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Millennial Voting Patterns in a Politically Polarized America

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By

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Under the Mentorship of Dr. Joshua Kennedy

Abstract

As the millennial population has grown into adulthood, this generation has been labeled as an entitled group which is politically inactive, with lower voter turnout than older generations. At the same time, existing literature shows that the federal government in America has become increasingly polarized over the past decades and less representative of the general population which still generally moderate. I argue that low voter turnouts for millennials are a direct result of this increased polarization as a more moderate young people feel like they are not represented by elite politicians, who generally fall into older generations and the highest possible social class. Through surveys and interviews with college students, I analyze the perception and trust level that millennials have of the government and how this affects their likelihood to vote in Presidential elections. Millennials report that they feel as if their individual vote does not matter and that their voice has no effect on potential changes in the highest level of government, creating a problem that must be addressed.

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Introduction

Political events leading up to and immediately following the 2016 Presidential election are an indicator that the political climate has shifted in the United States and could have long term implications on the structure of the Republican and Democratic Parties. The 2016 Presidential election will be memorable for outrageous personalities and criminal investigations that forced the voters in this country to decide between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, who were both shown to have historically high unfavorable ratings (Wright, 2016). Politicians serving in the highest level of government found themselves disagreeing on key issues based on party affiliations, as illustrated by the block on Merrick Garland's Supreme Court nomination at the end of Barack Obama's presidency and Republicans holding out for months in the hopes of a conservative president. Research has shown that the Republican and Democratic Parties are becoming more polarized and less willing to compromise on major decisions and policy (Theriault 2008, pg. 27).

This growing political divide has effects that reach far beyond Washington D.C. and those serving in the federal government. As a result of increased partisanship, a moderate electorate has been forced to choose a side on the political spectrum and tends to vote differently across different demographics (Fiorna 2016). One demographic that can be used as a predictor of voting behavior is age, and people have traditionally been separated into identifiable generations. Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, tend to vote together from a conservative Christian background, while the main priority of Generation X (born in 1964-1980) is protecting an economy that may be failing as they approach retirement. Millennials, people who were born after 1980 and cut off around

1998, according to the Pew Research Center (2017), are portrayed as more liberal than older generations; additionally, this generation is often criticized for a lack of political participation and low voter turnout.

The criticism directed towards the millennial generation for low voter turnout is statistically supported by the voting records from previous elections. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), the amount of eligible millennial voters who actually end up voting has never risen above 50 percent. This falls well below the percentage for Baby Boomers and Generation X, which generally turn out at about 70 and 60 percent, respectively (Figure 3). Despite vastly outnumbering the Boomer generation in the general population, the millennial generation only produced 34 million votes, a much lower number than the Boomers who were responsible for 48 million voters in 2016. These low numbers for voter turnout of millennials indicate that the political environment in America may be having an effect on the willingness of young people to be politically active in elections. My research looks to provide evidence and reasoning for how being born into a highly polarized political climate has resulted in lower political participation of the millennial generation in presidential elections.

What factors motivate millennials to vote in elections? And what political stance must a candidate have to gain millennial support? I theorize that millennials are motivated to vote when they perceive a candidate, regardless of his/her specific party association, to serve as a better representation for the values and needs of young people. This differs from older voters who are more likely to associate with one of the major political parties, because they feel better represented and have consistently voted with that party for many elections. As the elites have become more polarized over the last few

decades (Fiorina, 2006), millennial voters have entered a political scene where they are less likely to feel truly represented by either party. Candidates who are perceived to represent the needs of young voters, through campaigning on issues like education reform and the creation of more entry level jobs, will naturally attract the younger millennial voters, who do not feel that they are adequately represented in Washington.

Understanding the motivations of the millennial generation is imperative moving forward, due to the fact that young people make up a large percentage of the population that is eligible to vote, but have consistently failed to account for the same percentage of voters in elections. Answers to the questions presented can inform not only presidential candidates, but any politician as to how he or she can best represent and protect the values of a rising generation and can help to create a political climate in this country that promotes the civic participation of all citizens, regardless of age. It is only possible for American democracy to truly flourish when all citizens are engaged in the political processes which determine how this nation is governed.

Literature Review

Civic Participation

When considering varying levels of civic participation and how people view their role in American politics, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's book (1995), *Voice and Equality*: *Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, is a foundational piece for understanding modern American democracy. Their study covers far more than just the voting habits of Americans, but still investigates the factors that lead to higher political involvement and participation. The types of political involvement analyzed in their study

ranged from working in electoral campaigns to attending protests to serving on local boards in elected positions. Their research found that those who had money to invest in politics were more likely to participate and have a larger voice in the democratic process (p. 515). This led them to conclude that social class and status is one of the primary factors in indicating the likelihood of participation in many aspects of American politics. They also focused on race, which is related to their conclusions on social class, and found that whites, who are historically more privileged, are more likely to participate and vote than both Latinos and African Americans (p. 523).

