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Exploring What MilleniGenz Think About Range of Social Issues

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It has long been accepted that young adults are more socially and politically liberal than the middle-aged or elderly. It is also accepted that as a generational cohort ages, its views become more conservative. But does this piece of received wisdom apply to MillenigenZ? It is well documented that MillenigenZ are far more liberal on political and social issues than older generations. What is less certain is whether this leftward lean will persist as the MillenigenZ age or whether they will go through the same rightward shift as members of Generation X, the Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation did before them. In this study, we address this question in two ways. First, we examine differences in MillenigenZ's attitudes on a range of social and political issues between two waves of a survey. Second, we compare the attitudes of the youngest members of the MillenigenZ generational cohort to those of the oldest to see whether there are intra-generational differences. Our findings suggest that MillenigenZ are not getting more conservative as they age and, from the youngest to the oldest, remain remarkably uniform in their left-leaning social and political attitudes. Findings from this study advance our understanding of not only this generation but also how generations change over time.

There is an old saying that goes, "if you're not a liberal when you're 20, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative when you're 40, you have no brain." While the exact origin of this saying is unclear, its meaning is straightforward: liberalism is an age-related infirmity that one grows out of, like croup or colic. According to the folk wisdom embodied in this saying, liberalism is the result of ignorance, naïveté, and youthful idealism. Once you have some years of experience under your belt, you will settle down, find common sense, and become a conservative, just like your parents and grandparents did.

Like a lot of folk wisdom, there is some truth behind this. Certainly, older voters are more politically conservative than younger ones. For example, in their analysis of the 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections, Igielnik et al. (2022) found that that every generation was more politically conservative than the one that followed it. Millennials (born 1981–1996) preferred Democrats to Republicans by margins of 25%, 39%, and

19% points, respectively, while the Silent Generation (born 1928–1945) preferred Republicans to Democrats by 19%, 16%, and 16% points, with Gen X and the Baby Boomers falling between the two. Likewise, in opinion surveys conducted for the past century, every generational cohort has become more politically conservative as they have gotten older[1] and older people are certainly perceived to be more conservative (Grant et al., 2001).

Why Do People Change Their Views as They Age?

Two of the most offered explanations for the rightward shift are what we might term "buy in" and "beat down."

Buy In

According to the "buy in" explanation, as you become more invested, both socially and financially, in the existing social and economic order, you have more to lose and are thus more resistant to changes that might disrupt the existing social and economic order (Glenn, 1974). "Buy in" is inextricably tied to long-term planning in a mutually reinforcing symbiosis. That is, "buy in" both allows for and requires long-term planning.

In the decades following World War II, the imagined American life course looked something like the following scenario. After graduating (whether high school or college), you find someone, "settle down," and get married. You have a child and buy a home with a 20 or 30-year mortgage in a neighborhood with good schools for when your baby grows up. You work at the same company for 30 or 40 years so that once you turn 65, you are ready to retire, pension-in-hand, free now to enjoy your golden years, spoiling your grandchildren and traveling the world. Each successive step further invests a person in maintaining the status quo, reinforcing its grip, and disincentivizing rocking the boat. This story operates as both a fairy tale and a prescription – do the right things at the right times, and you will live happily ever after.

Of course, historically, this scenario was, by and large, only available to some segments of the American population – specifically heterosexual, middle and upper-

[1] For example, in his analysis of General Social Survey data, Peltzman finds that 34% of 25-year-olds identify as liberal compared to compared to 25% of 45-year-olds and 26% of 25-year-olds identify as conservative compared to 36% of 45-year-olds (Kuta, 2020).

middle class, whites. Others were denied full participation. Beyond the fact that same-sex marriages were illegal until the 21st Century, it was usually unsafe for gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities to be open about their sexual identities as they could lose their jobs, become targets for violence, and risk prosecution under anti-sodomy laws. So, too, for much of the 20th Century, women and racial minorities were denied full citizenship and the ability to participate equally in society. Discrimination in mortgage lending, employment, education, and housing made it virtually impossible for many Americans to "buy in."

Nevertheless, this scenario, associated in the popular imagination with the post-World War II "American Dream," maintained its status as a relatively attainable fantasy. That the dream was largely denied to non-whites did not limit its promise for the overwhelmingly white majorities for most of the 20th Century. Indeed, though the dream lay beyond the grasp of many whites as well, the promise that it might be attained in a few years, or perhaps by their children, helped it to remain fixed in the minds of so many.

The dream has such gravitational attraction that in 1960, John Steinbeck opined, "I guess the trouble was that [in the U.S.] we didn't have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist" (Steinbeck, 1966, p. 27). Viewed in this way, the dream becomes an example of the "sunk cost" fallacy, in which people who invested some amount of time, money, or other resources into a losing proposition refuse to move on and cut their losses. As with a pyramid scheme or a fixer-upper that turns into a money pit, once people have spent enough years working towards the American dream, they are "bought in" and imagine that the promise of the payoff is too great to risk any major changes.

Those who are less "bought in" have less to lose if the existing social order is replaced or altered. This type of explanation rests upon the not-insignificant assumption that age is positively correlated with social investment. When you are young, you perceive that, as Bob Dylan (1965) put it, "you ain't got nothing," so "you got nothing to lose" if the world changes. But as you get older, you have a higher paying job and a mortgage and a retirement plan and a standing in your community and on and on.

This observation, too, relies upon assumptions about young people. The affluent post-World War II years witnessed the "discovery of the 'teenager'" (Jamieson & Romer, 2008, p. vii), with the number of years Americans were formally educated[2] rising dramatically (Ryan & Bauman, 2016) and the abolition of most child labor with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 (Nordlund, 1988). For many middle-class white Americans, this era was characterized by delays in adult responsibilities and roles (Cohen et al., 2003). For middle-class white young adults, jobs were to earn spending money, not to support the family (Fuligni et al., 1999). This vision of carefree young people with "nothing to lose" is a middle-class white one, however, which fails to include many poor, non-white, and immigrant families. For these families, the American Dream was an intergenerational one, which demanded that parents work menial or low-paying jobs or devote grueling hours at small businesses so that their children and grandchildren could have better lives (Rendón, 2019). Countless poor, non-white, and immigrant children, often working alongside their parents and grandparents behind liquor store counters (Sanders & Nee, 1996) or in scorching agricultural fields (McLaurin & Liebman, 2012), have witnessed firsthand the price their families have paid for their American Dreams. Children in these families were often forced into adult responsibilities at young ages, serving as translators or cultural mediators for parents and grandparents struggling to negotiate life in the U.S. due to linguistic, cultural, or educational barriers (Orellana et al., 2003) or putting off their educational or professional goals to take care of family members (Dodson & Dickert, 2004; Orellana, 2001).

The parents of many middle-class white teenagers might presume that their kids will go to college after high school just like they did. Many first-generation college students have very different experiences, with family members often wondering why they are "wasting their time in school" rather than getting a job to help their families (Hao, 2011). Perhaps these young adults will not change their views as dramatically as they age since they have already "bought in" by taking on adult roles and responsibilities since they were children.

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[2] For example, the percentage of Americans who had graduated from high school rose from 25% in 1940 to nearly 90% by 2015.

Beat Down

The "beat down" perspective explains the rightward shift by suggesting that as you get older, you are "beaten down" by experience. As you learn more about the world, you witness what happens when societies change too quickly or when the "old ways" are lost. You come to realize that maybe there is some value in maintaining stability in social and economic affairs (Glenn, 1974). Or maybe you just become cynical about the motives, or pessimistic about efficacy, of progress promising politicians. The young just have not witnessed the anomie that comes from dramatic and rapid social changes, the disorder that anomie brings, or how dangerous the world really is. The young have not experienced what happens when well-intentioned liberal policies are actually implemented. The young have not yet been let down so many times that they have come to view all elected officials as corrupt or foolish and the government as bloated and ineffective. This perspective suggests the corollary to the above-mentioned "old saying," the aphorism typically attributed to Irving Kristol that "a neo-conservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality" (Gewen, 2009, para. 4). This perspective is supported by social psychology research, which finds that conservatives are more likely than liberals to feel constantly under threat and that when threatened, liberals become more conservative (Nail et al., 2009).

