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YES WE CAN

The Emergence of Millennials
As a Political Generation

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NEXT SOCIAL CONTRACT INITIATIVE

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION



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Executive Summary

The 2008 presidential election unleashed a potent new force in American politics. It is the Millennial Generation: Americans born since 1982, now age 26 and under. Politicians and pundits alike were surprised by the waves of young volunteers who manned the campaign front lines, phone banking, blogging, canvassing door-to-door, and organizing large groups of peers to do the same. Politics was suddenly cool, pushing *Time* to jump ahead of long-time favorite *Cosmo* as the most popular magazine on college campuses.¹ Youth turnout in the primaries jumped dramatically—in many states doubling or more since 2004 while older adults showed only marginal gains.² In the general election, Millennials turned out in record numbers for their age bracket and cast their votes overwhelmingly, by roughly two-to-one, for Obama.³ So decisive was their preference that, without it, the sizable 7 percent popular-vote margin for Obama nationwide would have been effectively erased. Not since the 1930s have youth had such a large quantitative impact on the national outcome.

Rejecting the pundits' outmoded (Generation X) image of the disinterested and disengaged youth voter, these Millennial youth have now made their first major impression on American politics. This is just a prequel. In the coming decades, we predict they will become America's next political powerhouse.

Millennials have brought with them a very different set of attitudes and behaviors than the youth who preceded them: a confidence and conventionality, a preference for group consensus, an aversion to personal risk, and a self-image as special and as worthy of protection.

The emergence of Millennials on the national political stage is the latest chapter in a generational story that has already been building for many years. Over the past decade, parents, teachers, military recruiters, faculty and (most recently) employers have all noticed that Millennials have brought with them a very different set of attitudes and behaviors than the youth who preceded them: a confidence

and conventionality, a preference for group consensus, an aversion to personal risk, and a self-image as special and as worthy of protection. The generation that has already transformed K-12 classrooms, the enlisted ranks, college campuses, and the entry-level workforce is now beginning to transform politics.

Who is this Millennial Generation? Cynical Gen-X slackers are giving way to a new kind of youth—civically engaged organizers like tweenager Talia Leman, recent guest on the Today Show, who used the Web to persuade middle schoolers across America to donate funds to build schools in Cambodia and provide clean water to African villages. The hard-edged Gen-X celebrities are giving way to a nicer, friendlier model, like teen icon Miley Cyrus, who recently threw a community service-themed “Get Ur Good On” Sweet Sixteen party. The Millennials are pressured and programmed. They are bonded to their parents and networked to their friends. They want the system to work and are eager to contribute. They are optimistic about their future. No one would have described young Boomers this way in the 1970s or young Gen Xers this way in the 1990s.

In 2008 there appeared several excellent accounts of how Millennials approach politics, covering mainly their policy views, their technology, and their organizational style. These include *Millennial Makeover* by Mike Hais and Morley Winograd, *Generation We* by Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber, and *The Progressive Generation* by David Madland and Amanda Logan.⁴ Our essay will focus more on the Millennials' underlying beliefs and life priorities, on why they differ so dramatically from those of older generations, and on how this generation is likely to change the substance and tone of America's political life for decades to come. A long-term perspective is important. We predict that Millennials over their lifetime will greatly strengthen the connection between citizen and community, between ordinary people and public institutions at all levels of government. By the time they reach the age of national leadership, they will forge a new social contract. Some generations tear down civic trust, and others build it up. Having watched so many of their elders tear it down, Millennials are poised to become a builder generation.

If history offers an example of a youth generation similar to the Millennials, it is the G.I. Generation (born 1901-

1924), who grew up in an era of tightening child protection and improving behavior, earning a reputation as upbeat, team-playing, and civic-minded youth. In their adult years, the G.I.s pulled America out of Depression, saved the world from fascism, unleashed nuclear power, founded suburbia, and took mankind to the moon. It may be that the Millennials will dominate the history of America in the twenty-first century just as the G.I.s have dominated the history of America in the twentieth.

To explain how the Millennial story could unfold, we need to appreciate what political generations are, how regularly in history they appear, and how they are shaped by their formative years and collective life story. Because most political scholars regard youth merely as an age bracket, they cannot account for sudden shifts in how people in their teens or twenties think and behave. By looking at birth cohorts aging through time—that is, by looking at political generations—we believe we can explain these nonlinear shifts.

Applying this method over the past twenty years has enabled us to make useful predictions about the behavior of young people and draw a detailed picture of Millennials as a generation—all of which is recapitulated in this essay. Finally, we offer a detailed thematic overview of the Millennials' political views, with special emphasis on views that are likely to remain unchanged as Millennials grow older.

One of our major conclusions is that Millennials think about politics in ways that cut across the “liberal” and “conservative” labels used by older generations. Another is that Millennials constitute a new political generation with attitudes towards politics, government, and social issues that today's policy makers cannot afford to ignore. Already, they show early signs of becoming a political generation of unusual power that will strengthen civic trust, build national institutions, and forge a new sense of teamwork and optimism in American politics. As their influence rises, the Millennials are likely to translate these priorities into a new social contract, radically re-drawing the institutional connection between citizen and state.

About the Next Social Contract Initiative

The New America Foundation launched the Next Social Contract Initiative (NSC) in 2007 to design and advance the framework for a 21st-century social contract, along with a detailed policy agenda to support it. The premise of this initiative is that, given the unimaginable changes of the last half-century, we should think from scratch about the appropriate roles of each sector of society—government, employers, individuals, and civil society. The programs and policies of a new social contract should be designed to support entrepreneurship and risk-taking, encourage long-term growth and broadly shared prosperity, and support individuals and families not as employees, but as citizens. Perhaps most importantly, NSC operates on the belief that economic security and opportunity are not mutually exclusive alternatives.

NSC draws on the strength of existing domestic policy programs at New America including the American Strategy, Asset Building, Economic Growth, Education, Fiscal Policy, Health Policy and Workforce and Family programs, as well as its own staff, to fulfill this mission. In the tradition of New America, NSC strives to develop innovative, principles-based solutions for a 21st Century economy and society. If individuals are to take advantage of the opportunities inherent in a dynamic economy, they will need the security provided by social insurance, individual assets, and portable benefits. In doing so, they will fulfill their own goals and bolster our collective faith in the continued vitality of the American Dream.

In the course of our research, analysis and outreach, it has become apparent that deeper, macroeconomic forces are also undermining the social contract. Indeed, one lesson from the growing financial crisis is that finding the proper balance of rights and responsibilities among the various sectors—including the proper allocation of economic risk—is not a philosophical luxury, but essential to a healthy economy and a stable society. This has led to an increased focus on developing policies that promote growth, innovation, and the reestablishment of the reciprocal connection between increases in productivity and higher wages.

Political Generations in American History

“Amongst democratic nations, each new generation is a new people,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, after touring America in the late 1820s.⁵ The notion that Millennials constitute a new and different political generation seems novel and daring to some. But from the very foundation of the United States, if not earlier, many have observed a generational rhythm underlying the ebb and flow of American political life.

Like Millennials, many of these generations have acquired names. There were the soldiers of the American Revolution, dubbed the “generation of 1776” by Thomas Jefferson, renowned for heroism and statesmanship in their youth, but condemned for worldliness and complacency in their old age. There was the “transcendental generation” (“born with knives in their brain,” according to Ralph Waldo Emerson), whose early reputation for utopianism and religious prophecy scandalized America until, reaching midlife, it led the nation into the Civil War. There were the tucked-away children of the Civil War, who later matured into the “progressive generation” of Presidents like Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, champions of expertise and good government. There was the generation of World War I veterans, dubbed “the lost generation” by Gertrude Stein, who as young adults put the “roar” in the twenties but who later calmed America by producing Presidents Truman and Eisenhower during the postwar American High.⁶

Historians routinely invoke “generational transitions” or “generational aging” to explain changes in the nation’s political direction.