While *Voice and Equality* focuses heavily on class differences and the influence of money in political participation, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) did not take an in depth look into the differences in civic participation among various age groups. Dalton (2016) replicated the research design from *Voice and Equality* to identify how civil participation has evolved over the last few decades while focusing on generational differences. Using data from the General Social Survey, he measured the change from 1967 to 2014 in levels of participation in political activities. Dalton (2016) found that in many ways the level of political participation has increased. Today, people are more likely to contribute money to politicians, write letters to their representatives, work on a campaign, and even participate in a boycott or march than they were in the 1960s or 1980s. Voting, however, has had a significant drop in participation levels, especially among the millennial generation. Dalton (2016) found that the Millennial generation has the lowest voter turnout of any generational group of young voters and argues that "it is unclear whether the Millennial generation can ever catch up to earlier generations" (p. 6).

This research statistically verifies the idea that millennials do not turn out well in elections, but leaves room for further research into what exactly has caused this problem.

Leighley and Nagler (2014) conducted research investigating the difference in policy preferences and political standing of voters and non-voters in elections dating back to the 1970s. One important finding of their surveying was that moderate voters have slowly but progressively become a smaller section of the electorate in recent elections. White economic conservatives have been over represented in every election in the past few decades, and this over-representation has continued. Leighley and Nagler (2014) also offer a potential explanation for the differences in voters and non-voters. They believe that economic class is a good predictor for whether or not someone will vote, as wealthier people are more likely to be politically active. This may partially explain why older people have higher turnout in elections, as they tend to be more financially stable than people just entering careers. This set of research shows that citizen participation will continue to be unequal across different demographics and there will never be one factor that can fully explain the reasons for or against participating in the democratic process.

Political Polarization

There is a large amount of existing literature that examines the increasing polarization that is taking place in American government. While government actors are taking more extreme positions on political issues, the same change is not taking place among American voters. Fiorina (2006) argues that the political polarization of the American electorate is a myth, and the reality is that most citizens are politically moderate compared to the extremes that make up the political parties. He uses Gallup

Polls from the 2004 election to show how issues that cause deep divides in Washington actually cause most Americans to take generally moderate positions. The result, however, is that people choose the candidate and party that is closer to their position to support. Fiorina (2006) also pointed out that the media portrays America in a way that there is a deep, almost even split among Americans for extreme support for each political party and its policies, which is not an accurate representation. He concludes that voting reform is necessary to encourage people without any perceived representation to vote and bring the political climate in Washington back to a more moderate standing.

While Fiorna (2006) argues that polarization has really only been significant within the government, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2008) offer an explanation for this growing partisan polarization in their book, *Polarized America.* They argue that polarization has occurred at the same time as an economic shift that has created a greater wealth disparity between upper and lower class citizens. They also argue that polarization and inequality work in a cycle as polarization creates more inequality, which leads to more polarized candidates and policies (p.76). Their data show that as income inequality has grown, members of both parties have moved further away from the middle, and Congress has had points of stalemate because no real agreements can be made on policy. This serves as an explanation for the increased polarization in Washington currently, as income inequality has continued to grow. Their study supports Fiorna's (2006) claims that polarization is only a major issue at the government level, and that the electorate remains relatively moderate.

Theriault (2008) offers an alternate explanation for the increasing polarization in candidates for both legislative and executive positions, which focuses more on

institutional changes rather than economic disparity. There has been redistricting of voting lines, which he describes as a process in which legislators choose their constituents, rather than the other way around as it is supposed to be (p. 62). As a result, districts now vote the same way consistently, even though their representatives are moving away from the moderate positions that they hold. An increase in power and decrease in the amount of checks on that power have allowed for members of the House of Representatives to take more extreme stances, forcing groups of people to rally behind candidates who may not really represent them. Theriault (2008) presents a problem that must be solved if the government is expected to be responsive to people, because currently power lies primarily in the hands of politicians and not with those who elect them. This idea that the people are losing their power to influence politicians can create the feeling in voters that there is no hope in changing the political system.

The government's slow and methodical weakening of the democratic process through polarization and an increase in legislative power is examined in *Tides of Consent.* Stimson (2004) argues that public opinion only shapes the political climate when a large majority supports a new view on an issue. Members of a minority view do not have the chance to influence policy makers, and their arguments often are simply ignored by members of government. Stimson (2004) also argues that a majority of people are ignorant about politics and do not understand what they truly want (p. 27). The public, generally, is not passionate about political issues and thus their opinions do not equate to change. As a result, when people lack a true desire to initiate change, they are less likely to participate in voting and other democratic processes that give them a voice. This argument appears to hold true for the millennial generation, who, as a whole, lack passion

to participate in elections. My research attempts to show this to be true by analyzing how engaged politically millennials are and whether or not that effects the likelihood of them voting.

Elections

In addition to the material on polarization, there is literature that focuses on elections and how campaigning affects presidential candidates' chances of winning. Vavreck (2009) argues that the stance a candidate takes on the economy is one of the most important factors in influencing voters. It is more complicated than just the position that is held, but also if the economy is succeeding or failing in the year leading up to the election. According to Vavreck (2009), a candidate who takes a positive position on a succeeding economy will tend to talk about it more in an attempt to bolster his support. This idea is important because it shows that, no matter which demographic you are looking at, the economy and a candidate's stance on it is one of the most important issues in voting. When considering millennials political views and voting patterns, it is imperative to include their stance on the economy and what kind of economic platform they want a candidate to run on.