However, here again, the "beat down" explanation assumes that young people have lived sheltered lives and do not understand how the world "really works." While this may well have been true for many middle-class white Americans growing up during the prosperous decades following World War II, it is certainly not universal. Many who grew up poor or marginalized because of their skin color, religion, immigration status, or sexual identity were already "beaten down" by the status quo. They are well aware of Kristol's "reality" (Gewen, 2009, para. 4) and have no illusions about its risks. Those young people who had to help their parents navigate Byzantine government or corporate bureaucracies or serve as literal translators for their parents do not need to be told about inefficiency, greed, incompetence, or precarity. Those who have been over-policed and under-protected by the criminal legal system, who have been subjected to the carceral apparatus, or who have witnessed immigration enforcement in action have no illusions about the benevolence of the government and its agents. Those who, as

children, fled countries scarred by poverty or war or dictatorships or famines only to be greeted in the U.S. by xenophobic, anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric and employers who exploit a lack of legal status to force their workers to endure miserable working conditions for miserable wages do not need lectures about "reality." That this assumption goes so often unquestioned is assuredly due in part to demographics.

Consistent with the idea that people become more conservative with age, scholars have found that people's value orientations change; that is, they reshuffle what think is important over time. Concepts such as having an "exciting life," "freedom," being "imaginative," or "broad-minded" matter less; more emphasis is placed on "family security," "self-respect," being "polite" and "clean" (Feather, 1977) and belief in the importance of "family values" and "hard work" have been found to increase with age (Grant et al., 2001). Although here, too, perhaps these observed changes are reflections of the overwhelming white majorities in previous generations. Will these changes persist in generations that are increasingly diverse?

Regardless of whether one, both, or neither of these explanations is correct, this rightward shift has been observed now for decades – the most famous example of this being perhaps the transformation within the Baby Boomers from hippies to yuppies. But of course, this is not always the case. Even in the most conservative generation, which at present is the Silent Generation – the generation between the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boomers – there are always some individuals who do not step to the right.

Among the most provocative theories offered to explain generational attitude shifts is that the step to the right with age is influenced in part by survivorship bias. Survivorship bias refers to a tendency to draw conclusions about a group based on who is still around at the end while failing to consider those who may have died. For instance, people might look around at beautiful 100-year-old buildings and think, "buildings back then were all so grand," without considering that the shoddily constructed or ugly buildings built at the same time were probably torn down long ago. Thus, our conclusions about past buildings are biased by the fact that only the most beautiful or most well-engineered buildings are still around.

Rodriguez and Capotescu (2018) have argued that a similar thing happens with politics. When we look at the Baby Boomers and see that they are all conservatives,

rather than witnessing the transformation of a generation from “Make Love Not War” to “Make America Great Again,” we are only seeing those Baby Boomers who “won.” That is, those who were poorest, most vulnerable, most marginalized died, fell through the cracks or are imprisoned and thus do not get to vote.

Consider high school graduation. When we look at those who walk across the stage at the end of the year, we miss those who dropped out or were expelled or, indeed, died. If we were to take a poll of those graduating seniors, we would have to admit that they do not represent students their age; they only represent the students their age who stayed in school until graduation. So, too, when we check in with each generation from young adulthood to middle age to retirement, we must admit that the numbers shrink at every stage, and those who are still around tend to be the healthiest, best educated, and wealthiest. Those who are still around, those for whom the system has most worked, tend to be most “bought in” to maintaining the social order, as they have been rewarded by it.

So, the question is, are MilleniGenz different from previous generations? Are they going to follow the same pattern that the previous generations have followed or is there something new occurring? Previous research has found that Millennials and Gen Z, are strikingly similar in their social attitudes and far to the left of older generations (Parker et al., 2020). Social scientists have observed that views on social issues are highly correlated, such that attitudes can be described as liberal or conservative. There are now clearly discernable “liberal” and “conservative” positions on a range of social issues, with liberals more likely than conservatives to support abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, expanding paths to citizenship for immigrants, expanding the role of government in health care, and gun control (Pew Research Center, 2014). And on all these issues, Millennials and Gen Z are far more liberal than previous generations (Pew Research Center, 2018). Left unanswered is whether this jump to the left will last.

As if on cue, just as the oldest Millennials turn 40, a spate of articles and editorials began to prophesy the impending step to the right. Consider, for example, an opinion column by *Washington Post* columnist J.J. McCullough (2022), which asked, “Are millennial leftists aging into right-wingers?” McCullough’s (2022) thesis is a version of the “beat down” theory, with Millennials supposedly awakening to discover that they

have moved to the right solely by dint of the culture moving to the left. Sociologists and demographers note how this phenomenon can create a kind of mirage as the appearance of a rightward shift with age is only in comparison with subsequent generational cohorts becoming more liberal (Glenn, 1974; Schwadel, & Garneau, 2014). The upshot, to McCullough (2022), is that Millennials are discomfited by the speed with which the culture is changing and have, as a result, begun to disapprove of the most strident of progressive calls. A typical observation:

> Just as some boomers felt their progressive views on civil rights and feminism justified indifference — or hostility — to the gay rights movement that came later, aging millennials who feel they've proved themselves supportive of gay rights may find prissy and frivolous the younger generation's insistence on things such as pronoun introductions and perfectly race- and gender-balanced workplaces (McCullough, 2022, para. 9).

So, is this really what is happening? Are MillenigenZ growing out of their liberal social views? Are they beginning to look askance at the social and political progressivism of younger generations? Will we be able to observe a difference between the views of the oldest and youngest MillenigenZ, that is, between aging Millenials and college-aged members of Gen Z?

Methods

To answer these questions, we have chosen two approaches. First, we will analyze the 2018 and 2020 waves of a survey to see whether we can detect any differences in attitudes. If there has been a step to the right as MillenigenZ get older, then we should see significant differences between the 2018 sample and the 2020 sample. To do this, we divide our sample into three groups by birth year: the oldest who were born between 1982 and 1987, the middle who were born between 1988-1994, and the youngest who were born between 1995-2000. Following Krosnick and Alwin (1989), we divided the sample into groups rather than just comparing birth year to birth year. This has the benefit of accommodating the variability in the numbers of respondents in particular birth years (e.g., there were 15 respondents born in 1985 but only 5 in 1986). We then compare the average responses of these age groups to the 2018 and 2020 surveys to see whether there has, in fact, been a shift to the right in social attitudes for the entire sample and for each of these groups.

Table 1: *Sample Composition by Birth Year Group*

	Birth years	% of 2018 sample	% of 2020 sample
Oldest	1982-1987	4%	4%
Middle	1988-1994	22%	18%
Youngest	1995-2000	74%	78%

Second, we compare the oldest MillenniGenZ – the so-called geriatric millennials who were nearly 40 in 2020 – to the youngest MillenniGenZ – who were around 20 in 2020 – to see whether there is a shift occurring as they get older. Given the nearly 20-year gap between the oldest and the youngest, if the old saying about not having a brain if you are still a liberal when you are 40 is true, then again, there should be a difference between the oldest and youngest MillenniGenZ in our sample.

An important methodological note: for this analysis, we do not need to assume that our sample is nationally representative or that our estimates of MillenniGenZ attitudes are generalizable. Rather, we are only concerned with whether there are any statistically discernable changes occurring in our sample's attitudes. So, even if our sample is more diverse or more educated than MillenniGenZ nationwide, in this analysis, we are concerned with whether *these* MillenniGenZ have changed their attitudes. At the least, our findings shed light on whether MillenniGenZ, like those found in our sample (college-educated, ethnically diverse), have shifted to the right.

In our survey, we ask our respondents to give their opinions about a range of social issues and problems. We ask about seven social issues: support for LGBTQ rights, support for undocumented immigrants, support for refugees, support for universal health care, support for the 1st Amendment, support for the 2nd Amendment, and support for women's bodily autonomy. These issues include those identified by Pew Research Center (2014) as having the clearest partisan splits in attitudes, namely abortion, guns, gender and sexuality, immigration, and healthcare. We also ask respondents whether they agree or disagree that the following issues are problems: discrimination against women, sexual harassment, and poverty. For each issue, we ask

respondents to reply (using a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to a series of statements designed to gauge their support for the issues.