These and other political generations have attracted much attention from scholars and the media. Dozens of books have been devoted to their collective stories, from *The Revolutionary Generation* and *The Last Generation* to *The Greatest Generation* and *The Destructive Generation*.⁷ Historians routinely invoke “generational transitions” or “generational aging” to explain changes in the nation’s political direction. Psychohistorical interpretations have been organized entirely around the concept of “generational

conflict,”⁸ as in George Forgie’s brilliant *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age*.⁹ Several major cyclical theories of political change, such as the “cycle” of realigning elections¹⁰ or the “cycle” of liberal versus conservative ascendancies,¹¹ have been ascribed mainly to generational rhythms—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for instance, calls them “the mainspring” of his famous cycle.¹² Several well-known historians have even attempted to narrate the entire political history of the United States as a succession of identifiable political generations, each coming to power and growing old in its turn—including Daniel Elazar, Morton Keller, Samuel Huntington, and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr.¹³

What do all these political generations have in common? Each generation first announces its presence—passionately or politely—when its earliest-born members reach their twenties and its later-born members are still in their teens. Each generation spans roughly 20-to-25 birth years, which means that the appearance of each new generation occurs at similar intervals. (By the time a new generation is gaining attention, in other words, a future generation is starting to appear in infancy.) And finally, each new generation appears as a surprise. Its political attitudes and aspirations are never an extension of those of the previous generation, but rather represent a complete break, a turning of corners, an entirely different perspective.

Most social scientists are so tightly wed to the idea of fixed phases of life, which either don’t change at all or change only slowly and linearly, that they resist the possibility of generational surprises. Nonetheless, they happen. Most of today’s adult Americans have witnessed at least one such transition in their lifetimes. Consider the following expectations for young people at various times during the postwar era:

The Silent Generation (born 1925 to 1942) came as a surprise. In 1946, after the victorious G.I.s had come home from conquering half the world, Americans braced for fresh ranks of organized youth who would take the mass mobilizations of the New Deal and World War II to a new level of public energy. Political leaders and federal authorities expected a new wave of communist agitation, sit-down strikes, or partisan campaigns for massive new government benefits and public works.

None of this happened. Everyone was surprised to learn that the rising crop of “teenagers” were uninterested in heroic

public action. They kept their heads down, worried about their “permanent records,” and planned on early marriages and long careers with big organizations. Rather than change the system, the new young people wanted to work within it. Time magazine called them “Silent” in 1951,¹⁴ and the name stuck. Historian William Manchester later wrote, “[N]ever had American youth been so withdrawn, cautious, unimaginative, indifferent, unadventurous—and silent.... They waited so patiently for everything that visitors to college campuses began commenting on their docility.”¹⁵

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The Silent have since acquired a political reputation as well-behaved conciliators who trust the experts, show high rates of civic engagement, and want to improve institutions without fundamentally changing them. They achieved a generational plurality in Congress and governorships shortly after the “Watergate Baby” election of 1974; and their power peaked in 1983.¹⁶ They have produced over ten White House chiefs of staff—but no Presidents.

The Boom Generation (born 1943 to 1960) came as a surprise. By the early 1960s, Americans had grown used to talking about a “Silent Generation” of youth. As experts looked ahead to the onrushing bulge of children known as the “baby boom” who were about to arrive at college, they foresaw a new corps of technocratic corporatists, a Silent Generation to the next degree, even more pliable and conformist than the gray flannel “lonely crowd” right before them. “Employers are going to love this generation,” Cal-Berkeley’s Clark Kerr declared in 1959. “They are going to be easy to handle. There aren’t going to be any riots.”¹⁷

The boiling youth anger and activism of the 1960s and ‘70s threw these expectations on their head. Coming of age, Boomers loudly proclaimed their dislike for the secular blueprints of their parents. They scorned institutions,

civic participation, and team-playing while pushing towards inner-life, self-perfection, and deeper meaning. Remarkably, none of the biggest-name social scientists—not even Erik Erikson or Margaret Mead—foresaw the youth explosion before it happened.

Boomers have since acquired a political reputation as passionate culture warriors who trust their own values, show declining rates of civic engagement, and don’t mind wielding harsh identity politics and us-versus-them polarization in their quest to reform the world. They achieved a generational dominance in Congress and governorships after the 1994 (“Contract with America”) election; and their power is due to peak no later than 2010 or 2012. They have produced two Presidents: Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

Generation X (born 1961 to 1981) came as a surprise. By the early 1980s, youth experts accepted Boomers as the new norm for youth attitudes and behavior. Society looked ahead to the rising crop of “Baby Busters” who had no memories of the assassination of John Kennedy and no clear impression of Woodstock, Vietnam, or even Watergate. Demographic forecasters suggested that the teens in the 1980s and 1990s would be like Boomers, only more so—more ideological, “holistic,” and morals-driven, extending what *American Demographics* termed “an ongoing trend away from material aspirations toward non-materialistic goals.”¹⁸

Those predictions were rudely overturned when the scrappy, pragmatic, and free-agent Gen-X persona emerged a few years later. Long-haired ideologues were replaced by mohawked punks, suicidal grunge stars, goateed gamers, professional soldiers, gangsta rappers, and business school “power tools.” The journey was no longer the reward, and “values” no longer a watchword, as youth leaned towards political pragmatism and nonaffiliation.

Gen-Xers have since acquired a political reputation as resilient free agents who like to solve their own problems, show low rates of civic engagement, handle risk well, and seek ad-hoc solutions to pressing problems as they arise. They are slower to gain power in Congress and governorships than any earlier generation in American history. Their one President, Barack Obama, explicitly bills himself as a “post-Boomer” (or “Joshua Generation”) leader.

The Millennial Generation (born 1982 to 2004) is coming as a surprise. Today, another twenty years have passed, and

yet another generational change is on the doorstep. As a group, Millennials are beginning to manifest an upbeat civic engagement that older Americans no longer associate with youth—along with a wide array of positive social habits, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, and good conduct.

The Formation of a Political Generation

It may seem premature to say anything more about Millennials until they are older. Although political generations can easily be described in retrospect, forecasting their identity in advance is clearly a tougher task. It is also an enormously complex task. One cannot reduce generations, as the Schlesingers sometime do, to the beats of a metronome that swings back and forth between conventional liberalism and conventional conservatism.¹⁹ Generations are like people: To know how they think or behave politically, we first need to know how they think and behave in all other respects—since their political views will reflect everything else about who their members are, as students, friends, spouses, parents, workers, and citizens.

To get a better sense of how generations mature and of how to understand them in their totality, it makes sense to turn to some of the great minds who have developed the social theory of generations over the last two centuries. An early pioneer of this intellectual tradition was John Stuart Mill, who first formally defined a generation as “a new set of human beings” who “have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and have taken possession of society.” Mill also rejected the notion (a century before the Schlesingers advanced it) that successive “political generations” can influence each other independently of culture, science, manners, and mores. “In the filiation of one generation to another,” Mill noted, “it is whole which produces the whole, rather than any part a part.”²⁰

Other notable generations theorists include Wilhelm Dilthey, who described a generation as “a relationship of contemporaneity...between those who had a common childhood, a common adolescence, and whose years of greatest vigor partially overlap.” Observing that members of a generation tend to share certain beliefs and behaviors, Auguste Comte concluded that each generation develops a “unanimous adherence to certain fundamental notions.” In the direct aftermath of World War I, Karl Mannheim, José

Ortega y Gasset, François Mentré (who coined the term *social generation* in a book by that name), and many others produced an extensive body of writing on generations.²¹

From this corpus of social theory, several broad rules stand out which have helped us, in our own work, to understand the Millennials as a generation and to anticipate how they will mature, politically as well as in other respects.