In addition to the economic stance taken by a candidate, the standing within a political party also matters in presidential primary voting. Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller (2016), using the most recent presidential election as evidence, claim that regulars win nominations more easily when harmony is high among the leadership of a political party. Political outsiders have a greater chance of winning primary races when a party has multiple factions with widespread support that fragments voters. Based on recent

elections, they argue that younger voters (millennials, essentially) turn out stronger for these outsider candidates who represent a break from the political norm in Washington This research contributes to the development of the idea that millennial voters do not feel well represented by the major political parties and their leadership in Washington. This stronger turn out for outsider candidates could also be a result of the culture in which millennial generation has grown up.

Millennial Culture

Oyserman and Lee (2008) investigated the effects that culture has on the thinking of individuals and found that the context surrounding an individual has a large influence on subsequent thought and action. Through priming research participants towards individualism or collectivism and exposing them to different issues, it was observed that the surrounding culture influences the perception an individual has of problems (p. 330). Oyserman and Lee (2008) concluded that human thinking is largely dependent on the social context within which it occurs. Applying this research to millennial voting participation, it can be argued that the culture of individualism identified in young Americans is having an effect on the amount of people voting in elections.

While individualism is a quality that is often praised, recent research has shown that young people have become increasingly self-absorbed and out of touch with reality. In their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic,* Twenge and Campbell (2009) argue that the culture of individualism that has long characterized this country has taken a negative turn in recent years. Their studies show that American college students from the 1980s to the 2000s showed increasing signs of narcissistic traits. Through surveying and medical

research, it was shown that people in their twenties are three times as likely to suffer from narcissistic personality disorder at some point in their life than those in their sixties and seventies. Twenge and Campbell (2009) believe that this rise in narcissism and selfishness is a result of Americans losing touch with the values of individual responsibility and hard work that were traditionally held in this country. This shallowing of values in America has had the largest effect on millennials, whose foundational years were deeply affected by this culture shift.

Some researchers have questioned whether or not the stigma of narcissism surrounding millennials has any legitimacy. Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) studied changes in high school seniors over a thirty year period to examine if the complaints about increasingly selfish young generations hold any weight. They surveyed students from the same high schools to analyze the personality traits and values shared by cohorts of young people. Their results showed that most personality traits have been consistent in young people over the past thirty years (p. 67). These traits include happiness levels, self-esteem, work ethic, and feelings of loneliness. However, members of the millennial generation showed higher levels of cynicism and a lack of trust in government institutions than young people of previous generations (p. 68). The study did not provide an explanation for why trust levels have decreased in the government, but it was suggested that this may be an indication of a change in the government and in society, as a whole.

Despite researchers having mixed opinions on the culture of millennials, older generations often view the younger cohort cynically and have expectations that millennials are problematic. Baker Rosa and Hastings (2016) researched the views that

older generations have of millennials, particularly in the workplace. They interviewed managers at different businesses focusing on the perception they have of the millennial employees that surround them. The most important finding in the research was the overwhelming number of managers who viewed the millennial employees as "kids". Many managers talked about their workers as if they were children despite showing "an awareness of possible negative connotations and/or the inappropriateness of the term for the workplace" (p. 55). These findings are important because they discuss how the stereotypes placed on millennials cause a strain in intergenerational relationships. Baker Rosa and Hastings (2016) acknowledge that as millennials age they will lose this stereotype, but, while it exists, it will continue to distance millennials from the older generations in society.

Conclusion

My research will expand on the already existing literature by looking at the effects of polarization on a specific group of voters. While there are many stigma associated with millennials and a lack of civic participation, there is a lack of research in determining why this generation of young voters is turning out to polls at a lower rate. I attempt to fill in this gap in understanding by asking millennial voters what is keeping them from voting and if they view political involvement as an important aspect of American life. By synthesizing the ideas presented in the literature about polarization and the culture millennials have grown up in, I hope to show exactly why millennials have lower levels of civic participation than older generations.

Existing research also shows that the electorate is not taking extreme views like the leaders in Washington, but does not really give a clear picture of the results of polarization on voters and how they select candidates. If millennial voters are more likely to be moderate or independent (Pew 2017), then selection of candidates in voting is bigger than just voting along party lines. It will also further the understanding of whether or not young voters are really paying attention to the current political situation in Washington, and will give the most relevant answer as to which issues are key in campaigning for millennial votes moving forward.