Findings

Our first approach was to compare the survey responses from the 2018 survey to those in the 2020 survey. We will summarize and interpret the findings one at a time.[3] Our second approach is to compare the survey responses for the oldest and youngest groups in the 2018 and 2020 surveys. These results are shown graphically in Figures 14 and 15.

Women's Bodily Autonomy & Abortion

As seen in Figure 1, there are differences between the results from the 2018 and 2020 surveys. But are those differences merely the result of "noise" in the data, or can we be confident that there are real differences in the responses? To answer that question, we conducted a statistical analysis called an independent samples t-test.[4] We find statistically discernable[5] decreases in support between 2018 and 2020 among all birth year cohorts, from 4.57 to 4.43, and in the middle birth year cohort, born between 1988 and 1994, from 4.62 to 4.38.

Perhaps the decline in support among the 1988 – 1994 cohort (aged 24 – 30 in 2018 and 26 – 32 in 2020) is due to its members reaching the average U.S. fertility age – 26 for first=time mothers and 31 for first-time fathers (Bui & Miller, 2018) – and experiencing ambivalence regarding pregnancy, fertility, and abortion. Regardless, there is no evidence that the older MillennigenZ are more conservative than younger

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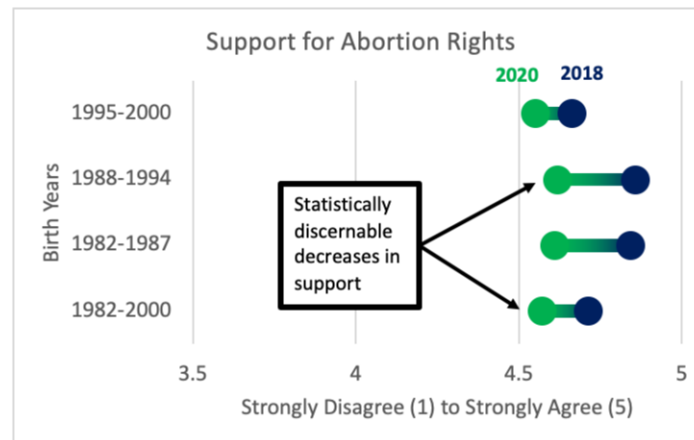
[3] A note on methodology. Throughout this section, we will refer to differences as being "statistically discernable," which just means a difference that can be observed using statistical means. The criteria that we will use is based upon a "p-value," which is an estimate of the statistical probability that any observed differences are not merely the result of chance. We use the phrase "statistically discernable" rather than "statistically significant" to avoid conflating the concepts of statistical and practical significance. To say that a difference is statistically significant is merely to say we are confident that there really is a difference, not to say how big or important that difference is. Statistically discernable differences can end up having little practical significance (e.g., It may be that taking a certain medication increases your chance of getting cancer from .00001% to .00002%. Such a difference might end up being statistically significant, but at the end of the day, does it really matter?).

[4] We have opted to use two-tailed, independent samples t-tests not assuming equal variance to minimize Type-1 error and provide the most conservative estimates.

[5] Using two-tailed, independent samples t-tests. *All birth year cohorts* ($t(1205.8) = -2.86$, $p = 0.004$); *Birth Year 1988-1994* ($t(185.4) = -2.23$, $p = 0.027$).

ones, as there are no statistically discernable differences[6] between the age groups. Despite the measurable decline in support in one of the age groups, in both surveys, respondents of all age groups in both 2018 and 2020 expressed high levels of support for women's bodily autonomy, with average sentiment falling between "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree."

Figure 1: *Support for Abortion Rights*



Discrimination Against Women

As seen in Figure 2, there were statistically discernable[7] increases in agreement between 2018 and 2020 among all birth year cohorts, those born between 1988-1994, and those born between 1995-2000, with the largest increase in agreement – from 3.98 to 4.32 – among those born between 1988-1994.

What changed between 2018 and 2020 to explain this increased agreement that women's equality/discrimination against women was a problem? Did something in the world change, or did MillenigenZ themselves change?

One explanation might be that survey participants in the 2020 survey are perceiving that there are more attacks on women or threats to sexual equality than their counterparts in 2018 did. That is, either there has been an actual rise in misogyny, or the misogyny that already existed is more recognized than it has been historically.

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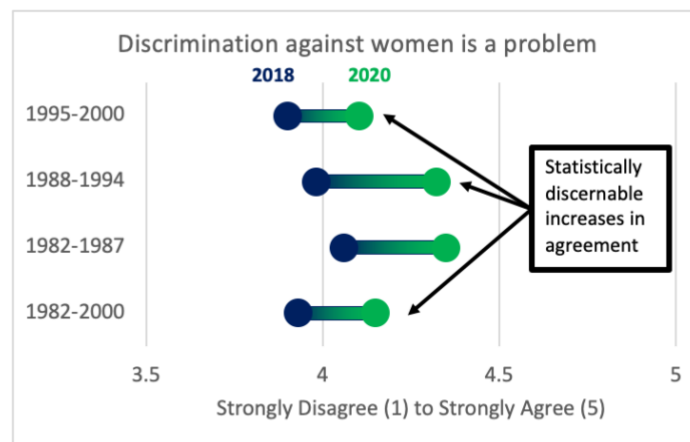
[6] Figures 14 and 15 display standard error bars around the 2018 and 2020 means for the oldest and youngest MillennigenZ groups. When those bars overlap, we can say that there are no statistically discernable differences between the groups. That said, even when they do not overlap, additional statistical tests are required to determine whether the difference is statistically discernable.

[7] *All birth year cohorts* ($t(1465.2) = 3.96$, $p < .001$); *1988-1994* ($t(267.944) = 2.73$, $p = 0.007$); *1995-2000* ($t(1122.1) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, two-tailed).

Certainly, this view would be consistent with the idea that there was a kind of sexual reckoning following Trump's election in 2016, as embodied in the Women's March, #MeToo, TIME'S UP, and the election of "the Squad" and more women than ever before to the U.S. Congress in 2018. However, such an explanation does not account for why we detect changes in the attitudes of the younger cohorts of MillenigenZ in our sample but not the oldest. Moreover, as the 2018 survey was conducted between February and December 2018, most, if not all, of these social movements and historical events had occurred by the time of the survey and thus should have shown up in the 2018 survey.

Figure 2: *Discrimination Against Women*



Alternatively, the increase in agreement among the younger respondents might be explained by their leaving college and entering the workforce. It could be the case that as students leave the relatively egalitarian environment found in universities and transition into work environments that may be more male-dominated and defined by patriarchal gender norms and expectations, they experience a "rude awakening" as to the pervasiveness of gender inequality and discrimination. So why are older MillenigenZ different? A possible reason might be that older MillenigenZ, who might be presumed to have been out of university and in the workforce for longer, are more likely to agree that women's equality/discrimination against women is a problem. This is supported by the fact that agreement that women's equality/discrimination against women is a problem seems to rise with age.

One way to test this idea is to look at when the different age groups entered the workforce. In both the 2018 and 2020 surveys, we ask, "How old were you when you

got your first job?" As seen in Table 2, in the 2018 survey, respondents in each of the age groups stated that, on average, they got their first job between 17-18, which coincides with the end of high school. However, in the 2020 survey, respondents varied widely, with the oldest cohort of MillennigenZ (those born between 1982-1987) entering the workforce, on average, at 17 years old (during high school), the middle MillennigenZ, at 18 (at the end of high school), and the youngest, at 22 (in our sample, between Sophomores and Juniors, see Table 3).