Gen Xers grew up as children during a high tide of family breakup, social crusading, and lifestyle experimentation in which the needs of children were often overlooked and discounted. But by the time Millennials arrived as children, public and parental opinion was swinging decisively in the direction of cocooning, zealous child protection, and “family values.”

One rule is that a generation’s collective identity is decisively shaped by its location in history—that is, by the historical setting of their childhood and by the social mood they encounter as they come of age into adulthood. Consider, for example, some of the obvious contrasts between Gen Xers and Millennials in what Mannheim calls their “generational setting.” Gen Xers grew up as children during a high tide of family breakup, social crusading, and lifestyle experimentation in which the needs of children were often overlooked and discounted. But by the time Millennials arrived as children, public and parental opinion was swinging decisively in the direction of cocooning, zealous child protection, and “family values.” Gen Xers became adults (in the 1980s and 1990s) during an era celebrating individualism over community. Millennials are becoming adults during a post-2000 decade bracketed by national emergencies (9/11 and the financial crisis of 2008) which are clearly reversing those priorities.

The contrast between Boomers and Millennials is even starker—indeed, something like a direct inversion. When Boomers arrived as children, they encountered a homogenizing popular culture and wide gender-role gap in an

era when community came first and parenthood felt strong (though families were starting to weaken). When Millennials arrived as children, they encountered a fragmenting popular culture and a narrow gender-role gap in an era when individuals came first and when parenthood felt weak (though families were starting to strengthen). As a postwar generation, Boomer appeared just when older Americans felt the need to conform, unite, and assume new community obligations. As a post-awakening generation, Millennials appeared just when older Americans felt the need to diversify, atomize, and discard old community obligations.

The Millennials' formative experiences include Waco, Oklahoma City, Columbine, 9/11, Enron, Bernard Madoff, and the Crash of '08. In all these instances, the real danger seems to come not from out-of-control institutions, but from out-of-control individuals, teams of conspirators, or failed states, who have become a menace to humanity because national or global institutions are not strong enough to even monitor them.

A second rule is that such contrasts in historical location often have direct and obvious consequences for a generation's life agenda or (as Dilthey would say) "worldview." Growing up in the conformist 1950s, Boomer youth wanted to use pop culture as a passionate vehicle for self-expression. Growing up in the exotic 1990s, Millennial youth want to use it as a friendly vehicle for sociable activity. Hence the youth shift from folk rock to Facebook. Boomers recall growing up when two Cold War superpowers ran everything and when only large and powerful governments possessed weapons of mass destruction. Naturally, Boomers came of age worrying that institutions may be too strong. The Millennials' formative experiences include Waco, Oklahoma City, Columbine, 9/11, Enron, Bernard Madoff, and the Crash of '08. In all these instances, the real danger seems to come not from out-of-control institutions, but from out-of-control individuals, teams of conspirators, or failed states, who have become

a menace to humanity because national or global institutions are not strong enough to even monitor them. Hence the hugely positive shift in the youth perception of government power.

A third rule is that each new generation comes of age "rebellious"—or at least asserting its identity—against older generations in a predictable manner. It breaks with the styles and attitudes of the young-adult generation, which now seem stale and no longer effective. For Millennials, this is Generation X. It corrects and compensates for the perceived excesses of the midlife generation in charge. For Millennials, this is the Boom Generation. And it fills the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation, a role that now feels fresh, desirable, even necessary for society's well-being. For Millennials, this is the G.I. Generation.

A fourth rule is that a generation's basic attitudes, once shaped at an early age, remain surprisingly durable as the generation matures. As many empirical studies have confirmed, this stability endures even into old age.²² Consider, as an example, the young adults of the 1920s, those barnstormer vets and gin-fizz party-goers who were famously skeptical of grand causes. They didn't change much as they grew older. By the late 1950s, they compelled political scientists to amend textbooks to describe the elderly as "cynical," "disengaged," and "mostly Republican." The uniformed youth of the New Deal, by contrast, got used to hearing themselves described during World War II as "junior citizens." They didn't change either. By the time they began retiring in mass around 1970, the new term "senior citizens" was deemed the best way to refer to these busy, engaged, and (now) mostly Democratic elders. Studying historical parallels has helped us learn to identify which attitudes we now observe in Millennials, or in any other generation, are likely to remain fixed over time and which may be more open to alteration with age.

Examples are sometimes cited of generations that appear to undergo fundamental change as they grow older—for example, the notorious Boomer transformation from radical hippies (in the 1960s) to conservative yuppies (in the 1980s). Close examination usually uncovers plenty of continuity beneath such seeming contradictions. In the case of Boomers, both hippies and yuppies gave expression, at different phases of life, to the same dominant attitudinal

trends which have been abundantly documented for Americans born from the mid-1940s to late 1950s: an increasing distrust of civic institutions, a disengagement from politics and community participation, a greater attraction to life risks, and a growing reliance on “self” as a source of norms and values.²³ Indeed, the very assertiveness and pretension of both the hippie and the yuppie as self-discovered lifestyles can easily be interpreted as reflections of the same Boomer mindset.

A fifth rule is that a generation, while obviously encompassing individuals of every variety (by ethnicity, income, education, region, and so on), gives rise to certain prevailing beliefs and priorities that are acknowledged by all. To belong to a generation, Mannheim insisted, is at some level to be conscious of one’s generational identity. This is as true for Millennials as it has been for earlier generations. In 2007, fully two-thirds of Americans age 18 to 25 told the Pew Research Center that they belong to a “unique and distinct” generation (with an outlook different from people “in their 30s” or older)—a margin that transcends gender, race, and political party affiliation.²⁴ That same year, college students ranked “their age group” as tied with their religion and economic class as the most important personal characteristic influencing their political views; they too ranked their gender, race, and political party as much less important.²⁵

Just because nearly everyone is aware of their generational identity does not, of course, mean that nearly everyone is fond of their generation. Large numbers of people are invariably hostile to much their generation’s cultural style and political leanings. Yet these outsiders (what generations theorist Julius Peterson called “suppressed” members²⁶) cannot help but be aware that they are in the minority. As the prevailing tide shifts from generation to generation, so does the definition of outsider—and this too will affect how individual Millennials will perceive themselves politically in the years ahead. Though millions of Millennials may regard themselves as anti-establishment crusaders or free-agent nomads, they will no longer feel as close to the center of their generation as they would have felt had they been Boomers or Gen-Xers, respectively.

Using these and other rules, it is possible to make reasonable forecasts about how generations—even at a very early age—are likely to think and feel and behave as they grow older. The power of this kind of generational forecasting

is that it enables non-linear predictions. Most social scientists (especially political scientists) rarely pay attention to the cohort effect. They simply assume that the current attitudes and behavior of youth will either remain the same or intensify in their current direction indefinitely. Often, these assumptions prove to be correct. Yet every twenty years or so, a new youth generation comes along and dramatically breaks the trend. By understanding generations, it is possible to see around these “corners” and correctly predict an entirely new youth direction.

