 at the time of the study recruitment); Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996, and Gen X members were born between 1965 and 1980. Members of the Boomer generation were born between 1946 and 1964, whereas members of the Silent generation were born between 1928 and 1945 and those from the Greatest generation were born before 1928. In the analysis, I combine Millennials and Gen Z, and also combine members of the Silent and Greatest generations to address small sample sizes among the Gen Z and Greatest generations.

Findings

Relationship between values and turnout

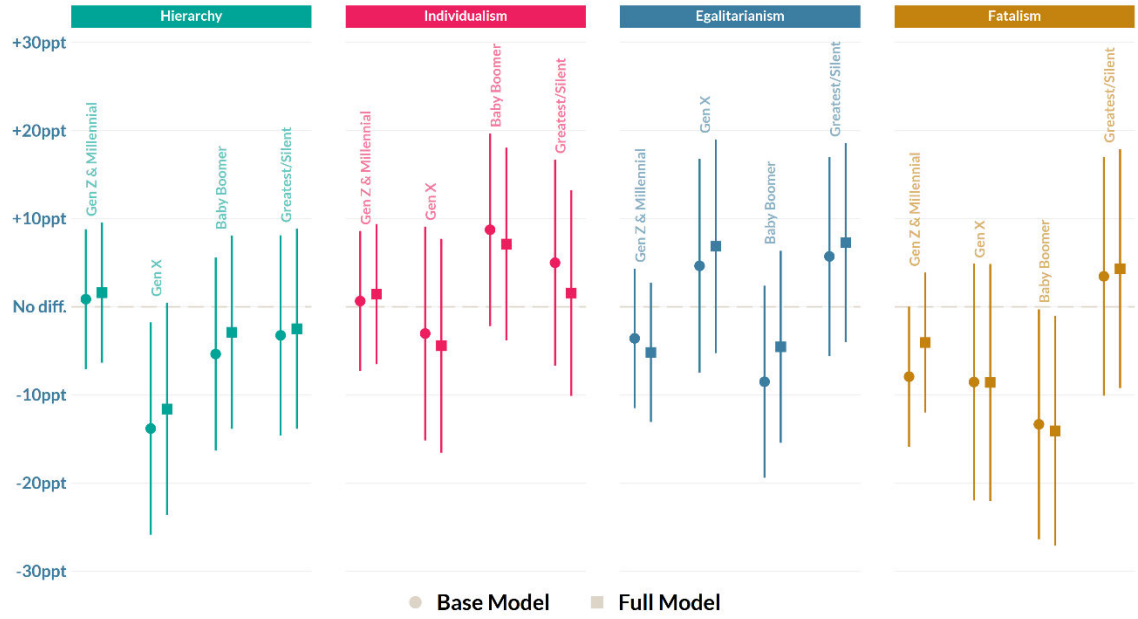
Figure 2 below shows the relationship between value type and whether the respondent voted in the 2016 general election.[4] As shown, for Gen X there is a statistically significant relationship where those with hierarchical values were about 13 percentage points less likely to vote in 2016 than those in the Gen X generation that did not express hierarchical values, but the statistically significant effect diminishes when controls are added in the full model. There are also statistically significant results among Gen Z and Millennials with fatalistic values, who were about 8 percentage points less likely to turn out to vote in the 2016 election than those in their generation that did not express fatalistic values; however, the effects diminish in the full model with controls. Fatalistic Baby Boomers, on the other hand, show marginally statistically significant results in both the base and full models, and were about 13-14 percentage points less likely to vote in 2016 if they expressed fatalistic values. Figure 3 shows the relationship between value type and voting behavior in the 2018 midterms. Again, there are few notable patterns. The base model shows a negative relationship with voter turnout for Baby Boomers who held egalitarian values. The same trends in fatalism persist for the Millennial/Gen Z generation and Baby Boomers, with those holding fatalistic views less likely to turnout to vote in the 2018 election.

Figure 2

[4] To interpret statistical significance in Figures 2-5, the coefficient and error bars must not cross the horizontal dotted line at the center of the figure to be statistically significant. If the error bars do cross the line, there is no statistically significant relationship.

Are Values Associated with Voter Turnout in 2016?

Percentage point (ppt) difference in each generation voting in 2016 by value type