Theory

I argue that the low voter turnout of millennials is a direct result of increasingly polarized candidates not representing the values of younger Americans. The culture of individualism and entitlement that millennials were raised in causes millennials to look for candidates who directly represent their needs and desires for the country (Twenge & Campbell 2009). Millennials have entered adulthood in a time of increased political divide between Republicans and Democrats, and these two parties may not attract young moderate voters. As a result, I argue that many millennials are choosing not to vote because they do not feel represented by the party leadership. This is different from previous generations, who are more likely to vote consistently with one party because they have always done so, despite increasing polarization and changes within each party. Because Baby Boomers and Generation X had higher voting rates when they were the youngest voters (Dalton 2015), they continue to vote despite the increased polarization because they always have voted and value the idea of voting more.

With the current state of politics in this country, candidates are often viewed as elitist politicians who do not represent the common man's needs. As the partisanship in Washington continues to grow, it is valid that millennials could perceive that they are unrepresented by presidential candidates. With a polarized government that cannot seem to work together to solve issues, this generation of young voters has a perception of hopelessness and lack of trust that has led to increased apathy and lower voting turnout.

While young people have felt underrepresented for many generations and have never had high voting rates, the millennial generation has a unique situation compared to those earlier generations. In the past, it could be argued that young people were disengaged from politics because information surrounding politics was not readily available to them and, thus, not a concern. The millennial generation is the first to truly grow up in an environment where all the information dealing with politics is constantly at its fingertips, as technology has enabled mass communication to happen immediately. Almost all members of the millennial generation have instant access to coverage of political happenings through online news sites, as well as exposure to people's opinions from different backgrounds through social media. This immediate access to political news and witnessing the controversy that it creates could also be part of the explanation for why millennial voters are less engaged.

It does not suffice anymore to say that young people are completely uneducated when it comes to political issues because politics have progressively entered into more aspects of society, and young people are constantly hearing new opinions. The trouble comes from the fact that many sources of information are not credible and fabricate stories to belittle one party and its members, knowing that their faithful readers will

believe it. Ultimately, this back and forth game that the media plays attempting to push their agenda is leading moderate young people to want nothing to do with politics in America.

Rather than claiming ignorance or laziness, I theorize that many millennials see the situation in Washington as a battle of two parties with which they do not identify and do not want to be a part of the conflict. This is applicable to all levels of government, ranging from the President all the way down to locally elected officials, as the perceptions one has of the national government could also affect their level of participation in local elections. Concerning all levels of government, potential millennial voters have more moderate views on many of the issues then the elected officials and are less likely to have any true partisan identification.

Based on my theory about political participation of millennials, I will test several hypotheses about voting patterns and candidate preferences of millennials.

H1: If a millennial identifies as a moderate and/or an independent, he/she
is less likely to vote.

I suspect that this will hold true because members of the millennial generation who do not take strong stances on political issues are less inclined to turn out to vote. These people are less likely to identify with members of the polarized political parties and do not see any reason to vote for a candidate they do not agree with. I assume that the millennial generation will have more potential voters identifying as a moderate or politically independent than older generations, and that this affects voting turnout. This

will not be the case for every millennial, as people who have strong opinions on current political issues will be more likely to affiliate with some party and to vote for that party.

> *H2: If a millennial believes that the government does not directly represent their needs and values, he/she is less likely to participate in elections.*

This hypothesis will be tested to assess my claim that political participation for millennials is low because they do not feel a true representation from the government. This lack of representation is the result of the absence of young people in high elected offices and the feeling that the older politicians do not truly have the best interest of the entire population in mind when making decisions. As a result of the culture surrounding the millennial generation, young people do not feel inclined to participate in politics when they have no perceived, direct gain for themselves and end up feeling apathetic towards politics. The increased access millennials have to media coverage around politics intensifies the feeling of poor representation, as young people now have a better idea of what the government is actually concerned about.

> *H3: Millennials who do not believe their vote matters in the presidential election are less likely to turn out to vote.*

This hypothesis comes from the idea in my theory that millennials do not feel like they are truly a part of or represented by the political system in America. In Presidential elections especially, it seems like a very small number of the total population has a say in

who wins the election. This can be traced to the Electoral College system that forces Presidential candidates to focus all of their efforts on only a few states and their middle class voters. In some areas of the country, it is clear that a state will be carried consistently by one party, but people of both parties still turn out to vote based on who they support. For millennials, however, a combination of not really fitting into either party and having a view that their vote does not make a difference in the outcome will lead them to have no desire to vote because it feels useless.

H4: Millennials who report lower levels of trust in the government are less likely to vote in presidential elections.

High levels of polarization in the government have increased the tension between the Republican and Democratic Parties. This increased tension and inability to work across the aisle leads people to believe that the government is not able to do its job and results in lower levels of trust. For some people, especially those who identify with one of the two parties, the solution to this problem is to vote out members of the opposing party and hope that your party takes control of the government. I suspect that millennials do not have this same motivation because of the polarizing shift in politics and do not necessarily blame one party for the problem. Millennials are likely to have lower trust in the entire government and not vote because they do not see the candidates as being part of a solution.