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The best way to illustrate the predictive power of this approach is to describe our own experience applying it. Neil Howe, one of the authors of this essay, and his longtime coauthor William Strauss have been making non-linear predictions about the Millennial generation for nearly two decades. They began forecasting Millennial trends in their 1991 book *Generations*, when the oldest Millennials were only 8 years old.²⁷ Howe and Strauss made major predictions in that book about how Millennials would transform the behaviors and attitudes of teens and young adults over the next five, ten, and fifteen years. Nearly all of them have turned out to be correct.

- In 1991, the public worried about the growing neglect and “underparenting” of Gen-X teenagers. Howe and Strauss predicted, however, that the rising crop of elementary school children would “ride a powerful crest of protective concern” driven by Boomer parents with a new “perfectionist approach to child nurture.”²⁸ Over the subsequent decade, adults gradually pulled down per-capita rates of divorce, abortion, alcohol consumption, and drug abuse. Child abuse, runaways, and abductions fell by nearly half.²⁹ Worried parents became avid consumers for a booming childproofing industry. Today, a

large majority of parents of college students say they have worked harder to protect their children from harm than their own parents did for them.³⁰

- In 1991, rates of youth crime, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse among Gen-X teens were rising to alarming levels, prompting many youth experts to forecast further increases (and even the emergence of urban “super-predators”) by the year 2000. But Howe and Strauss predicted that “substance abuse, crime, suicide, unwed pregnancy will all decline” as Millennials passed through adolescence.³¹ As early as 1997, most “youth risk indicators,” as tabulated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, were in decline.³² By 2005, rates of violent crime among teens had dropped by 65 percent, rates of teen pregnancy and abortion by 15 percent, and rates of alcohol and tobacco consumption at grades 8, 10, and 12 had reached all-time lows.³³
- In 1991, politicians and social commentators warned that the youth pop culture was destined to continue its decades-long trend towards more explicit sex, violence, and overall edginess. But Howe and Strauss predicted that the Millennials would pioneer a “more clean-cut and homogenous” youth culture with a friendly, big-brand appeal.³⁴ In 1997, Hanson, the Spice Girls, and the Backstreet Boys began attracting large Millennial audiences, ushering in a happier, brighter, and more innocent musical sound. Clean-cut, big-brand entertainment has since become overwhelmingly popular with today’s teenagers and “tweenagers,” from Hannah Montana concerts to Disney’s *High School Musical*.
- In 1991, most educators were grimly forecasting that K-12 student achievement would continue to plummet. Howe and Strauss predicted, by contrast, that Millennials would show “rising aptitude scores” and “gradually improve their ranking vis-à-vis the Japanese, Europeans, and others.”³⁵ Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have since improved or at least held steady for both reading and math at all three ages tested (9, 13, and 17).³⁶ According to 2007 results for the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), our relative ranking in science has improved since 1995 from 18th to 11th and in math from 19th to 11th.³⁷ In 2005, teens scored better on the combined SAT than in any year since 1973—despite the rising share of teens being tested.³⁸

- In 1991, most political leaders assumed that the prevailing youth mood of civic disengagement and political alienation would continue indefinitely. Yet Howe and Strauss predicted that Millennials, when they reached their teens, would “show an extraordinary talent for teamwork and public service.”³⁹ Since the mid-1990s, the share of high school seniors who volunteer has nearly tripled. Applications for Teach for America are up 28 percent and Peace Corps 16 percent, and interest in government careers and nonprofits has been on the rise.⁴⁰ Voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds has risen in each presidential election since 1996. In 2004, their voting rate was only 10 percentage points lower than the rate for the 25-to-44 age bracket—the smallest gap between these two age brackets ever measured, going back to 1964.⁴¹

Critics may object that these trends do not apply equally to every Millennial subgroup, and therefore do not really constitute *generational* trends. They often imply that most of the positive trends only apply to affluent white youth. In fact, nearly all of these trends are remarkably broad, covering every major region, ethnicity, and income group. If there is a subgroup leading these trends, it is not affluent whites but inner-city blacks and Latinos. Since the early 1990s, urban minority teens have shown the most dramatic percentage improvement in crime (victimization or arrest rate), drug use, pregnancy, K-12 test scores, likelihood of father present, and community service. If there is a group that is lagging somewhat behind these trends, it is rural (and mostly white) youth. Yet even these kids are certainly “Millennial” enough in their behavior to be included as part of their generation.

After publishing *Generations*, Howe and Strauss were able to improve and deepen their understanding of the Millennials by observing them carefully over the rest of the decade. In 2000, they published *Millennials Rising*, which presented a more detailed picture of how the Millennials (by then age 18 and under) were maturing and how they were likely to change the mood and direction of America as they became adults.⁴² They offered a summary overview of the Millennial peer personality that included seven core traits.

We recapitulate and update these seven core traits here. Notice how none of them would have been an appropriate way to describe young Gen Xers in the mid-1980s or young Boomers in the late 1960s.

The Seven Core Traits of Millennials

Special. From the precious-baby movies of the mid-1980s to the media glare surrounding the high school Class of 2000, older generations have inculcated in Millennials the sense that they are, collectively, vital to the nation and to adults' sense of purpose. Parents, indeed, obsess endlessly over them—in K-12 schools, in colleges, and even as they enter the workplace. As Millennials absorb the message that they dominate America's agenda, they come easily to the belief that their problems are the nation's problems. Unlike Gen Xers, they don't mind talking about themselves as a "generation." Ask Millennials about their preferred choice of community service, and most often they will tell you it's helping other people their own age, either at home or abroad.

Sheltered. Millennials have been the objects of one of the great child protection movements in American history, from the surge in child-safety rules and devices to the post-Columbine lockdown of public schools to the heightened security of college dorm rooms and workplaces. Like a castle under construction, new bricks keep getting added—V-chips and "smart lockers" last month, campus underage drinking monitors this month, wellness seminars and life-counseling in workplaces next month. Helicopter parents figure these special kids will always require special care. All this sheltering has created a youth generation that is, on the whole, much healthier and less prone to injury and predation than any earlier generation in American history. Federal data show that, between 1988 and 1999, rates of child abduction fell by 23 percent, runaways by 25 percent, substantiated child abuse by 43 percent, and missing children by 51 percent.⁴³

Confident. The Millennials have a new sunny outlook, confidence that they can achieve great things, and faith that America's big problems really can be solved. For over thirty years, until the mid-1990s, the teen suicide rate marched relentlessly upward. Over the last decade, it has declined by 30 percent.⁴⁴ In 2008, 88 percent of high-school students said they would

use the word "confident" to describe themselves.⁴⁵ This generation exudes a yes-we-can optimism about their futures, even when older generations criticize them for unrealistic "overconfidence." By 2005, 65 percent of youths aged 18 to 25 (including 75 percent of Latinos and African Americans) believed they would someday be financially more successful than their parents.⁴⁶ Among youth age ten to seventeen, 95 percent say they "have goals that I want to reach in my life," 92 percent agree that "my success depends on how hard I work," and 88 percent agree that "I'm confident that I'll be able to find a good-paying job when I'm an adult."⁴⁷

Team-Oriented. From youth soccer and social networking to collaborative learning and a resurgence of community service, Millennials are developing strong team instincts and tight peer bonds. During the 1990s, there was a sharp decline in the share of eighth- and tenth-graders who felt lonely or wished they had more friends—and a growing desire to share the credit for winning.⁴⁸ Today's young adults are much more likely than their Boomer parents to say they trust big institutions like governments or communities to "do the right thing."⁴⁹ High school students now regard team skills (along with technology) as the most valuable for their careers. For Millennials, the use of information technology has become a group activity. Today's young people power up their IM and email servers as soon as they touch a computer, making themselves the most 24/7 peer-to-peer "connected" generation in the human history.