Source: Authors' analysis of YouGov data, administered April 29 - May 13, 2020.
Notes: This figure illustrates the generational (percentage point) differences in the relationship between voter turnout and value type for our base model (no controls) and full model with controls for poverty status, college attainment, gender, race, and political ideology. Value preferences are based on a binary indicator for each value, with respondents coded as holding a particular value if the mean of their index value is greater than three.
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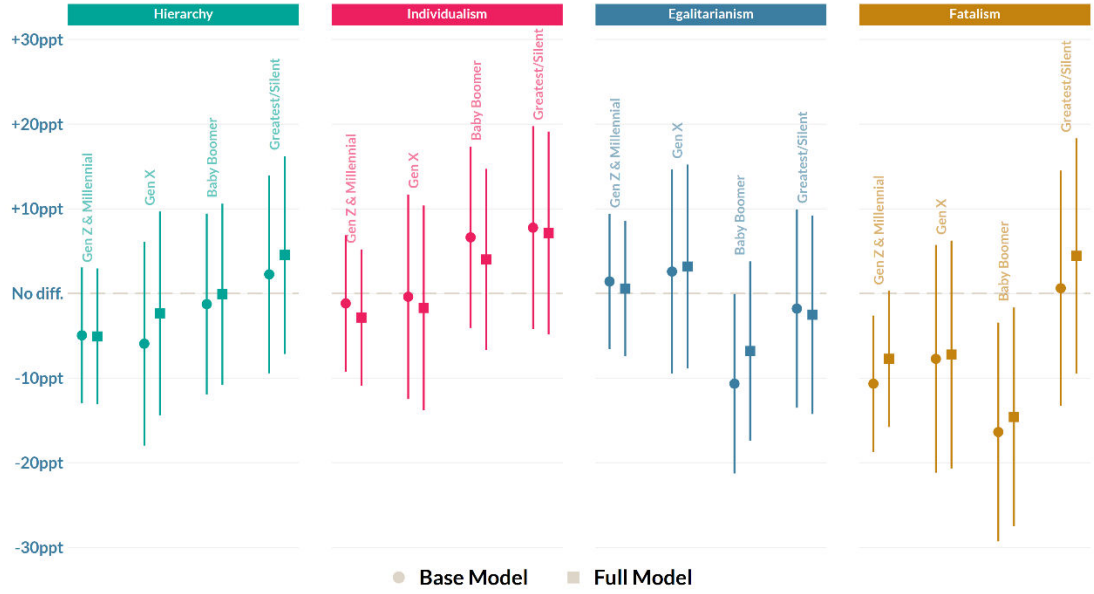
Figure 3

Are Values Associated with Voter Turnout in 2018?

Percentage point (ppt) difference in each generation voting in 2018 by value type



Source: Authors' analysis of YouGov data, administered April 29 - May 13, 2020.
Notes: This figure illustrates the generational (percentage point) differences in the relationship between voter turnout and value type for our base model (no controls) and full model with controls for poverty status, college attainment, gender, race, and political ideology. Value preferences are based on a binary indicator for each value, with respondents coded as holding a particular value if the mean of their index value is greater than three.
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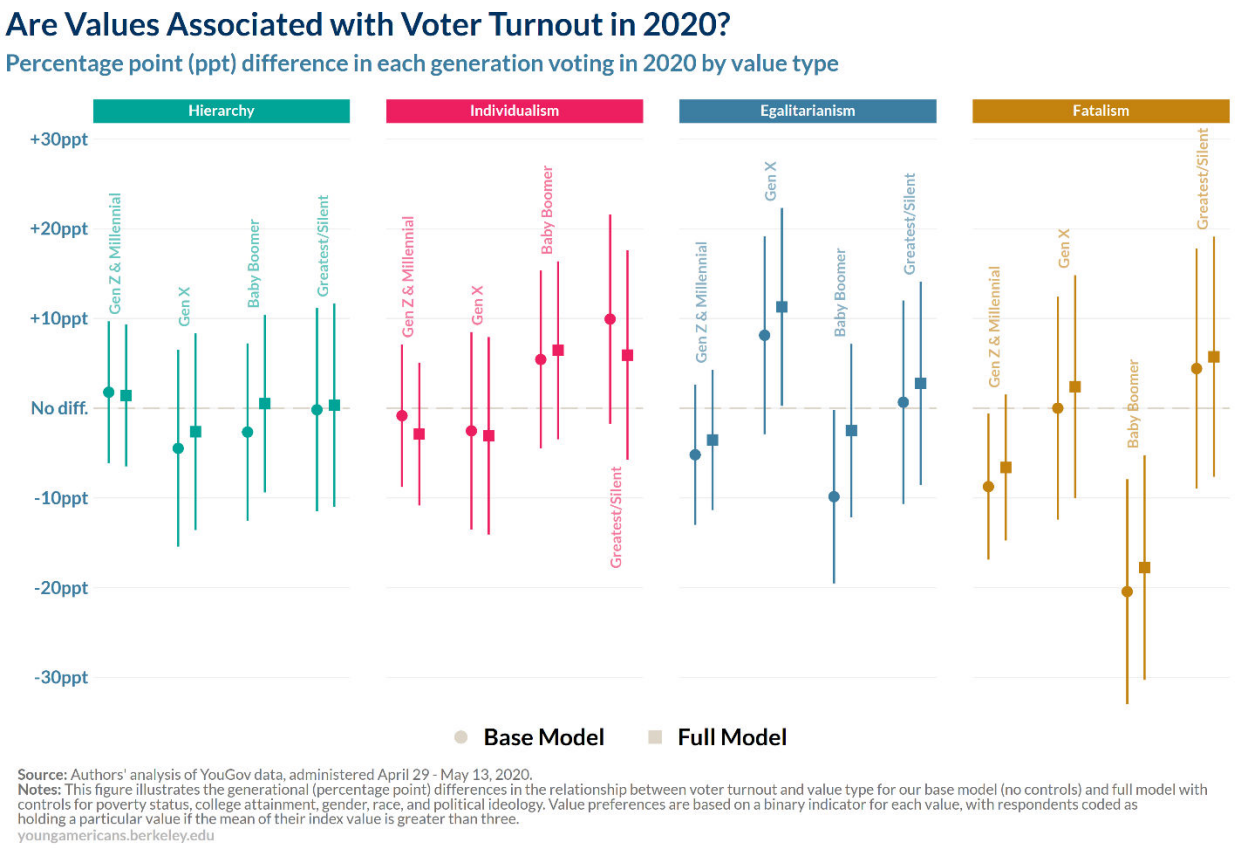
Data from the 2020 election show similar findings compared to 2018, as seen in Figure 4. There is a negative association between egalitarian values and voter turnout for the Baby Boomer generation, although the effect diminishes in the full model. Again, the same consistent pattern in the relationship between fatalism and turnout for the Millennial/Gen Z generations and Baby Boomers is shown, with those expressing fatalistic views from each generation less likely to turnout than those in their respective generations who do not express those views. Figure 5, which shows turnout for the 2022 election, again shows the same consistent pattern of the negative relationship between fatalism and turnout among the Millennial/Gen Z generation and the Baby Boomers. Yet notably, Figure 5 also shows new movement in the relationship between voter turnout for Millennials/Gen Z with hierarchical and individualistic values. Young people with hierarchical values were 10-13 percentage points less likely to vote in the 2022 election in both the base and full models. Millennials/Gen Z with individualistic values were about 12 percentage points less likely to vote after controls were added in the full model.