Research Design

Case Selection

This research is designed to provide answers to the lack of millennial voting across the entire country, specifically focusing on a section of the 18-29 age demographic that Census Bureau surveys have shown to have extremely low turnout in recent elections (File, 2017). Older millennials, while still not voting at the same rate as Baby Boomers or Gen Xers, do not create the same level of concern moving forward to future elections as the youngest group of eligible voters. Thus, the population for this research is all eligible voters who are enrolled in colleges across America, who are traditionally aged between 18-25.

Because of limited time and resources, my sample is limited to students enrolled at Georgia Southern University (GSU). Georgia Southern University provides a racially and ethnically diverse campus, which can be used to draw general conclusions about the millennial population, as a whole. According to the official enrollment data, Georgia Southern University has a population that is 47% male and 53% female. The racial makeup of University students is 63% white, 25% black, and 6% Hispanic (GSU, 2017). While I anticipate that the GSU sample group is more conservative than the entire population, the sample size is big enough to ensure that people of multiple political backgrounds and beliefs are included in the results.

The unit of analysis for this research is individuals who participated in the survey, the interview, or both. Questions in the survey assess each individual's views on the government and whether or not they participate in elections. Using the individual as the unit of analysis, I synthesized the data together to identify the voting tendencies of young

millennials as a whole. While the research was focused on individuals, the analysis of data and the conclusions are focused on addressing a group of people's voting habits.

Variables

      The independent variables in this research design are represented by questions in the survey and are self-reported by individuals in the study. The independent variables are the level of *trust in the government*, the perception of *representation by the government*, an individual's *personal political stance*, and an individual's view on whether his or her *vote matters*.

      Each participant rated their level *of trust in the government* on a scale from one to ten in the survey on question 16. This measures the amount of confidence that young millennials have in the government to do its job responsibly. The perception of *representation*, also measured on a scale from one to ten in question 15, identifies how important participants feel their interests are to the government in its decision making. These variables deal with how participants view government and can have an impact on whether or not an individual wants to participate in the political system.

      Political stance was measured in question fourteen by asking the participant to place themselves on a spectrum from being extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (10), with the middle of the spectrum being moderate. Question 4 also asks if participants identify with any political party and serves as another way to measure *political stance*. This variable will be used to analyze whether or not millennials report themselves to be moderate and if they fit into the increasingly polarized parties.

During both the survey and interview, participants were asked to identify whether or not they believed their *vote matters*. In question 12, this was asked as a simple yes or no question. In the interview, participants were asked to analyze why or why not, considering the Electoral College system that is used in Presidential elections. This is a critical variable because believing that voting does not really make a difference could explain why people choose not to vote.

The dependent variable in my study is whether or not an *individual votes*. Specifically, this variable was measured by voting participation in the 2016 Presidential election and if an individual plans to vote in the 2020 Presidential election through their answers to questions seven and ten, respectively.

One control for this experiment was to ensure that only the data would be used from individuals who were eligible to vote in the 2016 election when dealing with past voting numbers. Their answers were only used in determining relationships between the independent variables and plans to vote in future elections. This eliminates the alternative explanations that some students did not vote because they were too young to be registered or because they are not American citizens.

Other controls in this experiment are *gender* and *race*. These are controlled for by having a diverse sample and asking all participants to identify their gender and race to ensure that general trends can be identified. These controls are important because both gender and race could provide explanations for why people choose to or not to vote and what their political affiliation is.

Sources of Data

The sources of my data are surveys and interviews addressing voting habits with current Georgia Southern students. Both the survey and interview were administered with IRB approval under the tracking number H18098. The survey and interview questions are both included in the Appendix section (Figures 1 and 2).

Surveys were conducted in large classroom settings of introductory level American Government classes with permission granted from the instructor and were optional for students in the class. Introductory classes were used to ensure that a large number of students of various backgrounds and values were included in the sample. The total number of participants included in the survey was 428. The survey questions focused primarily on the individual's perceptions of the government and whether or not they voted in the previous election.

Face to face interviews were conducted with 15 random students who volunteered to participate in the research. These interviews were conducted in a private setting and with the assurance of confidentiality to guarantee truthful and accurate answers. Each interviewee was asked to verify that the recorded summaries of their answers were an accurate representation of what they had said. The interview questions addressed how the individual perceived the government and current voting system, as well as their perceptions of the millennial generation as a whole.

Methodology

For my project, I employ a mixed method approach to attempt to answer my research question. The survey is a form of quantitative analysis, while the interviews

allow me to conduct qualitative analysis, as well. Using the data from the survey, I identified whether or not there are relationships between voting habits of millennials and their perceptions of the government and political ideologies by utilizing logistic regression. By assigning numeric values to survey answers, I statistically identified the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. By controlling for other potential explanations, causal links were found through the statistical analysis.

Through interviews with millennial voters, I attempt to further identify explanatory factors for low levels of millennial voting participation. This mixed method approach allows me to identify variable relationships statistically, as well as having more in depth answers from millennials that can provide insight into ways to combat the low voting turnout.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The results of the survey do not entirely match the expectations I had based on my hypotheses. My expectations were that the two dependent variables would have similar relationships with the different independent variables. While the general trends were similar across the two variables, the statistical significance of the independent variables differed greatly in some cases. Logistic regression statistics from the data can be found in Appendix, Figures 4.