Conventional. Taking pride in their improving behavior and comfortable with their parents' values, Millennials have embraced a new credo that the *New York Times* calls "neotraditionalism." The share of teens who say their values are "very or mostly similar" to their parents has hit an all-time high of 76 percent.⁵⁰ Having entirely closed the once-wide (Boomer youth era) "generation gap," Millennials trade advice easily with their parents and even share their parents' taste in music and clothes. A recent J. Walter Thompson study found that Millennials show a new respect for national institutions, traditions, and family values—including monogamy

and parenthood (94 percent), marriage (84 percent), the U.S. constitution (88 percent), and the military (84 percent).⁵¹ “Teens today are decidedly more traditional than their elders were, in both lifestyles and attitudes,” agrees prominent pollster George Gallup, Jr.⁵²

Pressured. Pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of the opportunities offered them, Millennials feel a “trophy kid” pressure to excel, in the workplace as well as in the classroom. There is a new youth assumption that long-term success demands near-term organization and achievement—that what a high school junior does this week determines where she’ll be five and ten years from now. That, at least, is the new perception, and it’s a reversal of a forty-year trend. The impulse to plan starts with parents and it starts early. Since the mid-1980s, “unstructured activity” has been the most rapidly declining use of time among American primary-grade kids.⁵³ At the middle and high school level, record shares say they worry

about their grades, want to go to college, and don’t get enough sleep.

Achieving. Seeing higher school standards move to the top of America’s political agenda and feeling mounting pressure to jump-start a successful career, Millennials take academic achievement seriously. Gen Xers sometimes playfully celebrated “dumbness,” with “Idiot’s Guide” books and movies like *Wayne’s World* and *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. There is no such self-mockery among Millennials. Eight in ten teenagers say that it is “cool to be smart.”⁵⁴ Most students today support standardized testing and higher standards, and believe that the best cure for rampant classroom boredom is tougher curriculum. Employers are beginning to notice Millennial hires pushing for measurable achievements and advancement in the workplace. Showing a left-brained tilt, Millennials demonstrate more interest and improvement in math and science than in the arts or social sciences.

Millennials and a New Social Contract

Every rising youth generation differs politically from prior generations—yet rarely do their differences line up neatly with the political categories defined by prior generations. This is true as well for Millennials.

By conventional self-identification measures, Millennials show a dramatic swing toward the Democratic Party, now favored in the 18-to-29 age bracket by roughly 25 percentage points.⁵⁵ This represents a major shift from young Gen-Xers during the Reagan and Bush, Sr. years (when youth marginally favored the GOP), but not with young Boomers during the Johnson and Nixon years or with young G.I.s during the Roosevelt years (when youth also favored the Democrats by an overwhelming margin). Millennials are less “middle of the road” and more “liberal” (and also somewhat more “conservative”) than young Gen Xers circa 1990. At the same time, they are considerably less “liberal” and more “conservative” than young Boomers circa 1970.⁵⁶

While revealing, these trends are of limited usefulness. Yes, the Millennials’ emerging identification with the Democratic Party is important. But it is too early to tell

whether they simply preferred the Democratic candidate in this election—or how Millennials might drastically refashion the party if they were in charge. Similarly, though shifts in youth attitudes toward liberalism and conservatism are worth attention, it is widely appreciated that today’s youth approach politics in ways that transcend the usual labels and often bewilder older people. Millennials tend to lean liberal in their positive view of community action and their support for a powerful government, but conservative in their positive view of the family and middle class and their support for conventional values.

If compelled to give them a label, we might define them as politically and economically liberal but socially and culturally conservative, reminiscent of the now aging (and disproportionately G.I.) “Reagan Democrats.” Back in 1986, David Boaz wrote in an introduction to a volume of essays on the politics of Boomers, “It has become a cliché to say that the baby boomers are fiscally conservative and socially liberal, but clichés are often founded on truth.”⁵⁷ By 2020, pundits may be writing the opposite about Millennials entering their 40s—by inventing the cliché that Millennials

are fiscally liberal and socially conservative. And this too will be founded on truth.

Not coincidentally, many younger political strategists on both sides of the aisle are advising their parties to move in this direction—toward the party of “Sam’s Club” (Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam) or toward the party of “universal service” (Rahm Emanuel and Bruce Reed).⁵⁸ Yet Millennials bring their own very modern twist to these traditional views, and differ radically from today’s older and blue-collar Democrats on a whole range of issues, ranging from race and immigration to markets and technology.

So what political vision will the Millennials bring to the fore? Drawing insight from their core traits and from data on their views and behavior thus far, we can forecast a life-long political agenda organized thematically around the following ten imperatives.

Strengthen the community

Millennials take pride in what they do together and are enthusiastic about community engagement, from their own circle of friends to the country as a whole. Having come of age surrounded by older individualists in a political environment wracked by ideological divides, today’s youth value group cohesion as a way to achieve group goals. Like older liberals, they believe the needs of the community come before the needs of individuals and that government, as an agent of community action, should halt or reverse the growing inequality of income and wealth. Like older conservatives, they want to strengthen the middle class economically and socially and believe that community needs often take precedence over personal liberties.

This generation feels a strengthened connection—and civic obligation—to their neighborhoods, their nation, and their world. A record-high 70 percent of college freshman now say that it is “extremely important” to help others in need.⁵⁹ The share of 16- to 24-year olds who volunteer in their community has doubled since 1989.⁶⁰ The trend in Millennial career choices reflects their rising interest in community service. In 1999, in a yearly survey of college seniors about their top-ten ideal employers, Gen-Xers filled the entire list with for-profit businesses (like Microsoft and Cisco). In 2007, Millennials filled five of the top ten slots with public agencies and nonprofits (these five were the State Department, the FBI, the CIA, Teach for America, and Peace Corps).⁶¹ They overwhelmingly favor the creation of a national Public

Service Academy (88 percent to 12 percent).⁶² When asked to identify essential or very important life goals, college freshmen in 1968 chose “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” by 14 percentage points over “helping others in difficulty”; in 2007, college freshmen chose “helping others” over “meaningful philosophy” by 21 percentage points.⁶³

Millennials put more importance on engaging in the formal political process than Boomers or Gen Xers did at the same age. Sixty percent of today’s youth say that political engagement is an effective way of solving important issues facing their community, and 73 percent say voting for President can bring about significant change.⁶⁴ From 1996 to 2008, the voter turnout in presidential elections among Americans age 18 to 29 has risen steadily from 37 percent to a record 52 percent, as Millennials have been replacing Xers in that age bracket.⁶⁵

Today’s youth want government to participate actively in building communities and helping those who are in need.

Today’s youth want government to participate actively in building communities and helping those who are in need. People aged 18 to 29 agree nearly two to one that the role of government should be to promote the principle of strong community and expanded opportunity and prosperity for all, as opposed to the principle of self-reliance and limited government and spending—while older Gen Xers are split almost evenly on this question.⁶⁶ More than any other age bracket, Millennial teens favor reducing the restrictions on government surveillance of citizens to prevent terrorism and are willing to let government protect the community even at the cost of civil liberties.⁶⁷ A right to privacy does not rank high in Millennial priorities.