Table 2: *"How old were you when you got your first job?"*

Birth Years	2018	2020
1982-1987	17	17
1988-1994	18	18
1995-2000	18	22

These results reveal a difference in the composition of the two surveys' samples. The youngest MillennigenZ in the 2020 survey sample (at the time, aged 20-25) delayed entering the workforce for, on average, four years longer than their counterparts in the 2018 survey sample. Regardless, in both the 2018 and 2020 surveys, respondents, on average, began working before or during college (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 3: *Average age of each education level in our sample*

	2018		2020	
	% of sample	Average Age	% of sample	Average Age
Freshman	19%	20	11%	19
Sophomore	16%	21	15%	21
Junior	30%	24	27%	24
Senior (4th year)	24%	25	24%	25
Senior (5th+ year)	9%	25	9%	25
Graduated	3%	29	15%	34

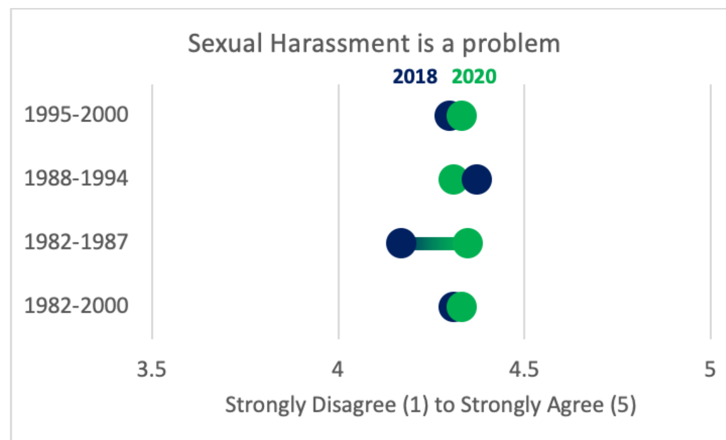
MillennigenZ of all age groups agree that discrimination against women is a problem, with average sentiment falling between "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Comparing the oldest and youngest groups of MillennigenZ, we again find no

evidence[8] supporting that MillennigenZ are getting more conservative with age regarding discrimination against women.

Sexual Harassment is a Problem

In both the 2018 and 2020 surveys, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “I feel a problem facing our society is sexual harassment.” As seen in Figure 3, there are no statistically discernable differences between responses between the 2018 and 2020 surveys for any age group. Further, respondents of all ages express strong agreement with the idea that sexual harassment is a problem, with average sentiment falling between “Somewhat Agree” and “Strongly Agree.”

Figure 3: *Sexual Harassment is a Problem*



It may be useful to compare responses regarding discrimination and sexual harassment. The gap between the responses for the youngest group (1995-2000) in the 2020 sample suggests they do not view these concepts as being the same. Perhaps they perceive sexual harassment to be a problematic but isolated phenomenon that does not automatically signify broader problems with women’s equality. This might explain why the two oldest age groups in the 2020 sample have such high levels of similarity in their responses. Perhaps as they have gotten older, they have come to realize how closely the phenomena are connected. Ironically, this suggests an inversion of the “beat down” perspective, in which MillennigenZ, having experienced more

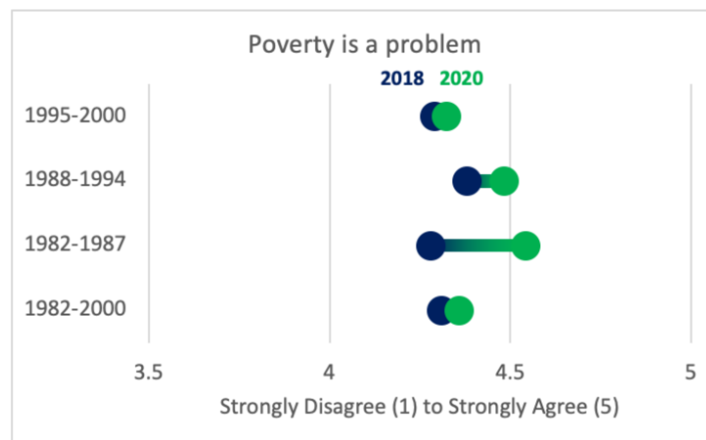
[8] In Figure 15, the error bars around the 2020 means for the oldest and youngest MillennigenZ do not overlap suggesting that the difference between the means may be statistically discernable. However, once we conduct an independent samples test, we find that the differences are not in fact statistically discernable, $t(28) = 1.6$, $p = .12$, two-tailed. As the p value is greater than .05, by convention, we are unable to rule out that any perceived difference is not merely the result of chance.

hardships and injustices as they age, actually get more liberal instead of more conservative. Regardless, there are no statistically discernable differences between the attitudes of oldest and youngest MillennigenZ, regarding sexual harassment, let alone evidence of a rightward shift.

Poverty is a Problem

As seen in Figure 4, there are no statistically discernable differences between responses between the 2018 and 2020 surveys for any age group. Further, respondents of all ages express strong agreement with the idea that poverty is a problem, with average sentiment falling between "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Once again, there are no statistically discernable differences between the oldest and youngest groups in 2018 or 2020,[9] which again contradicts the idea that the older are more conservative than the younger.

Figure 4: *Poverty is a Problem*



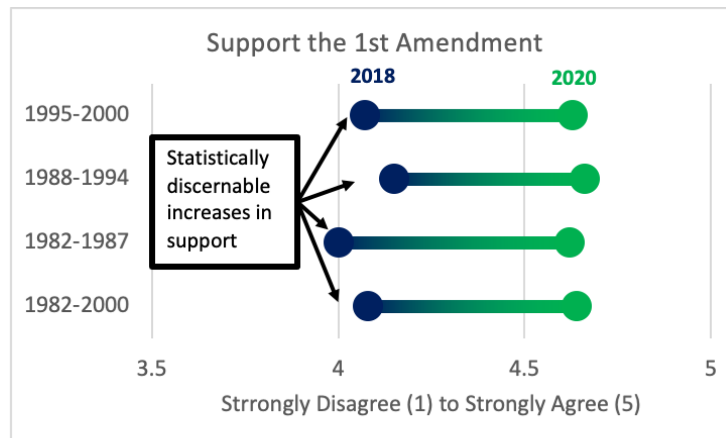
Support for the 1st Amendment

As seen in Figure 5, there were large, statistically discernable[10] increases in agreement between 2018 and 2020 among every age group, with almost all birth year cohorts strongly agreeing that they support the 1st Amendment. How do we make sense of these dramatic differences, and what do they signify?

[9] $t(29) = 1.75$, $p = .09$, two-tailed. As the p value is greater than .05, by convention, we are unable to rule out that any perceived difference is not merely the result of chance.

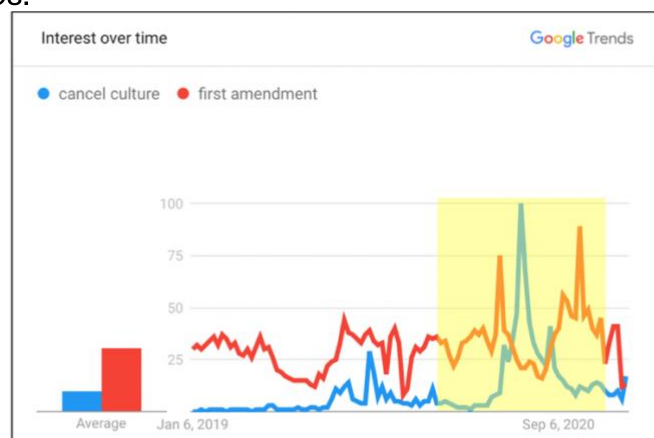
[10] *1982-2000* (t(1310.47) = 12.30, $p < .001$); *1982-1987* (t(45.7) = 2.77, $p = .008$); *1988-1994* (t(274.7) = 4.90, $p < .001$); *1995-2000* (t(979.11) = 11.00, $p < .001$).

Figure 5: *Support the 1st Amendment*



First, these findings run counter to the dominant narrative popular among right-wing news outlets and commentators about the ascension of "cancel culture" and its chilling effects on free speech. As seen in Figure 6, the period between the end of the 2018 survey and the end of the 2020 survey coincides with the rise of the specter of "cancel culture" and the threat it supposedly poses to free speech. Examples of this line of argument include the article "A Generational Threat to Free Expression – Survey data show that Americans under 30 prize cancel culture over liberty" from *City Journal*, published by the conservative think tank the Manhattan Institute (Kaufmann, 2022) and a *Wall Street Journal* podcast apocalyptically titled, "Civilization and Its Enemies," in which Gerry Baker, the editor at large, and the Hoover Institute's Ayaan Hirsi Ali bemoan "how the youth of today misinterpret concepts like free speech" (Baker, 2022, para. 1).