Figure 4



Source: Authors' analysis of YouGov data, administered April 29 - May 13, 2020.
Notes: This figure illustrates the generational (percentage point) differences in the relationship between voter turnout and value type for our base model (no controls) and full model with controls for poverty status, college attainment, gender, race, and political ideology. Value preferences are based on a binary indicator for each value, with respondents coded as holding a particular value if the mean of their index value is greater than three.
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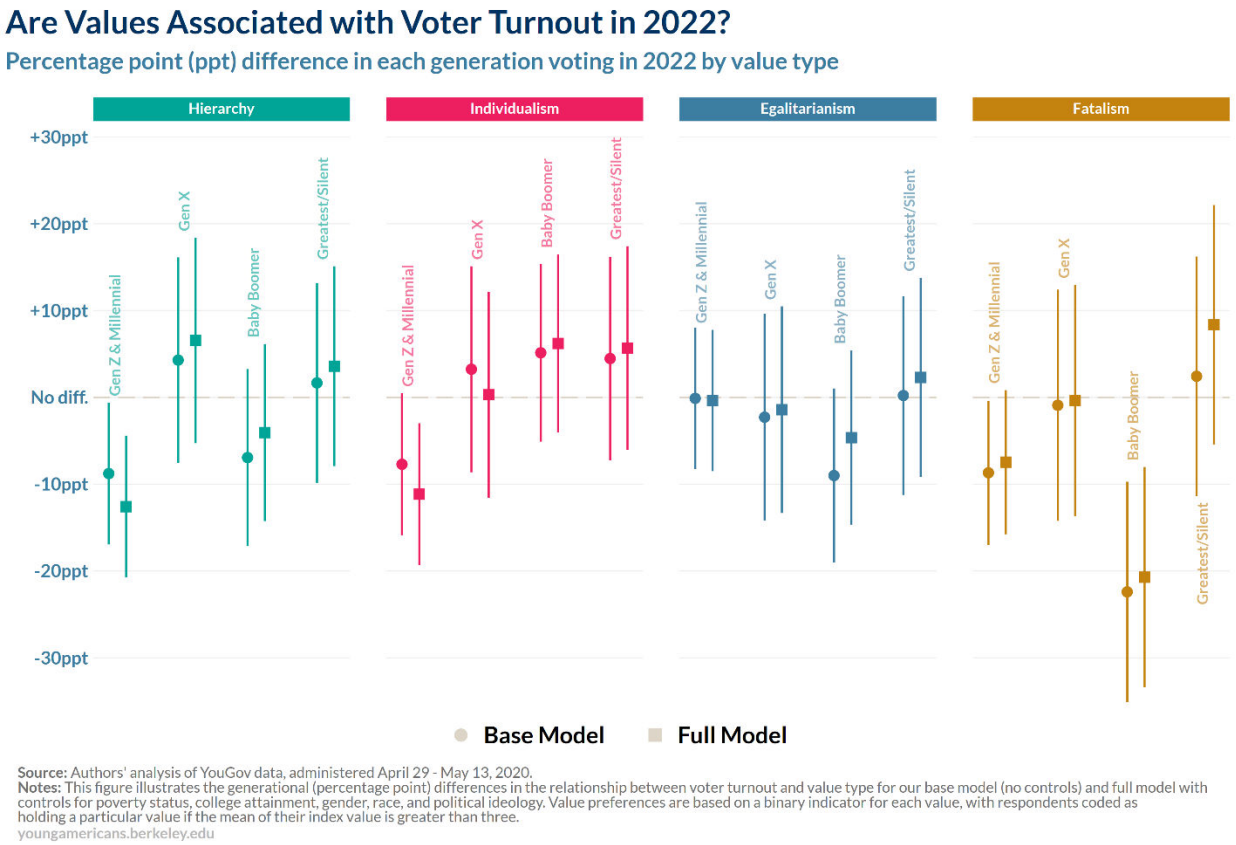
Figure 5