Among workers and businesses as among their own friends and peers, Millennials favor collaboration and disapprove of cut-throat competition. Millennials are very supportive of labor unions, giving them the second-highest level of support⁶⁸ of any age group in 40 years. They like to buy from (and want to work for) businesses that help serve the community. They favor tax plans and other policies that create a strong middle class—18- to 22-year olds

today are more likely than any other age group to favor government action to reduce economic inequality.⁶⁹ On the other hand, they are not drawn to appeals to pit one class against another or to punish the wealthy. Millennials show much less desire to tax or penalize the wealthy than young Boomers did in the 1960s and '70s.⁷⁰ During the 2008 Democratic primary, they were put off by John Edwards' harsh and confrontational populism, but were drawn to Barack Obama's milder tone of communitarian inclusion.

The Millennial desire to join a larger community is also opening a generational rift in the ranks of evangelicals and other religious groups. For most Boomers and Gen Xers, religious conviction is naturally supposed to lead believers to take principled stands against the national community and popular culture. Growing numbers of Millennial believers disagree with this niche mentality and this reflexive opposition to the mainstream. Instead, they want to translate their religious enthusiasm into constructive action that benefits the entire community, including non-believers and secular institutions. They are more focused on activity and service than on beliefs—or, to use a more traditional terminology, more on “works” than on “faith.”

Trust the system

Millennials trust the capacity of large national institutions to do the right thing for the country and to provide a needed measure of structure and order to individuals' lives. Boomer children were indulgently raised in an adult society overloaded with norms, rules, and strong institutions. They famously came of age assaulting them. Millennial children, by contrast, have been protectively raised in a society whose adults have been steadily weakening—or disobeying—these norms and rules. They are now coming of age trying to restore them. Millennials don't want to break “the system”; they want the system to operate effectively. Like older liberals, they believe that an expert government should regulate decisions that individuals have neither the time nor the resources to make themselves. Like older conservatives, they are attracted to the “new paternalism,” wherein a benevolent government supervises, organizes, and improves the lives of the dysfunctional or deviant.

Throughout their childhood and teen years, the Millennials have been much more likely to trust institutional authority than Boomers or Gen Xers at the same age. When the *New York Times* surveyed the leading edge of Millennial teens in 1998, 50 percent said they trusted the government to

do what is right “all or most of the time”—while only 26 percent of adults said the same.⁷¹ In 2003, only 32 percent of 18- to 25-year olds agreed that government usually runs things inefficiently and wastefully, down from 47 percent in 1988.⁷² Today's young people agree two to one that “government should do more to solve problems” rather than that “government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals.”

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Today's youth have grown accustomed to relying on credentialed experts and protective institutions to help them make strategic life decisions—in K-12 schools, in colleges, and in the workplace. They are sympathetic to the new message of behavioral economics (as provocatively summarized by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their recent book *Nudge*)⁷³ that institutional environments can be actively structured in ways that help people make better life choices. On campus, the demand for emotional and career counseling has been steeply rising in recent years. Employers report a growing number of new hires asking for evaluation, counseling, and an assigned mentor. Young workers between the ages of 21 and 30 agree by more than two to one that they would feel “grateful” or “optimistic” if employers automatically enrolled them in defined contribution retirement programs, instead of the existing “do it yourself” approach.⁷⁴ More than half of young workers would prefer that employers mandate a minimum standard for initial contribution rates, automatically increase contribution levels, and place them in default investment options.

Poll after poll shows Millennials favoring, almost reflexively, more expert regulation to solve any number of national problems. They also favor more spending on a wide variety of government programs. Fifty-seven percent of today's 18- to 29-year olds support government-run health insurance over private plans, more than ten points higher than older Americans. (This wasn't always the case:

Back in the 1970s and 80s, older Americans were more in favor of national healthcare.)⁷⁵ Millennials favor regulation and contribution requirements for retirement savings, and may want government experts to provide similar guidance for other financial decisions.

Millennials also support policies that allow government to assume benevolent direction over people's life choices, particularly for those whom courts or psychiatrists have decreed cannot direct themselves. This includes everything from mandatory rehabilitation for criminals and the homeless to new institutions for the mentally ill. In 2007, 74 percent of 18- to 29-year olds agreed that it is the responsibility of government to take care of people who can't take care of themselves—and 31 percent say they “completely agree.” That's way up from 22 percent in 1994, when Gen Xers filled this age bracket.⁷⁶

Millennials may want government to offer the same constructive lifestyle “nudges” to aging Boomers that Millennials are proposing for themselves, from instituting case managers or wellness counselors as Medicare gatekeepers to restricting the risks older employers can take when investing retirement savings.

Minimize personal risk

Millennials are more risk averse than prior generations at the same age, from their lifestyle choices to the way they invest their savings. Having benefitted from a sweeping youth safety movement enforced by parents and schools, they get the message: Because we are special, we are worthy of protection. Millennials have been told since birth that they live in a dangerous world where bad consequences inevitably follow from bad actions—and that they'd better not do anything to jeopardize their life plan. Like older liberals, they want aggressive regulation and government safety nets to protect them from risk. Like older conservatives, they want government to crack down on crime and encourage risk-free life choices.

Though all data indicate that the likelihood of harm to young people has fallen substantially over the past fifteen years, the threshold of public tolerance for such harm has been falling even faster. Images of the Columbine and the Virginia Tech shootings, of 9/11 and the War on Terror, of AMBER alerts and Code Adams have alarmed Americans of all ages about the dangers threatening youth. Millennials have sympathetically responded by prioritizing their own personal safety. When asked which of all “issues” concerns them most, Millennials say their number one concern is

“personal safety” (81 percent). Other top concerns include crime, violence, terrorism, and the war in Iraq.⁷⁷ A rising share of college students say they want to pursue careers in public health, forensics, and law enforcement.

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Throughout their childhood and teen years, the Millennials have accepted authoritative security and rule-enforcement for their protection. Millennials rarely resist uniform dress codes, locker searches, see-through backpacks, urine checks, or cell phone GPS once they understand that these policies enhance their safety. Surveys show that today's teens are comfortable with “zero tolerance” for even minor infractions in schools, are somewhat more inclined than prior generations to report such infractions, and are more likely to say that enforcement does not go far enough.

Millennials also work to protect themselves and stay on track by taking fewer lifestyle risks. As already noted, this generation is smoking less, drinking less, and getting pregnant less in their teen years. Of the forty “youth risk indicators” that have been continuously monitored by the CDC from 1995 to 2007, 35 have fallen, four have remained unchanged, and only one (related to obesity) has risen.⁷⁸ Three-quarters of all teens agree that there is nothing embarrassing about saying you are a virgin—to the amazement of older Americans, who imagine that only a much smaller share of teens would agree.⁷⁹

With their desire to minimize personal risks, Millennials favor policies that regulate everything from dangerous consumer products to risky retirement accounts. They overwhelmingly support sweeping federal health insurance reform to prevent anyone from losing coverage. They also broadly support tough enforcement policies for crime and policies that encourage risk-free behaviors and lifestyles, such as youth curfews and limits on alcohol purchases.

Support the family

Millennials are maintaining strong emotional, physical, and financial connections with their families as they enter adulthood. Throughout their childhood and adolescence, they have been more likely than the last two generations to trust their parents, depend on their support, and discuss important personal matters with them. Looking ahead, Millennials also place great importance on starting their own nuclear families. They are less interested than their Boomer parents in reforming family life and discussing (or arguing about) “family values.” Most prefer to take the importance of families for granted and try to make them work. Like older liberals, they support a broad definition of acceptable family structures. Like older conservatives, they believe that strong families are the cornerstone of a stable and livable society.

Even as they enter adulthood, Millennials are keeping parents highly involved in their lives. Nearly a quarter of employers have “sometimes” or “very often” seen parents involved in the recruitment and employment of recent college graduates.