Figure 6: *Interest in the concepts "cancel culture" and "first amendment" between January 2019 and Decembers 2020 as measured by Google search engine queries.*



Our study's findings run counter to this narrative. Rather than seeking to suppress speech they disagree with, our survey's respondents increased their support for the 1st Amendment during the very period in which cultural conservatives were claiming that universities had become totalitarian "cultural socialist" gulags in which dissent is punished by cancelation.

In their study, Chong et al. (2021) reveal a factor that might explain what is going on. They find that the young and political liberals were tolerant of speech they disagreed with but intolerant of speech that might harm or offend women or racial minorities. This distinction may well be an important one. Our survey items ask respondents whether they support the 1st Amendment even for speech they might "disagree" with. Perhaps they imagine disagreement to be distinct from offense or opprobrium. Or perhaps, like The U.S. Supreme Court, Chong and colleagues (2021) observed that greater levels of scrutiny come into play regarding race and gender than for policy differences. Just as criticizing a politician for how they voted is more likely to be found acceptable than criticizing them for their race or sex, so too, you are more likely to tolerate speech that you merely "disagree" than speech that you feel unfairly targets people because of their immutable characteristics.

Moreover, this finding suggests another relevant distinction: government vs. private action. Even if it is true that the young and left-leaning may have become increasingly intolerant of some types of speech, that intolerance may not extend to government action. At the same time the conservative commentariat worried about the hordes of young liberals canceling public figures on social media, there was a growing awareness on the left that government officials – particularly those within the Trump administration[11] – were actively suppressing free speech. Perhaps, like the 1st Amendment itself, our respondents were confining their responses specifically to actions taken by the government and were not conveying their sentiment about "free expression" more generally and whether disagreeable speech by private actors should be tolerated.

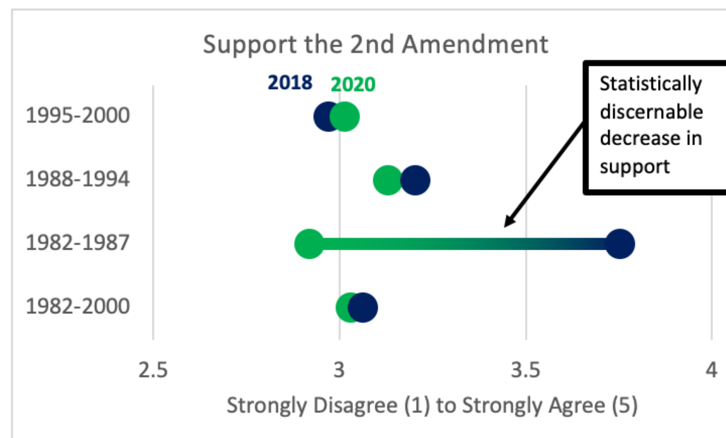
[11] For example, as of 2022, there is a separate Wikipedia article just devoted to "Trump administration political interference with science agencies."

Respondents of all ages express strong support for the 1st Amendment, with the average sentiment being closer to “Strongly Agree” than “Agree.” Finally, there are no statistically discernable differences between the oldest and youngest MillennigenZ, which once again contradicts the idea that one’s social attitudes get more conservative with age.

Support for the 2nd Amendment

As seen in Figure 7, the only statistically discernable difference[12] in support for the 2nd Amendment was among the oldest MillennigenZ (born 1982-1987), whose support fell from 3.75 to 2.92. This decline is notable as this age group had expressed much higher levels of support for the 2nd Amendment in the 2018 survey than the younger age groups. By the 2020 survey, the three age groups had largely converged in their ambivalence – midway between “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” – regarding the 2nd Amendment.

Figure 7: *Support for the 2nd Amendment*



There is a common expectation that people get more conservative around areas such as safety and security as they get older and thus might be more likely to support the 2nd Amendment. Contrary to this expectation, we find no conservative shift as MilleniGenz get older. Rather, the oldest group (born 1982 to 1987) seems to have gotten *less* conservative on the 2nd Amendment between 2018 and 2020. While there were statistically discernable[13] differences between the age cohorts, with the oldest more supportive of the 2nd Amendment than the youngest in 2018, consistent with the

[12] $t(60) = -2.48$, $p = 0.016$, two-tailed.
[13] Using an independent samples t test, $t(39) = 3.34$, $p = .002$, two-tailed.

assumption that people get more conservative as they age, by 2020, there were no discernable differences between the two groups' attitudes towards the 2nd Amendment.

One explanation for the much lower support for the 2nd Amendment among the younger groups of MillennigenZ in both 2018 and 2020 might relate to formative childhood experiences. When the Columbine High School shooting occurred in 1999, the oldest MillennigenZ were aged 12 to 17. The Columbine shooting was dramatic and unprecedented. It was the deadliest school shooting since the University of Texas clock tower shooting three decades before. It changed the culture. Michael Moore's documentary about the shooting and its aftermath, *Bowling for Columbine*, broke box office records and won an Academy Award for Best Documentary. The shooting led to other changes, such as the widescale adoption of school resource officers – police officers who are assigned to schools – a change which has been claimed to have contributed to the development of the "school to prison pipeline." There would not be another school shooting of a similar scale for nearly a decade. It is possible that the older MillennigenZ interpreted Columbine as a horrific but isolated tragedy. By the time of the next major school shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, these older MillennigenZ were adults aged 20 to 25 and processed it as such.

The younger MillennigenZ have had a different experience with mass shootings. When Columbine occurred, they were either small children or not yet born. For them, Columbine was not a freak event, it was a portent of things to come. Today, Columbine is no longer even in the top five most deadly school shootings. While the oldest MillennigenZ were in college by the time lockdowns and active shooting drills became commonplace in elementary schools, for the younger MillennigenZ, these shootings, and their aftermaths had become as formative to their childhood experiences and anxieties as the "duck and cover" atomic bomb drills had been for the Baby Boomers.

So, what happened between 2018 and 2020? Though the shooting at Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida, occurred in February 2018, while the 2018 survey was being conducted, by the time of the "March for Our Lives" gun control protest in March 2018 and "National School Walkout" commemorating the 19th Anniversary of the Columbine Shooting in April 2018, over a hundred respondents had already completed the survey. The year 2018 would also see mass shootings at a high

school in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and a bar in Thousand Oaks, California, followed by mass shootings at a municipal building in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and a Walmart in El Paso, Texas in 2019. Perhaps this string of high profile, deadly mass shootings shocked the older MillennigenZ enough to cause their support for the 2nd Amendment to plummet such that it now matched those of the other age groups.

Table 4: *2018 survey – "I support Gun Control"*

Birth Years	Support (1-5)
1982-1987	3.57
1988-1994	3.75
1995-2000	3.98

Consistent with MillennigenZ ambivalence towards the 2nd Amendment, there are limits to how far they will go. As seen in Table 4, when asked in 2018, MilleniGenz of all age groups were, on average, supportive of gun control. However, as seen in Table 5, when asked in 2020, all age groups of MillennigenZ expressed disagreement when asked whether "we should ban all guns."

Table 5: *2020 survey – "I believe we should ban all guns in the United States"*

Birth Years	Support (1-5)
1982-1987	2.48
1988-1994	2.63
1995-2000	2.71

Support Universal Health Care, Support LGBTQ Rights, Support Refugees

As seen in Figures 8, 9, and 10, there were no statistically discernable changes in support for universal healthcare[14], support for LGBTQ rights[15], or support for refugees, with average responses ranging between "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree" for all questions.

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[14] As seen in Figure 15, there appears to be a difference between the 2020 means for the oldest and youngest MillennigenZ, however the difference is not statistically discernable. $t(29) = 1.96$, $p = .06$, two-tailed.

[15] As seen in Figure 15, while there appears to be a difference between the 2020 means for the oldest and youngest groups, it is not statistically discernable.[15] $t(31) = 1.59$, $p = .12$, two-tailed.