Voted for Clinton (2016) or voted for Biden (2020)

Next, Figures 6 and 7 show the relationship between value type and whether the respondent voted for Clinton in the 2016 election and Biden in the 2020 election, respectively.[5] As shown in both figures, across all generations, those with egalitarian values were more likely vote for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020. Those with individualistic and hierarchical values were less likely to vote for Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020 (note that in both figures, the comparison group include those who supported Trump, someone else, or not sure). Fatalism does not appear to share a statistically significant relationship with preference for Clinton or Biden among any generation. Hierarchical values had a negative association with intentions to vote for Clinton and Biden, but only among the Boomer and Greatest/Silent generations in the 2016 election, and only among Gen X and Baby Boomers in 2020.

[5] To interpret statistical significance in Figures 6-9, the coefficient and error bars must not cross the vertical dotted line at the center of the figure to be statistically significant. If the error bars do cross the line, there is no statistically significant relationship.

Importantly, the spread of egalitarian and individualistic values across each generation is notable. For example, members of the Gen X, Boomer, and Greatest/Silent generations with egalitarian values were about 22-33 percentage points more likely to vote for Clinton in the 2016 election (depending on the generation), while Gen Z/Millennials with egalitarian values were only 13 percentage points more likely. The same pattern holds in 2020—members of the Gen X, Boomer, and Greatest/Silent generations with egalitarian values were about 24-34 percentage points more likely to vote for Biden, while Gen Z/Millennials with egalitarian values were about 23 percentage points more likely to vote for Biden. Likewise, there is a surprising amount of spread in individualistic values across generations in relationship to candidate preference. Members of the Greatest/Silent generation with individualistic values were about 36 percentage points less likely to vote for Clinton in 2016, and about 33 percentage points less likely to vote for Biden in 2020. This decreases for each younger generation, with Boomers holding individualistic values about 29 percentage points less likely to vote for Clinton in 2016 and 26 percentage points less likely to vote for Biden in 2020. Gen Xers were about 19 percentage points less likely to vote for Clinton in 2016 and 21 percentage points less likely to vote for Biden in 2020. Members of the Gen Z/Millennial generations with individualistic values were only about 7 percentage points less likely to vote for Clinton in 2016 than those in their age cohort who did not express individualistic values; Gen Z/Millennials with individualistic values were roughly 16 percentage points less likely to support Biden in the 2020 election.