Millennials have a closer relationship with parents than any other youth in living memory. Already by the late 1990s, eight in ten high school teens said they had “no problems” with any family member—up from only four in ten back in the early 1970s.⁸⁰ The share of teens who say their values are “very or mostly similar” to their parents recently hit an all-time high of 76 percent.⁸¹ Today’s youth trade advice easily with their parents about clothes, entertainment, and careers. They listen to (and perform) their parents’ music, share songs with their parents on iPods, and watch remakes of their parents’ old movies. Six in ten say it is “easy” to talk to parents about sex, drugs, and alcohol.⁸² Even as they enter adulthood, Millennials are keeping parents highly involved in their lives. Nearly a quarter of employers have “sometimes” or “very often” seen parents involved in the recruitment and employment of recent college graduates.⁸³ A growing share of young adults say they want to live near their parents, and many continue to live with them in multigenerational households.⁸⁴

With their positive image of family life and their focus on long-term life planning, Millennials are slowing the rise in the marriage age and may eventually reverse it. On a 2007 UCLA survey, 78 percent of incoming college students said “raising a family” is very important to them, the highest share in the 40-year history of the poll.⁸⁵ The intensity with which Millennials defend family integrity is reflected in surveys which show them taking a harder line than older Americans against casual sex⁸⁶ and against abortion and extramarital sexual affairs.⁸⁷

Despite this family-oriented “traditionalism,” today’s youth are more likely than older Americans to believe that unconventional families can be just as close and stable as traditional families. Millennials believe that the opportunity to participate in family life is so important that nobody should be left out. This generation is nearly twice as likely as older Americans to favor gay marriage, and they are the only age group that favors allowing gays to adopt children.⁸⁸ The case made by Millennials in favor of gay rights differs significantly from the case made by older generations. Older gay activists have argued that gay rights give individuals the freedom to *defy* mainstream social norms. One rarely hears this from Millennials. They argue instead that gay rights give individuals the opportunity to *participate* in mainstream norms. They are more interested in forming “Gay-Straight Alliance networks” than in trying to pit the “gay lifestyle” against the “straight lifestyle.”

Today’s youth support policies that encourage strong families, from offering support and training to parents with young children and expanding paid family leave to cracking down on parental negligence and domestic abuse. They also favor policies to support unconventional families, from legalizing gay marriage and facilitating adoption by single parents to assisting multigenerational households that may include adult children, siblings, parents, and grandparents.

Be upbeat and optimistic

Millennials have a more positive outlook than older generations about the nation’s future, a greater willingness to take on big challenges, and an attraction to national leaders who exude a yes-we-can optimism. While Boomers, according to the Pew Research Center, have infused a new pessimism into every phase of life they have entered,⁸⁹ Millennials are thus far infusing a new optimism. Like older liberals, they believe that government is a force for

good in domestic affairs and that bold social programs can dramatically improve Americans' lives. Like older conservatives, they believe America is a force for good in global affairs and that bold technology programs can solve pressing national problems.

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Millennials' political optimism starts with their confidence in themselves—both as individuals and as a generation. According to a Bayer/Gallup “Facts of Science” survey, 84 percent of today's young people believe someone in their generation will become the next Bill Gates, 66 percent believe they personally know such a person, and one-quarter believe they actually *are* that person.⁹⁰ The share of youths aged 18 to 25 who predict they will be “financially more successful than their parents” has been rising, reaching 65 percent overall in 2005 and 75 percent for young blacks and Latinos.⁹¹ In a recent survey, 18- to 29-year olds were the most optimistic group in assessing whether today's children would grow up better or worse off than people are now.⁹²

Today's youth are also optimistic that government action is capable of generating great results, both at home and abroad. In the 2004 national exit poll, fully 60 percent of voters under age 24 agree that “government should do more to solve problems,” higher than any older age bracket.⁹³ In 2008, 69 percent of voters under 29 agreed—again much higher than in older age brackets (in which the agreement was always under 50 percent).⁹⁴ Millennials want policy makers to echo their positive tone. More than two-thirds agree that “the political tone in Washington is too negative.”⁹⁵ Barack Obama's “yes we can” message resonated especially well with the Millennials for just this reason.

The Millennials' optimism dovetails with their need for structure, order, and a guaranteed place in “the system.” It also poses certain dangers. Young Gen Xers, holding fewer illusions about what can go wrong, embraced an ethic of resilient free agency and excelled at bouncing back from disappointing outcomes. Millennials, not possessing these strengths, are far more likely to feel derailed, even permanently damaged, when their high hopes are thwarted—whether by poor educational alignment, a plummeting economy, or a stagnant job market. If a growing number of today's youth find themselves stuck outside the system, they will support any program that promises a stable place for them. This might include a universal national service program, a subsidized internship/apprenticeship program, or a national early college program designed for at-risk high school students and dropouts.

In domestic policy, they favor large-scale national solutions. A decreasing share of youth say that government should only get involved in initiatives that cannot be run at the local level, and it is now far below the share for older Americans.⁹⁶ They are more likely than Boomers to say that technology will have to play a larger role in protecting the environment. Millennials tend to support ambitious government solutions for everything from global warming to healthcare to unemployment.

In foreign policy, Millennials favor intervening in international affairs, not just for America's own economic interest, but for the good of foreign nations. When asked about the results of American activity abroad, they tend to think first in positive rather than tragic terms. Whatever they may think of the wisdom of starting a war in Iraq, for instance, today's young adults are more likely than any older age group to say that the Iraq war will end well, with beneficial results for the region and the world.⁹⁷

Make capitalism work better

In their economic orientation, Millennials support government regulation without opposing businesses or markets. Millennials have grown up in the shadow of Reaganomics. Their entire lifespan has coincided with the longest financial boom and perhaps the most robust era of economic expansion in American history—all predicated on deregulated markets, entrepreneurialism, and globalization. They know that markets work, and in high school and college they study how markets work in far greater depth than older Americans ever did. Yet Millennials are also a risk-

averse and community-oriented generation that wants government to safeguard the economy against mounting systemic financial risk and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and income. As part of the solution, they believe that regulation should be used to give a market economy a proper structure and direction. Like older liberals, they believe that government regulation is necessary to ensure a stable and equitable economy. Like older conservatives, they believe that markets are the best way for an economy to perform most of its functions efficiently in a globalizing, high-tech world.

On the one hand, most Millennials believe that the government can be a force for good in the economy. Millennials agree 45 percent to 32 percent that government should ensure everyone has a good job and standard of living, rather than letting each person get ahead on his or her own. In 1972 young Boomers said nearly the reverse in response to this question, and in 1994 young Gen Xers were evenly divided.⁹⁸ Millennials are significantly less likely than older generations to agree that government regulation per se does more harm than good.⁹⁹

On the other hand, Millennials do not share the view of many older liberals that markets are inherently harmful or unfair—indeed, they are generally supportive of business as an institution and of markets as a means to empower consumer choice. In 2007, people under age 30 were more likely than older people to agree that the strength of this country is mostly based on the success of American business. (When young Gen Xers were asked the same question in 1989 and 1994, they were less likely than older people to agree.)¹⁰⁰ Fifty-two percent of Millennials believe that “business corporations generally strike a fair balance between profits and public interest,” compared with 38 percent of older generations.¹⁰¹

With their signature optimism, Millennials believe that the right public-policy framework can both promote market efficiency and encourage social equity—thus, their policy priorities cut across the traditional divide between free markets and government intervention.