Figure 8: *Support Universal Health Care*

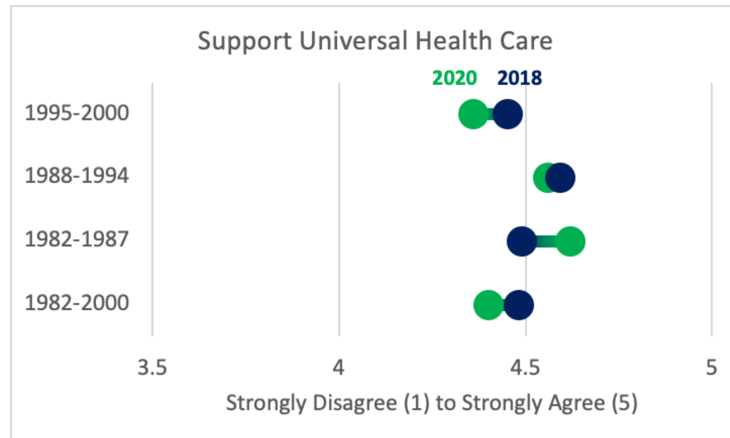


Figure 9: *Support LGBTQ Rights*

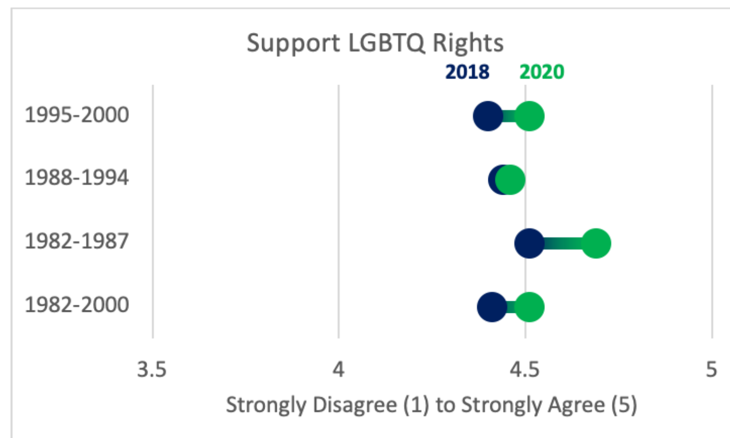
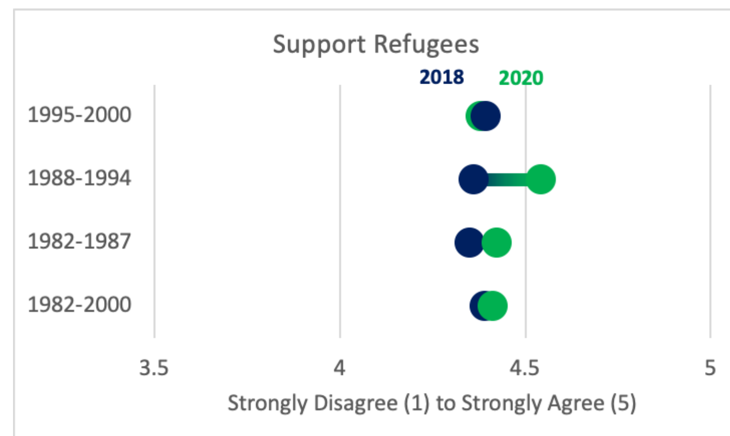


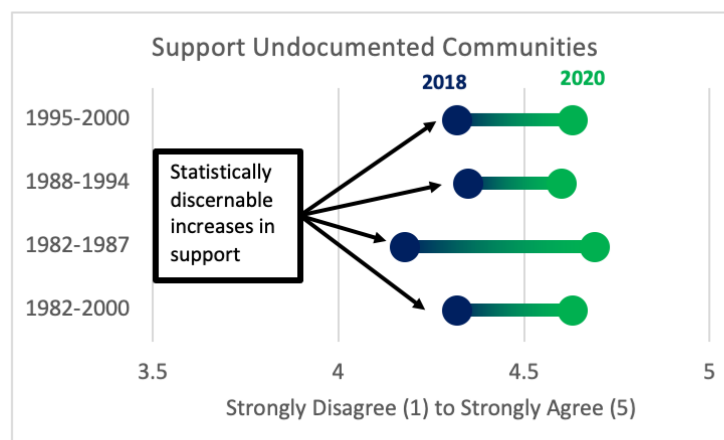
Figure 10: *Support Refugees*



Support Undocumented Communities

As seen in Figure 11, we do observe statistically discernable[16] increases in support for undocumented communities for every age group between 2018 and 2020. As with support for the 2nd Amendment, perhaps the dramatic differences in responses between 2018 and 2020 are due less to changes within MillennigenZ than they are to changes in the world. Donald Trump made attacks on immigrants central to his presidency from the moment he announced his candidacy in 2015, casting immigrants from Mexico as "rapists." In his first 100 days as President, he enacted a travel ban from a list of majority Muslim countries, ordered a series of high-profile Immigration and Customs Enforcement actions, announced the building of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, and attempted to cut federal funding to so-called "sanctuary cities," which refused to cooperate with federal immigration actions such as deportation. During the coming years, Trump's immigration policy would come to be defined by a combination of anti-immigrant action and rhetoric, from the attempt to rescind protections for the "Dreamers," undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as small children, to images of "kids in cages" that came to define the family separation policy that began circulating in 2018, to the pre-2018 election fear-mongering about the coming migrant "caravan," which Trump implied was filled with violent criminals (Shear & Hirschfeld Davis, 2018, para. 1).

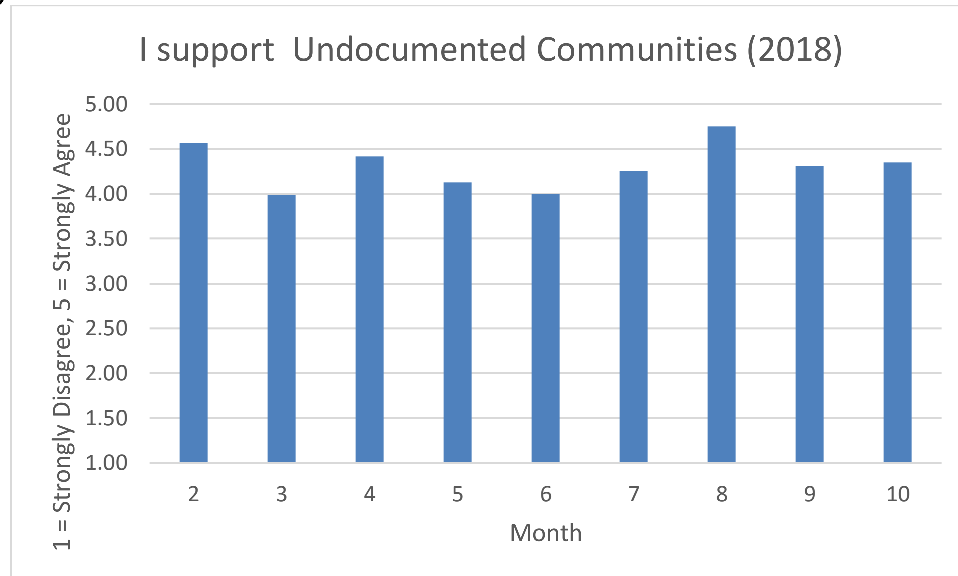
Figure 11: *Support Undocumented Communities*



[16] *1982-2000* (t(1492.38) = 6.45, *p* < .001); *1982-1987* (t(54.643) = 2.36, *p* = 0.022); *1988-1994* (*t*(238) = 2.43, *p* = .02); *1995-2000* (*t*(1116.13) = 5.60, *p* < .001)

Thus, respondents to the 2018 survey would likely already have been primed to consider support for undocumented communities in the context of current events. That said, as seen in Figure 12, for the 2018 survey (conducted between February and October[17], 2018), responses, on average, fluctuated between 4 and 4.5, with no discernable pattern.