Figure 6

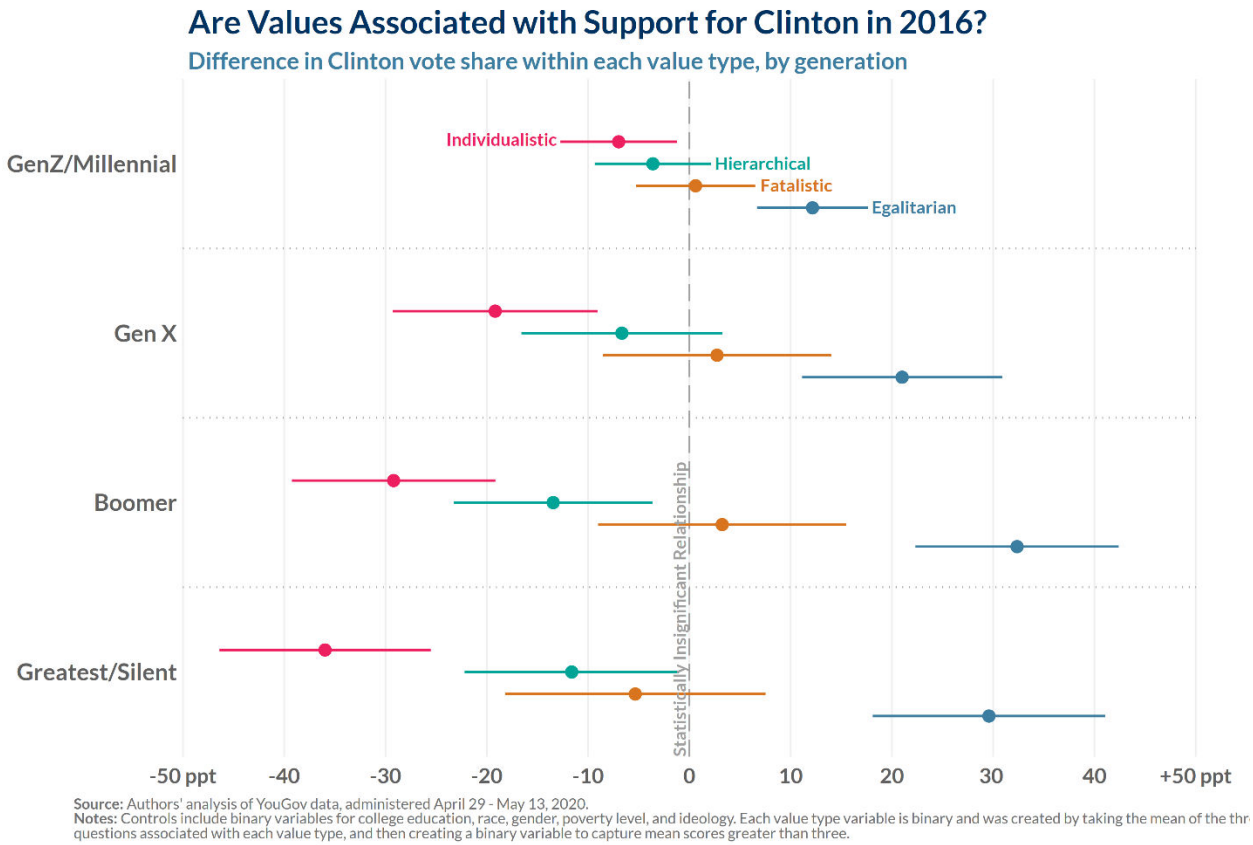
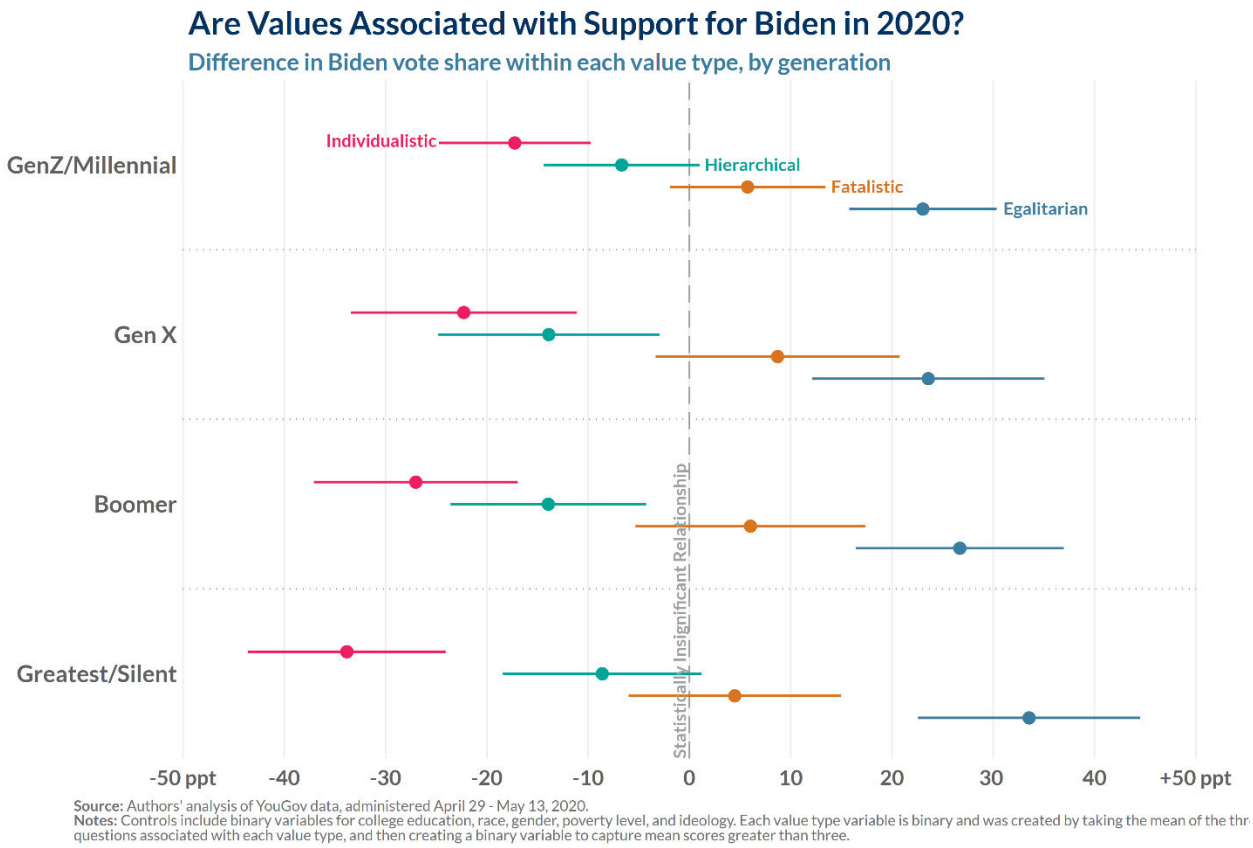


