

Generational Values and Political Behavior

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Overview of the Risk Generation Project

In the transition from the industrial to the knowledge economy, profound changes to the nature of work, the family, and the social safety net have taken root across U.S. society, giving rise to a complex set of risks unevenly experienced by younger generations. For example, in today's rapidly changing labor market young people are expected to go to college to earn a degree. They do this in order to secure 'good jobs' but take on large student debt loads since state governments have largely divested in higher education. Young people today are also expected to move to large, urban areas to find higher paying jobs but face the reality of rising housing costs and the difficult realization that homeownership is out of reach for most. In today's changing labor market, younger generations are also taking on new risks related to job loss, healthcare costs, and retirement savings; these risks were once collectively borne by the government and employers but are now largely shouldered by individuals and families. Rising uncertainties about global warming, the future of democracy, racial injustice, shifting global power structures, growing inequality, and the continued transformation of the labor market with automation and Artificial Intelligence only add to the risk portfolio for today's youngest generations.

In this mixed methods research project, we aim to understand how the Millennial and Gen Z generations are reacting to new risks that have evolved in American society in recent decades. We research how generational values shape risk perceptions, attitudes toward government and the social safety net, and political behavior. Our survey launched in the months leading up to the 2020 election. Qualitative interviews took place during the spring and summer of 2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of intense social and economic risk as well as one of the most expansive government interventions into the economy and safety net in U.S. history. This project provides a foundation for understanding the unique worldviews and perspectives of younger generations and their desire for a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future.

In the upcoming months, we will release several papers and issue briefs with our findings. The Round 1 release includes two papers related to the value structure of different generations and how generational values play out in political behavior. The first paper shows how values are changing among different generations, especially by demographic and ideology. The second paper explores how generational values are related to voter turnout in recent U.S. elections and presidential candidate preference in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Other issue briefs



and working papers will be released over the summer and fall of 2024 in the months leading up to the November election.

Findings from this project are especially insightful given that the youth vote may have potential to determine the outcome of the presidency in the 2024 election. Understanding young people's values, their risk perceptions, and what they desire from government will be important components for any political candidate looking to earn their trust and win their vote. For further information about the project, along with an interactive webpage displaying the project findings, see youngamericans.berkeley.edu/risk-generation.

Paper #1 – Cultural Evolution: Measuring Differences in Generational Values

Evidence has been accumulating for years that Millennials and Gen Z are coming of age with unique attitudes that differ from older age cohorts. Millennials and Gen Z are revealing that across the ideological spectrum, they are more progressive and more likely to support left-leaning policy views on issues like climate change and universal health care and on social issues like racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights. Yet the values that underlie such attitudes has not been studied systematically in recent research and is generally under-theorized, especially when it comes to understanding the unique outlook of the Millennial and Gen Z generations. We fill a gap in the literature by drawing on Cultural Theory to study generational culture, and in particular, the changing value structure of Millennials and Gen Z in comparison to older age cohorts. This paper presents results from a survey administered in early 2020, and is part of a larger, mixed methods research project. We measure how values differ by generation, and narrow in on how values are changing within each generation by demographic characteristic and ideology. We find:

- Millennials and Gen Z are descriptively more fatalistic and egalitarian than older generation, and less individualistic.
- Elevated levels of fatalism among younger age cohorts was the most salient trend, with Millennials/Gen Zers measurably more fatalistic than older generations even after controlling for demographics, education level, and ideology. This means that on average, young people are more likely to feel that they have no agency, are more likely to think that external factors control the direction of their lives, and are more likely to feel hopeless about the future.
- The analysis also uncovered generational differences by demographic characteristic. One of the most notable findings is that value structures appear to be changing generationally among people of color, with older age cohorts more egalitarian than their white counterparts and younger generations more individualistic and hierarchical than white people in their generation.
- Lastly, the results show across generations that those with egalitarian values are more likely to identify as liberal, and those with individualistic and hierarchical values are more likely to identify as conservative. Among both young adults who identified as liberal or conservative, their value types were more compressed than among the older age cohorts; older generations' values were much more polarized in relationship to ideology.

Paper #2 – Generation Values and Political Participation in Recent U.S. Elections

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. The main findings include:

- There was a weak relationship between voter turnout and those with fatalistic values in the Millennial/Gen Z generation and Baby Boomer generation. For both generations, fatalistic values were associated with lower turnout across all recent elections.
- Values showed a much stronger correlation with presidential candidate preference. 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 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.