Figure 12: *Support for Undocumented Communities by month during the 2018 survey*



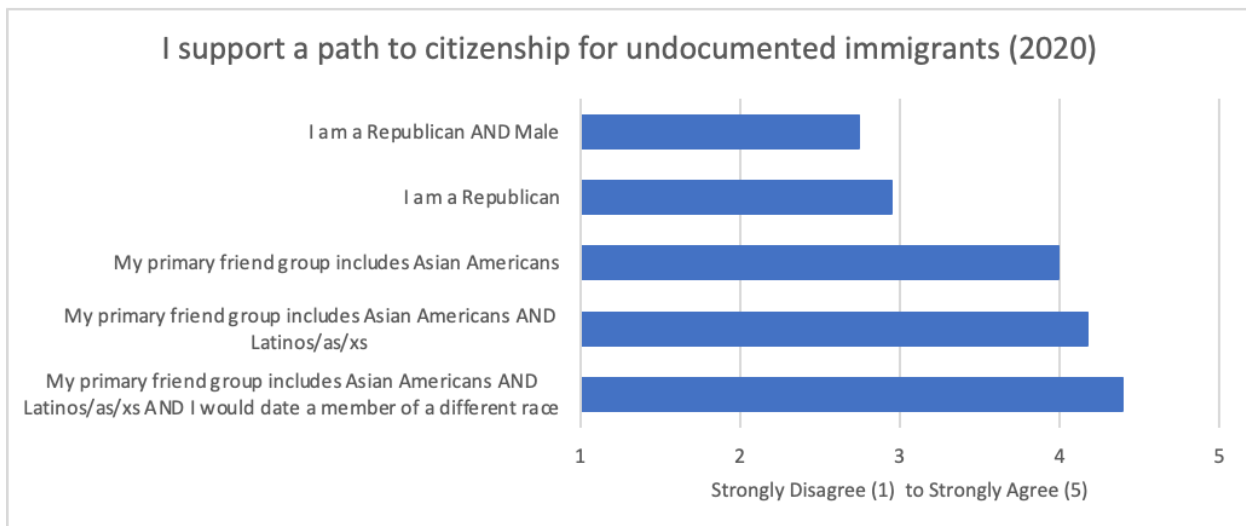
After the 2018 election, there was an escalation in coverage of anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions on the part of the Trump administration. Between the end of the 2018 survey and the start of the 2020 survey, among other things, Trump signed a proclamation suspending the right to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border, established the "Remain in Mexico" program prohibiting entry to asylum seekers, sought to restrict poorer immigrants from obtaining "green cards," and increased the pace of ICE enforcement actions, all while continuing to come under withering criticism for the family separation policy. Thus, it is likely that at least some of the increase in support for undocumented communities and a path to citizenship was in response to anti-immigrant actions and rhetoric.

A further possibility is that the rise in support for the undocumented may be the result of increasing solidarity among MillennigenZ of color. Research suggests that the

[17] There was only one survey completed after October 2018.

more that Asian Americans identify with Latino and Black communities, the more they are likely to support paths to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, while the more they identify with whites, the less likely they are to support such a path (Samson, 2015). Our survey reveals similar patterns. In Figure 13, results from our 2020 survey suggest that all else being equal, having a primary friend group that includes Asians or Latinos, and being willing to date someone of a different race increases support for a path to citizenship. However, being male (as opposed to non-male) or identifying as a Republican is associated with less support for a path to citizenship.

Figure 13: *Support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants*



Further, there appear to be no differences in support for the undocumented in either the 2018 or 2020 surveys by age group. Regardless, there is no evidence of any rightward shift in attitudes of MillennigenZ towards the undocumented as they get older. Rather, despite a drumbeat of rhetoric during this time attempting to cast the undocumented as dangerous criminals, MillennigenZ seems, if anything, to have become more liberal over time.

Figure 14: Agreement with statements for different age groups in the 2018 survey with standard error bars

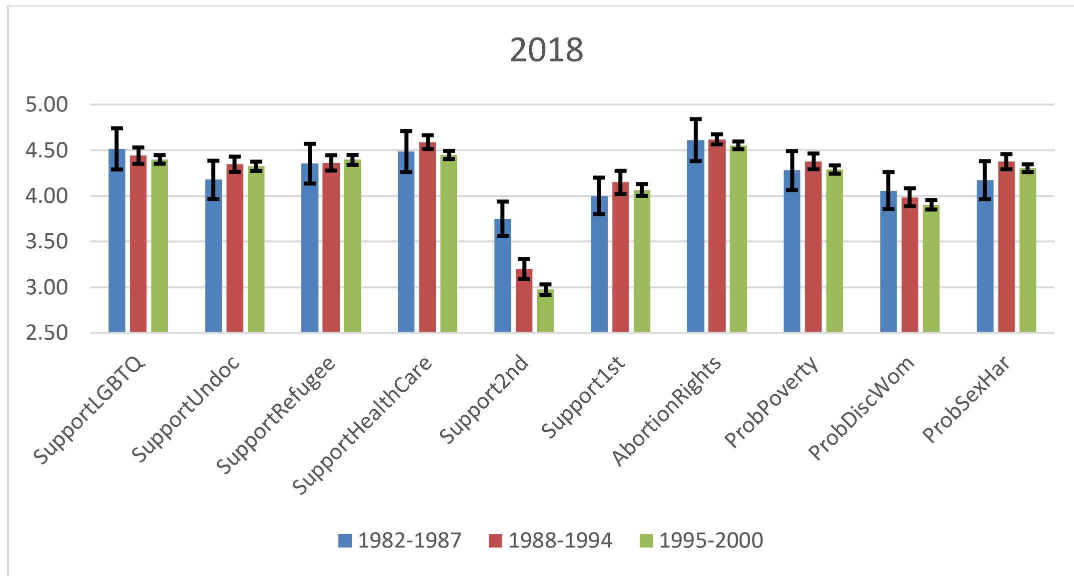
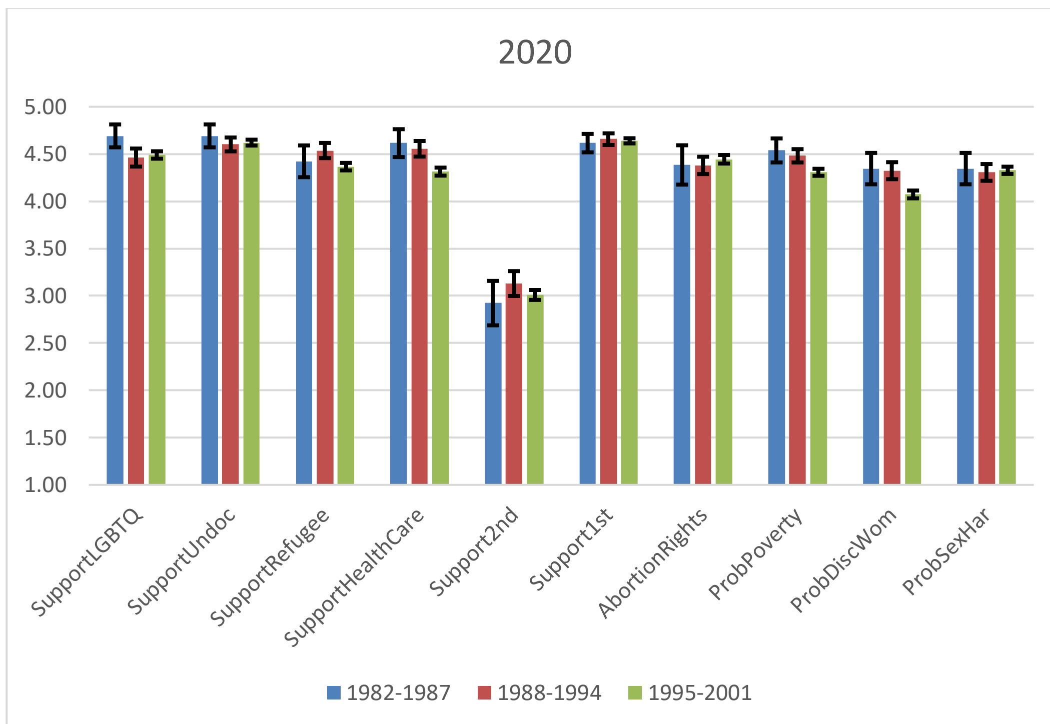


Figure 15: *Agreement with statements for different age groups in the 2020 survey with standard error bars*



Limitations

We acknowledge the following limitations of our study. First, unlike many studies employing two survey waves, we do not have the same participants in both waves. As such we cannot evaluate respondent-level changes in attitudes and must limit ourselves to analyzing data at the cohort level.