Survey results showed that neither *race* nor *gender* had any significant effect on the likelihood of a person to vote in 2016 or to plan on voting in 2020. Based on my results, men were slightly less likely to vote in 2016 and in 2020, but analysis showed

that this is likely to due to chance. In 2016, participants who identified as white voted at about the same rate as people of color, and were slightly more likely to vote in 2020, but this was not statistically significant.

With regards to Hypothesis 1, results showed that a person's self-identified *political stance* on the spectrum did not have any significant relationship with whether or not they voted in the last election or plan to vote in the next election. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported by the results of the survey with regards to the political spectrum. This can be explained by the fact that most people indicated that they are fairly moderate, usually scoring themselves as completely moderate or one point away from it in either direction, regardless of their political affiliation.

Despite most people identifying as moderate, affiliation with one of the two major political parties had a positive relationship with voting for both dependent variables, and showed clear statistical significance for the 2020 election. Participants identifying with a political party had a 97% probability of answering that they planned on voting in the next election, while political independents had a predicted probability of 91%. This result shows that people who do not identify with one of the political parties are less likely to vote consistently and may turn out to vote based on who the candidates are and what they represent. With regards to party affiliation, results showed that Hypothesis 1 was supported, as political independents were less likely to vote in past and future elections. Data showed that over 40% of people surveyed do not identify with a political party and fall into this category of potentially inconsistent voters.

For the 2016 Presidential election, prospective voters' views on the level of *representation* of young people by the government was a clear indication of their

likelihood to vote and Hypothesis 2 was supported by the findings of the survey. People who identified that they believe the government represents their needs well voted at a much higher rate than those who perceive poor representation. With all other variables held constant, people who reported a score one standard deviation higher than the mean score of 4.05 were 10.6% more likely to vote in 2016, while a score one standard deviation below the mean dropped the likelihood of voting by 13.5%. The same trend holds true for the next election, but because such a high number of people identify that they plan to vote in 2020, the level of statistical significance is not as high. This finding indicates that young people who feel that the government is representing them well are more inclined to participate politically because they believe the outcome can make a positive difference in their life.

Surprisingly, an individual's belief on whether or not their *vote matters* did not have a substantial effect on whether or not they chose to vote in the 2016 election, so Hypothesis 3 does not statistically explain why millennials do not vote. However, it is a clear predictor for the likelihood that someone plans to vote in the next election, as almost all people who believe that their vote matters report that they plan to vote in the next election. With other variables held as constant, a person who believes their vote matters has a 98% likelihood of answering that they plan to vote, while people who do not believe their vote matters drops this predicted probability by about 12%. Similarly, when people were asked if it was their civic duty to vote, participants who answered yes have a 98% chance of reporting they will vote in 2020 and those who answered no have a likelihood of about 10% lower. It would be interesting to see how many of these people actually do end up participating in the 2020 election, because it would give an idea of the

priority level that politics takes for many young people. It would not surprise me to see many of the people who said they do not believe their vote matters not turn out to the polls in 2020 because it is not important to them.

The data regarding people's *level of trust* in the government did not support my fourth hypothesis claiming that low levels of trust means that people are less likely to vote. While there were some people who reported very high levels of trust in the government, most people reported low levels of trust regardless of their political affiliation, with the mean reported trust level being a 3.7. As a result, both people who voted and did not vote tend to have similar levels of trust in the government.

I did not originally consider that many people's trust level in the government would be greatly shaped by the results of the 2016 election and the administration that now runs the country. The data for trust level in the government was similar to the numbers for how satisfied people are with the outcome of the 2016 election. This shows that current trust in the government cannot really explain why some millennials did not vote, because their trust is greatly influenced by the outcome of the election.

Another interesting finding from the survey that I did not initially consider was the effect that watching debates had on a person's likelihood to vote in 2016. Millennials who did not watch any of the Presidential debates before the 2016 election had a 45.9% likelihood to vote in the election. Participants who reported watching at least one of the Presidential debates had a 76.7% chance of voting. This data shows that whether or not a person watched any of the Presidential debates had an effect of over 30% on the likelihood that they would vote in 2016. Many people may have watched the debates because they planned on voting, so this finding does not necessarily show that watching

debates causes people to vote. However, it does show how education on political issues is an important aspect of voting that many millennials are lacking.

The varied results for the effect of different independent variables on past and future elections shows the intricacy of what motivates young people to vote. There is no single variable, or even a few variables, that can give a full explanation as to why a person chooses to vote during each election. This intricacy and lack of one or two clear variables illustrates the need to take a mixed methods approach to the research question. Combining the statistical analysis with real explanations given by millennial voters and non-voters gives a better picture of the general view on government, politics, and voting.