Figure 7



Voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020

As shown in Figures 8 & 9 below, those who voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020 were more likely to hold individualistic and hierarchical values, and were less likely to express egalitarian values. Fatalistic values were only associated with members of Gen X, where respondents who expressed fatalistic values were about 8 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump in 2016. Similar to Figures 6 & 7 above, there is a wide gap in the spread of value type by generation in both Figures 8 & 9. Notably, there is a wide generational gap in the likelihood of holding egalitarian values and voting for Trump in 2016 and 2020 in Figure 8. Members of the Greatest/Silent and Boomer generation were about 25 percentage points and 27 percentage points, respectively, less likely to vote for Trump in 2016 if they held egalitarian values. Respondents from the Greatest/Silent generation with egalitarian values were about 29 percentage points less likely to support Trump in 2020 and Baby Boomers were about 23 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump. The likelihood of holding egalitarian values and supporting Trump decreases for the Gen X and Gen Z/Millennial generation. Members of Gen X with egalitarian values were about 15 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump in 2016 and 22 percentage points less likely to intend to vote for Trump in 2020. Respondents part of Gen Z/Millennials that held egalitarian

values were about 8 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump in 2016, and 11 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump in 2020. Likewise, those in the Greatest/Silent generation who held individualistic values were about 36 percentage points more likely to support Trump in 2016 than those in their generation who did not hold individualistic values; this trend decreases for each younger generation, with Gen Z/Millennials who held individualistic values only about 15 percentage points more likely to support Trump. However, there are no clear patterns between the individualistic value type and intention to vote for Trump in the 2020 election across generations as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 8

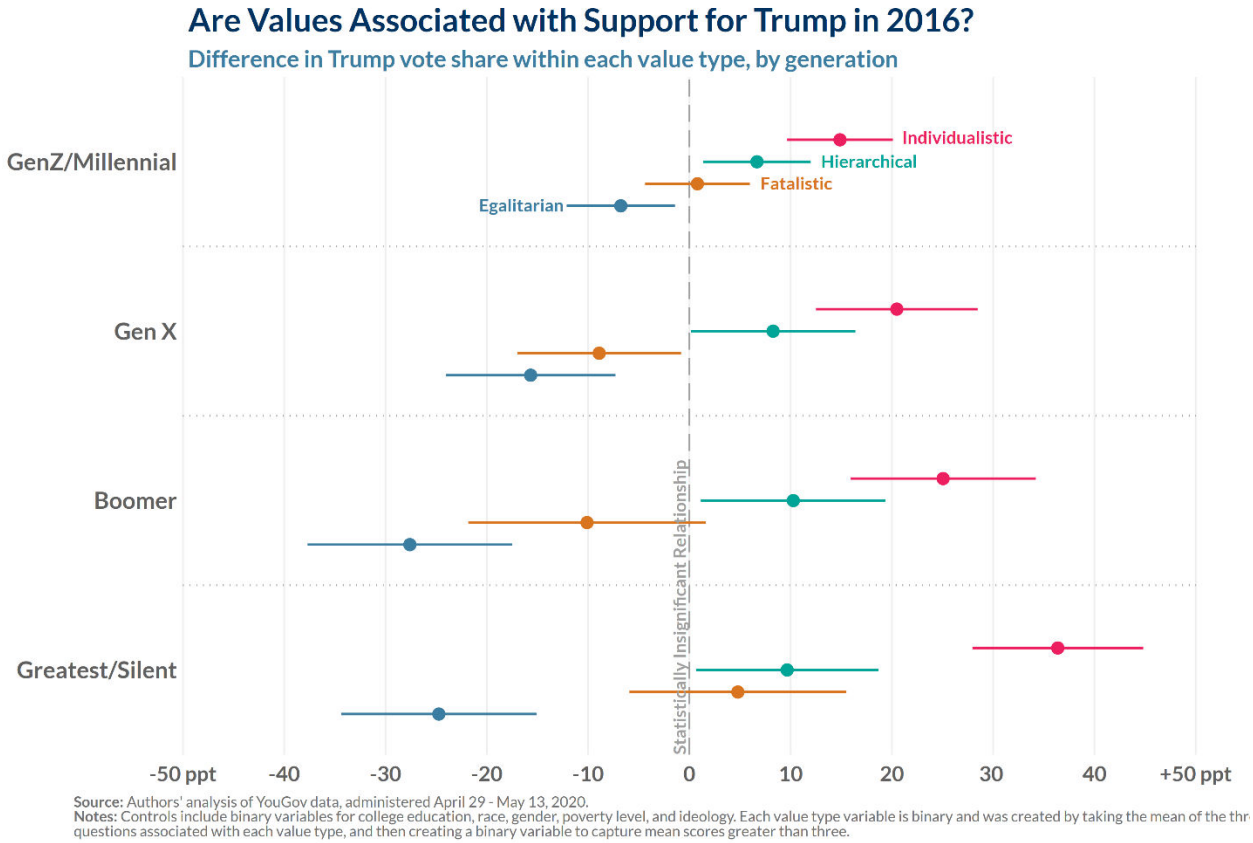
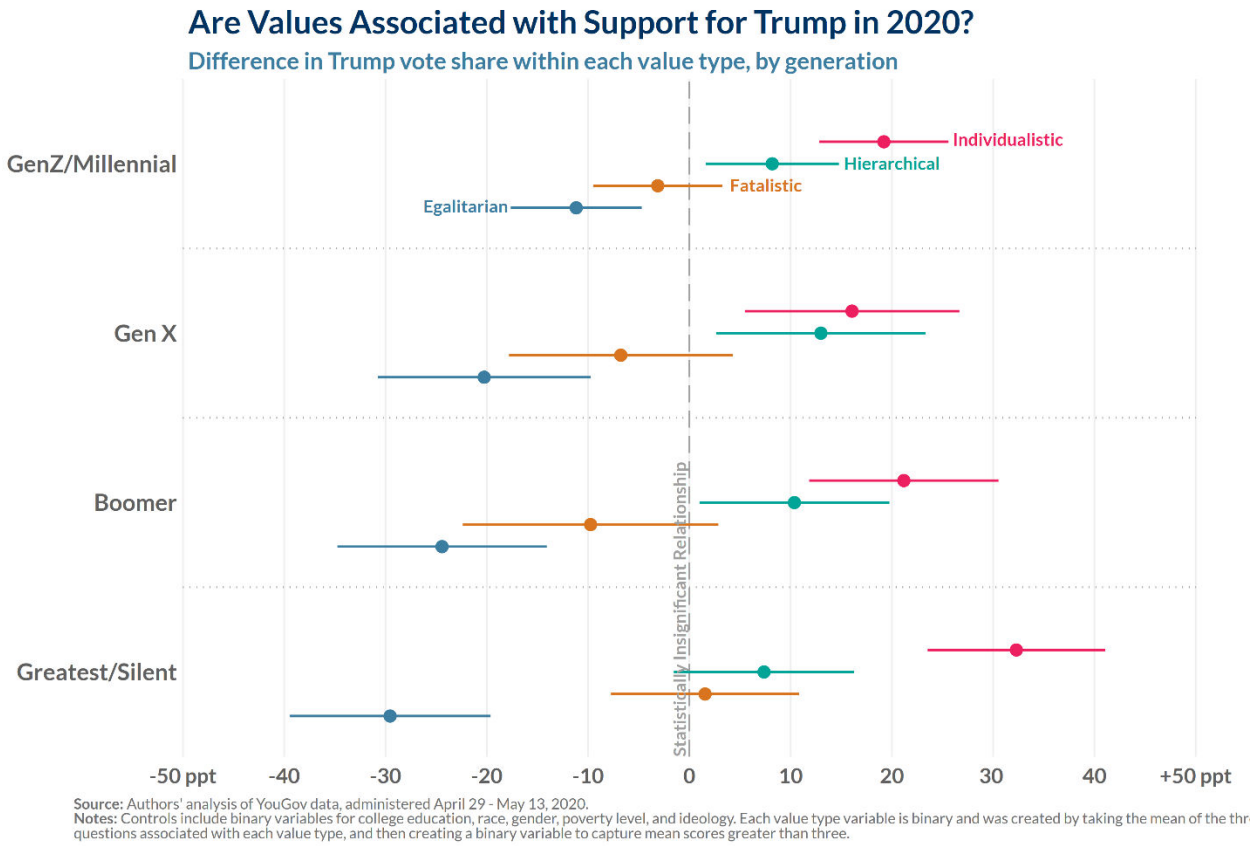