Second, between the two waves of the survey, there were some changes in wording for some questions. While these changes were usually minor, they could have some effect. When asked about abortion, in 2018, respondents were asked whether they “support the woman’s right to choose what happens to her body” and in 2020, whether they “believe in the right to have an abortion.” Perhaps the wider concept of bodily autonomy enjoys broader support than the more specific example of abortion, and that explains the decline in support. Likewise, in 2018, participants were asked whether “a problem facing our society is women’s equality,” and in 2020, whether “a problem facing our society is discrimination against women.” While the two statements are not identically phrased, the concepts being asked about – “equality” and “discrimination” – are closely related. Similarly, in 2018, we asked participants whether they “support the first Amendment even when it is a view I disagree with,” and in 2020, whether they “support the first Amendment, protects [sic] freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and right to petition, even when it is a view I disagree with.” The 2020 survey enumerates the sorts of rights protected by the 1st Amendment, while the 2018 survey does not. However unlikely, it is possible that the 2018 respondents were unaware of the content of the 1st Amendment and thus were less supportive of it than those in 2020 who were provided a description.

For some questions, the slight differences in wording seemed to have no effect, given the similarity in responses. In 2018, participants were asked whether they “support universal health care,” and in 2020, whether “everyone should have access to free health care.” Likewise, in 2018, we assessed participants’ support for “Refugee communities,” but in 2020, asked whether respondents were “okay with refugees seeking asylum in the United States.” Finally, in 2018, we asked participants to respond to the statement, “I support Undocumented communities,” and in 2020, to “I support the path to citizenship for undocumented communities.” In each case, there are slight

differences in wording between the two surveys, but the similarities in responses suggest that any differences are not meaningful.

Thus, we return to the paradox of MillennigenZ social attitudes. The fact that they have opted to maintain the social liberalism of their youth well into their thirties turns the question back to previous generations. Instead of puzzling at why they have not grown out of their liberal beliefs, MillennigenZ might ask those of us who came before why we gave up on ours.

Conclusion

Contrary to decades of voting patterns and social science research supporting the folk wisdom that people get more conservative as they age, our findings suggest that this just simply does not seem to be the case for MillennigenZ. So why are MillennigenZ different? It would seem that the durability of progressive social attitudes among MillennigenZ owes to some difference between MillennigenZ and previous generations. Some scholars have gone so far as to pathologize this generation, bemoaning its narcissism, lack of empathy, and obsession with attention and fame (Twenge, 2013). So, why are they not “growing up?” How do we explain this attitudinal neoteny?

Demographic Change

One of the defining characteristics of the Millennial and Gen Z generations has been their unprecedented racial diversity. In his analysis of U.S. Census data, Frey (2022) found that the non-white portion of each generation has grown over time, rising from 28% for Boomers, 40% for Gen X, and 45% for Millennials, to 49% for Gen Z. In their analysis of the 2016, 2018, and 2020 electorates, Pew found that while non-whites made up 26-28% of all voters and 35-40% of Democratic voters, they only made up 12-15% of Republican voters (Igielnik et al., 2022). Thus, in so far as non-whites tend to be more politically liberal, it should not be surprising that generations with a higher portion of non-whites would be more politically liberal as well.

Thus, insofar as political liberalism and social liberalism are correlated, part of the explanation for why MillennigenZ are more liberal than previous generations may be due to their greater racial diversity. However, this does not account for changes in

attitudes – either why earlier generations changed their attitudes or why MillennigenZ seem not to be doing so. Further, this explanation rests upon the syllogism:

Premise 1: Non-whites tend to be more liberal
Premise 2: MillennigenZ are more non-white
Conclusion: MillennigenZ tend to be more liberal

Such a chain of reasoning rests upon some precarious assumptions. First, while non-whites currently tend to be more liberal, that could very well change. If non-whites' current liberalism is the result of a lack of "buy in," then that could change should non-whites become more "bought in." In the same analysis in which Pew found non-whites to be more likely to be Democrats, they also found signs of fractures in that racial coalition as the share of Republican voters who were non-white increased between 2016 and 2020. Second, broad assumptions about racial and ethnic groups tend to ignore important variations within groups and are sometimes just wrong. Indeed, famously, many non-white immigrant groups from communist countries (e.g., Vietnamese communities in Orange County, California, and Cubans in South Florida) are some of the most reliably conservative voters. Third, it can be dangerous to conflate political and social views. Many non-white communities that, on average, tend to be more politically liberal may also be more conservative. Thus, we have cases like Latino voters in California who rejected the Republican Party after it embraced explicitly anti-immigrant policies such as Proposition 187 but who often held onto conservative attitudes on social issues such as abortion. Thus, while MillennigenZ are clearly more racially diverse and more socially liberal than previous generations, the two do not necessarily explain each other.

Broken Social Contract

Another possible explanation is that the social contract has been broken for MillennigenZ. They are not becoming more conservative because they are not "buying in." MillennigenZ are preserving the social liberalism of young adulthood because they have been denied access to the trappings of adulthood given to the middle-class whites of previous generations. They are less likely to marry, have children, or own a home, and those that do, do so later in life. They are more likely to be saddled with student loan debt for longer than previous generations were. A generation that is less invested

in the social order may be more supportive of even drastic changes to it well into their adulthood and even middle age.

This sort of explanation is consistent with the sociological concept of "social aging," which explains that as a person's pattern of social interactions changes, so too will their values and perspective on life (Peterson et al., 2020). Once you settle down into a long-term relationship, you will stop dating and probably start spending more time with other people in such relationships. Once you have kids, you will probably spend less time at bars and restaurants and more at parks and playdates. Once you buy a home, you will spend more of your time and attention on maintaining it. And on and on. But what of the MillennigenZ who are delaying – for whatever reason – marriage and children and home buying? When a generation maintains into their 30s and 40s the same patterns of social interactions they had in their 20s, we should not be surprised that they maintain their social attitudes as well.

Shared Life Experiences

A final possible explanation is offered by life course theory. In his 1928 essay "The Problem of Generations," sociologist Karl Mannheim suggested that shared experiences, particularly in youth, can shape a generation's outlook and perspective on life (1970). This explanation, also known as the impressionable years hypothesis (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989), has been widely accepted and hugely influential in understanding differences among generations. According to this theory, just as the Great Depression and World War II had inspired patriotism and self-sacrifice in the Greatest Generation, perhaps the economic prosperity of post-war America instilled in Baby Boomers their defining trait: self-confidence. This assuredness and pre-occupation with the self that comes with it may explain not only the Baby Boomers' trust that they could end the Vietnam War and dismantle Jim Crow but also their generational obsession with self-improvement (e.g., EST and aerobics).

So too, Gen X might be defined by anti-climax. For all of Reagan's militaristic rhetoric, the Cold War ended with more of a whimper than a bang. Gen X came of age in a decidedly backward-looking environment – between the assertion that their grandparents were "the Greatest Generation" and their parents' nostalgia for the 1960s – in which everything to be valued had already happened. Gen X was told that

capitalism's triumph over communism meant that they were now in the "End of History" but were left rudderless. What was there to look forward to or to work towards? Thus, its obsession with authenticity and anxiety over selling out.

So, what of MillennigenZ? As we have discussed, their formative experiences were virtually all traumatic ones. From Columbine to 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina to the Great Recession to the string of killings of Black men and women by police officers to the looming existential threat of climate change, MillenigenZ grew up buffeted by events overwhelming in their tragedy and which were, to a one, the direct result of the actions or inactions of previous generations. At the same time, MillennigenZ have become the most socially and politically active generation since the Boomers. MillennigenZ have embraced a gender and sexuality revolution perhaps as sweeping as the sexual revolution of the 1960s. So, too, the Black Lives Matter protests have eclipsed the mid-century civil rights and anti-war marches as the largest (Buchanan et al., 2020) and most diverse (Fisher, 2020) in U.S. history.

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