Qualitative Analysis

Through interviews, I found that members of the millennial generation tend to be critical of the generation as a whole, but usually do not identify with the "millennial culture." Interviewee #3, a female, identified millennials as "more selfish and entitled than older people," but that she did not feel like that was an accurate description of herself. Multiple interviewees used the phrase "it is all about me" to describe the approach that millennials often have to issues in their life. This described mentality is not something that just happened randomly, but was instilled in young people by the way they were raised. One student, #6, described how the millennial generation's main goal is to express individualism and independence, but that young people are dependent on our access to technology, which separates us from older generations. Overall, the interviews yielded a generally negative view of millennials due to the culture that we were raised in.

When asked about why the millennial generation has low voting turnout, there were a few answers that were brought up multiple times. The most common reason given for low voting numbers (cited by over half of the participants) was the perception that the voice and votes of millennials do not *matter*, further supporting the claim made in Hypothesis 3. One female, #5, pointed out that politicians in Washington are generally older white men, and that she has seen younger people attempt to run for office, but never with much success. This has led young voters to feel as if the democratic process in this country excludes them, rendering their votes useless, and is designed to satisfy the needs of older, wealthier people.

Interview answers also supported the statistical results that showed people are less likely to vote when they do not feel their needs are *represented* by the government, providing more evidence for Hypothesis 2. These answers help to explain the finding that changes in perception of the government's representation shifted people's likelihood to vote by 25-30%. One participant, #2, believes that if politicians were more active in addressing millennial relevant issues like the increase of student loan debt or the creation of entry level jobs, they would be able to attract more voters. A conservative male, #1, believed that none of the Republican candidates in the 2016 election truly represented young voters, but that Bernie Sanders made the biggest attempt to connect with millennials and address their problems. Interviewees did not believe that millennials were completely apathetic about voting, but felt that they had not seen candidates stressing issues that were directly relevant to them. One explanation for a lack of voting among millennials is the perception that politicians do not have the interests of young people in mind when making decisions.

The idea that politicians do not have the interests of young people in mind is partially a result of many millennials not caring as strongly about many of the major issues that face our politicians. One participant, #10, conceded that he does not really think about issues like social security and tax cuts because they are not a relevant part of his life right now. Other participants agreed that, because many of the issues do revolve around older and wealthier people, they have never really considered being politically involved. This result shows that young people must also make a genuine effort to educate themselves on political issues that will one day have a great effect on their lives.

Conclusions

While the polarization of political elite has not led to a more polarized group of voters (Fiorina, 2006), the shift has shown effects on voters. The response of many millennials has been an absence from voting because they do not see the benefits or general effects of participating in elections. There is no simple one or two step solution to motivating millennials to have a stronger turnout in elections. There must be changes made on an institutional level, as well as an effort made by millennials to engage in politics.

Political elites can motivate young people to participate in elections by constructing their platform to be inclusive of the millennial generation. By specifically addressing the needs and concerns of young people at political rallies or in debates, the political elite can send millennials the message that they are being represented at the highest levels of government. Candidates also stand to gain from the inclusion of young people in their platform because they have the chance to draw a large number of people into their support group who have not previously voted. Candidates who are able to draw

in millennial voters and follow through on their policy plans are likely to guarantee victory for themselves in future elections, while also giving younger voters a voice in politics.

An effort made by members of the political elite is only able to be successful if members of the millennial generation receive their message and are willing to respond to it. The survey results showed that many millennials do not watch debates and several interviewees were not aware of basic political issues or policies. In an age of instant access to a lot of false information, people must be willing to search and find trustworthy sources to be better informed on political issues. People who take active steps to be informed are likely to realize how the issues are relevant to their life and future and also may be exposed to people working in politics who they feel actually represent their issues. These steps to improve awareness would lead to a higher perception of government representation and for people to feel like their vote matters and can make a difference in the American political system.

Millennials have the ability, as they become the largest generation of potential voters, to put pressure on the government and politicians to respond to them and better represent the country as a whole. This has to be on both a local and national level, so millennials should educate themselves on what is happening in their city and state, as they have a greater chance of shaping local politics before they can affect national politics. If millennials continue their trend of political disengagement and politicians stay unresponsive to younger people, I expect to see the same cycle continue and intensify for successive generations. The polarization of political elites has led to a political system

that can be categorized as chaotic, and young people have the opportunity to challenge

that system and promote stability in American politics.

Appendix

Figure 1: Political Participation Survey

Please Circle Your Answer for Each Question and fill in the blanks when necessary

Age:

Gender: Male   Female   Other _____   Prefer Not to Say

Ethnicity: White   Hispanic/Latino   Black   Native American

                         Asian/Pacific Islander   Other_____   Prefer Not to

Say

Political Party Affiliation: Republican   Democrat   Other _____

None

Are you registered to vote?   Yes   No   Not sure

Did you vote in a 2016 Presidential Primary?   Yes   No

Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential Election?   Yes   No

Did you watch any 2016 Presidential Debates? Yes   No

Do you believe it is your civic duty to vote?   Yes   No   Not sure

Do you plan on voting in the 2020 Presidential Election?