Figure 9



Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to use advances in Cultural Theory to explore the relationship between generational values and political participation in recent U.S. elections. Overall, I found a weak relationship between value type and voter turnout, but a much stronger relationship between voter type and candidate preference. In regards to the relationship between value type and turnout, it appears that there may be a relationship between fatalism and voter turnout among the Baby Boomer and Millennial/Gen Z generations. In our base models showing the relationship between value type and turnout across election years, young people with fatalistic values consistently were less likely to vote across all elections by about 8-11 percentage points depending on the election year, but the effects diminished in each of the full models when controls were added. Notably, Baby Boomers with fatalistic values were also less likely to vote across all elections by 12-20 percentage points depending on the election year, in both the base and full models.

Cultural Theorists have long established that individuals with fatalistic views are less likely to participate in politics than individuals with other value types (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983; Thompson,

Ellis & Wildavsky, 1990). Those with fatalistic views are more likely to feel a lack of agency to solve complex problems and believe that luck is more determinative of their direction in life, are more likely to believe their welfare depends on conditions beyond one's control, and are more likely to be stuck in cycles of hopelessness, despair, and distrust (Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky, 1990). Because fatalists believe outcomes are a matter of luck or chance and not agency, they may be less likely to participate in collective decision making such as voting. In our data, fatalism shows a negative relationship with turnout for Millennials/Gen Z and the Baby Boomers in all recent elections, but not for fatalists in the Gen X or the Greatest/Silent generations. To the authors' knowledge, there is no existing evidence that can shed light on this specific pattern, and more research is needed to understand the unique cultural imprints of different generations and whether and why fatalism has a direct and negative relationship with voter turnout behavior in the Millennial/Gen Z and Baby Boomer generations but not others. More research is needed in general to understand the relationship between young people's values and different facets of young people political engagement. For example, what role do values play in young people's changing definition of citizenship (Dalton & Weltzel, 2014) or other indicators of young people's political behavior such as declining political efficacy and sense of duty? And how might fatalism be related to alternative forms of political engagement such as protesting?

In this analysis, there were also several anomalies showing the relationship between value type and turnout based on the year of the election. For example, members of Gen X with hierarchical values were about 13 percentage points less likely to vote in 2016 than those in the Gen X generation that did not express hierarchical values (base model only); Baby Boomers with egalitarian values were less likely to vote in 2018 and 2020 (base model only), and Millennials/Gen Z with hierarchical (both models) and individualistic values (full model) were less likely to vote in the 2022 election. Again, the existing research base is limited to explain these findings and more research is needed. However, it may be possible that certain period effects—such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald Trump's failed reelection campaign, or the overturn of Roe v. Wade—could be interacting with generational cultural dynamics, resulting in the lower likelihood of turnout in certain years for certain value types. However, this is a hypothesis only and can not be observed in our data.

Different value types had a much stronger relationship with candidate preference across generations than with turnout. The survey data showed a strong positive correlation between intentions to vote for Clinton/Biden and egalitarian values across generations. Likewise, the survey data showed a negative correlation between intentions to vote for Clinton/Biden and individualistic and hierarchical

values across generations. On the other hand, across generations, those who voted for Donald Trump during the 2020 election were more likely to have individualistic and hierarchical values and less likely to have egalitarian and fatalistic outlooks, across generations. These findings resonate with other literature leveraging Cultural Theory that shows the relationship between value type and ideology and political party identification (Swedlow, Ripberger, & Yuan, 2024). Specifically, other researchers have found that egalitarians and fatalists tend to identify as liberals and Democrats and individualists and hierarchists tend to identify as conservatives and Republicans. Given that the same pattern was identified in our data, this provides growing evidence that candidate preferences are strongly associated with CT value types.

Yet one of the most striking findings of this paper is that there was less of a spread of values for the Millennial/Gen Z generation than there was for older generations in relationship to candidate preferences. In other words, when it came to support for Clinton/Biden or Clinton/Trump, value types were more compressed among the youngest cohort, whereas value types were more polarized for older generations. One hypothesis for this observation is that differences in value types become more polarized over the life course; another is that there is a unique cohort effect with more ideological division among older generations. A few recent and important studies can provide insights into both hypotheses. Researcher Thomas Jocker and colleagues (2024) studied whether there is a generational component to mass polarization. They disentangled the age, period, and cohort effects of the General Social Survey and the American National Election Studies data to understand whether young people who grow up in a polarized party system are becoming more ideologically divergent and partisan. They find that younger generations are less polarized than older cohorts, and are also more homogenous in their political opinions on major social issues. This resonates with findings from Joseph Phillips (2022), who studied the age, period, and cohort effects of affective polarization—the degree to which people identify with warmth toward co-partisans and hostility toward the opposing political party—and found a clear age effect with affective polarization increasing over the life course (see also Stoker & Jennings, 2008 for similar results). These studies indicate that both hypotheses may be true: younger generations are less polarized than older generations, and polarization may increase with age. Findings from our study make a unique contribution to this literature by providing evidence that the more limited political polarization among younger generations may be due, in part, to their changing value structures (see also Heys, 2024).

There are important limitations to this study. This paper presents a cohort analysis using cross-sectional survey data collected prior to the 2020 election and does not attempt to disentangle the age, period, and cohort effects commonly associated with the study of generations (Neundorf & Niemi, 2014). Given that much is unknown about differences in generational values, especially among the Millennial and Gen Z generations, the survey findings provide an indicator of the relationship between generational values and political engagement to build theory and guide future areas of research. Another limitation is that the presidential candidate preference variables from 2016 and 2020 are self-reported; it is well known that self-reported voting behavior can be over-inflated (Selb & Munzert, 2013). However, our results show that the relationship between value type and presidential candidate preference stay consistent between candidate choice in 2016 and 2020 giving us confidence that any self-reported biases is likely limited. Lastly, I recognize that I do not have voter validated files for our full survey sample, which reduced the overall sample size. However, YouGov uses a rigorous process for validating voter turnout of their panel with state-level data and therefore I can be more certain of the relationship between generational values and actual turnout.

While this paper only offers a first analysis of differences in generational values in relationship to political participation, the findings are significant for future elections. Young people will be the largest part of the electorate in the coming years, and their ideas and values will matter even more as generational replacement takes place (Griffin, Frey, & Teixeira, 2020; Winograd, Hais, & Ross, 2023). Young people already helped to determine the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and swung important battleground states in the 2018 and 2022 midterms (CIRCLE, 2020a, 2022). Understanding what young people value and how their values effect their political behavior and preferences will be essential to engaging them in the political process.

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