Do you plan on voting in future elections beyond 2020?   Yes   No   Not sure

Do you believe your vote matters?   Yes   No   Not sure

How would you describe your level of satisfaction with the 2016 Presidential election

outcome? 1=completely unsatisfied, 5= Neutral, 10= completely satisfied

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

How would you describe your political views? 0= Extremely Liberal, 5= Moderate, 10=

Extremely Conservative?

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

How well do you feel the government represents young people's needs? 1= Completely

unrepresented, 5= Moderately Represented, 10= Completely represented.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

How would you rate your level of trust with the American government?   1= No trust 5=

Moderate Trust, 10= Complete Trust

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Which political issues concern you the most? Select 3.

Foreign Policy   Immigration   Gun Control   Health Care   Education   Abortion

Civil Rights/Equality   Unemployment   Enviornmental Concerns   Welfare

Federal Budget   First Amendment Rights   Defense   Terrorism

What issues do you want a Presidential candidate to find most important? Select 3

Foreign Policy   Immigration   Gun Control   Health Care   Education   Abortion

Civil Rights/Equality   Unemployment   Enviornmental Concerns   Welfare

Federal Budget   First Amendment Rights   Defense   Terrorism

Figure 2: Interview Questions

Do you feel it is important for all eligible citizens to vote in Presidential elections? Why or why not?

Do you believe your vote matters in the Electoral College System? Why or why not?

When considering presidential candidates, what qualities are most important in your opinion?

How would you describe "millennial culture" in your own words?

Do you believe the American government is responsive to young people? Why or why not?

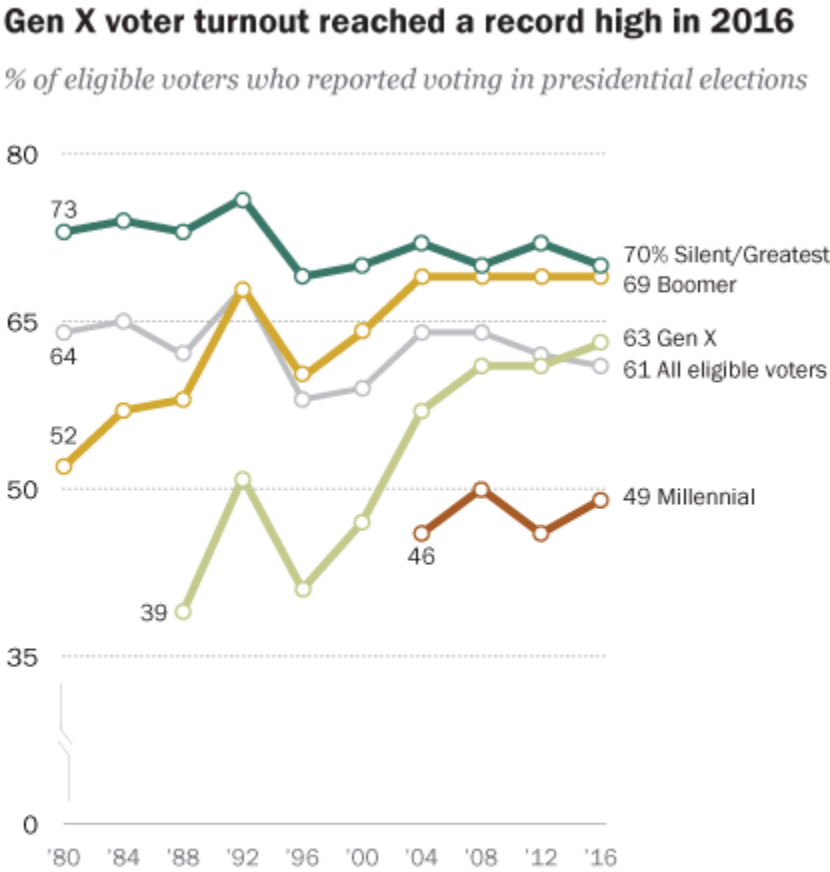Do you believe that the Federal Government cares about you individually? Why or Why not?

How could presidential candidates better represent your needs or political values?

Why do you think many young people choose not to vote?

What would motivate more young people to vote?

Does our two party system work? Is it effective?

Figure 3 (Fry 2017)

Gen X voter turnout reached a record high in 2016

% of eligible voters who reported voting in presidential elections

Note: Eligible voters are U.S. citizens ages 18 and older.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 1980-2016 Current Population
Survey November Supplements.

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Figure 4

Factors Affecting Millennial Voting in 2016 and Plan to Vote in 2020

	2016	*2020*
No Party Affiliation	-.221 (.342)	-.785* (.315)
Male	-.322 (.318)	-.181 (.306)
Person of Color	.021 (.342)	-.413 (.318)
Watching Debates	1.411*** (.339)	.946** (.311)
Duty to Vote	.845* (.379)	1.751*** (.317)
Vote Matters	.609 (.356)	1.855*** (.359)
Political Stance	-.114 (.086)	-.065 (.091)
Representation	.357** (.132)	.177 (.117)
Trust Level	.169 (.102)	.148 (.099)
Constant	-.310 (.743)	-1.52 (.669)
Pseudo R²	.314	.418

Standard Error Listed in Parentheses
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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