With their signature optimism, Millennials believe that the right public-policy framework can both promote market efficiency and encourage social equity—thus, their policy priorities cut across the traditional divide between free markets and government intervention. By a sizable margin, they support free trade and believe that globalization has positive consequences. They are the least likely of all age groups to say that free trade agreements “hurt you or your family financially.”¹⁰² Yet they are the most likely to say that government “definitely should” have the responsibility to provide all interested citizens with jobs.¹⁰³ In educational policy, they favor both school vouchers and increased federal funding for education.¹⁰⁴

Champion unity over diversity

Millennials are less interested in the “identity politics” that distinguishes one group from another (by race, gender, religion, sexual orientation) and more interested in making room for everyone in a broad American middle class. Though they accept diversity as a given, Millennials believe that each group should affirm its own solidarity in ways that do not demoralize or fragment the national community. Like older liberals, they take for granted a diverse range of cultures, backgrounds, and lifestyles. Like older conservatives, they are drawn to the vision of a unified American melting pot.

Millennials are the least Caucasian and most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history. As of 2008, non-whites and Latinos accounted for 42 percent of Millennials, much larger than the 26 percent for Boomers or the 15 percent for today’s senior-citizen G.I.s.¹⁰⁵ Many of these minority Millennials, the children of foreign-born Boomers and Gen-Xers, have acquired the joiner mentality common among second-generation immigrants—and are eager to assimilate. In any case, the growing diversity of their geographic and racial origin makes the old black-and-white divisions seem no longer relevant. Millennials are moving away from the idea of a *multiracial* society with a fixed number of discrete minority groups, and towards the idea of a *transracial* society, in which infinite gradations of racial identity allow fusion into one heterogeneous community.

Surveys confirm the declining significance of race among Millennials. When they are asked for the most important characteristic that defines their identity, “religion,” “ethnicity,” “race,” and “sexual orientation” clock in distantly

behind “music or fashion preference.”¹⁰⁶ From the late 1980s to today, the share of youth age 18 to 25 who “completely agree” that “it’s alright for blacks and whites to date each other” has risen from 20 percent to 64 percent.¹⁰⁷ Millennials are twice as likely as Xer youth in the late 1980s to disagree with the statement “I don’t have much in common with people of other races.”¹⁰⁸ With their upbeat, unity-oriented take on diversity, today’s youth are often put off by the adversarial, pessimistic outlook of old-guard civil rights activists. In the rising schism between older Silent and Boomer minority leaders (like Jesse Jackson, Sr., and Al Sharpton) and the younger Gen-X minority leaders (like Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson, Jr.), Millennials resonate with the unifying message of the latter.

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Millennials support policies that invite minority groups to integrate into the larger community and succeed there. They are more likely than older generations to reject a fence along the Mexican border and to endorse a program that would allow undocumented immigrants to gain legal status and citizenship¹⁰⁹. Nearly 60 percent of Millennials believe homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, 61 percent believe gays and lesbians should be able to adopt, and 61 percent think gay marriage should be permitted.¹¹⁰ (All of these percentages are larger for Millennials than for older generations.)

At the same time, most Millennials do not favor policies that seem to pit one group against another. Roughly half of college undergrads in recent years say that affirmative action should be abolished as a factor in college admissions.¹¹¹ In an era of splintering skin-color identities and of wealthy minority celebrities, most Millennials question whether it is possible to identify a uniquely disadvantaged racial or ethnic group all of whose members are categorically deserving. Many are offended by the abrasive style of diversity sensitivity training as it is meted out by older generations in college and in the workplace. A growing number are attracted to policies that would render assistance solely on the basis on wealth or income or educational disadvantage.

Favor realistic and multilateral world leadership

Millennials favor a multilateral approach to foreign policy, but are not hesitant to use force if it proves necessary to protect their country. This generation shies away from geopolitical idealism on both sides of the aisle. They don’t believe that America should reshape regions of the world in its own image, nor do they believe that America could best serve the world by reducing its military presence. They favor instead a strong dose of realism. Like older liberals, they believe that diplomacy and multilateralism are generally the best means to keep America strong and safe. Like older conservatives, they don’t hesitate to use force when needed and support military service with patriotic enthusiasm.

Millennials favor a multilateral approach to foreign policy, not as an idealistic end in itself, but as the most practical way to protect America’s interests. Coming of age in a post-9/11 era, they believe that military force cannot effectively counter America’s most pressing security threats, from suicide bombers to bioterrorism. By a much larger margin than older Americans, today’s young people agree that our nation’s security depends more on “building strong ties to other nations” (64 percent) than on “its own military strength” (29 percent).¹¹² They agree 3 to 1 that America should let other countries and the United Nations take the lead in solving international crises.¹¹³ Pew surveys indicate that today’s 18- to 29-year olds have the lowest opinion of military force alone as the best way to achieve peace.¹¹⁴

Yet Millennials are not ideologically opposed to using military force when force becomes necessary. Indeed, this generation strongly supports the military, even more than it supports other national institutions. Sixty-three percent of today’s youth have a “good” or “very good” opinion of the military, up from 55 percent in 1996.¹¹⁵ In 2002, shortly after the attacks of September 11, they were more in favor than older Americans of taking military action against Iraq.¹¹⁶ This is in part because today’s youth feel a rising patriotic commitment. In a 2005 GQR survey, Millennials ranked their own “patriotism” at 7.2 on a scale of 0 to 10, which was higher than any other trait except their own “health.”¹¹⁷ Even the most liberal Millennials are less averse than their elders to the use of military force. Among Howard Dean activists in 2004, 31 percent of Millennials supported the concept of preemptive war, compared to only 13 percent of Boomers.¹¹⁸

Seek consensus and decorum in politics

Millennials seek a new sense of consensus and decorum in public life. Boomers, who grew up in an era of stolid national unity, came of age breaking cultural taboos, shaking up the complacent establishment, and introducing a tone of passion (at times even hysteria) into their advocacy. Millennials, who have grown up watching national leaders pummel each other with symbolic gestures, scandal charges, negative ads, and scorched-earth partisanship, now want to push politics in another direction. They want to reestablish a regime of comity, politeness, and rationality. Like older liberals, the Millennials prefer a broad and sweeping consensus on policy issues. Like older conservatives, they seek a new restraint and decorum in political discourse.

In everything from their personal behavior to their pop culture tastes, Millennials have been moving to the ordered center rather than pushing the anarchic edge. They take fewer risks, they listen more closely to their parents, and they seek more structure in their lives. “Here come the traditionalists,” wrote George Gallup, describing first-wave Millennial teens earlier this decade, while the *New York Times* described a new “turn to the traditional.”¹¹⁹ By nearly two-to-one, Millennials agree that today’s pop culture has too much violence, sex, profanity, drugs, and meanness.¹²⁰ Upbeat, well-behaved Millennial culture icons (Miley Cyrus, Zach Efron, America Ferrera) are driving a new “blanding” of the popular culture.

If one answer is correct, Millennials ask, why can’t we all just agree without argument? When journalists interview today’s teens, they often remark on how much this generation prefers to offer a team answer (assisted by IM) than many individual answers.

On college campuses, faculty are noticing, along with the new team focus, a growing student resistance to debates in the classroom. If one answer is correct, Millennials ask, why can’t we all just agree without argument? When journalists interview today’s teens, they often remark on how much this generation prefers to offer a team answer

(assisted by IM) than many individual answers. A related trend among Millennials is the rising importance of demonstrating competence, of earning credentials—in short, of being “smart.” Almost by definition, being “smart” requires deliberation and restraint. According to one survey, Millennials rank “knowledge” first among every advantage (including money, fame, and believing in yourself) that makes a person successful.¹²¹

In politics, as in the popular culture and their own lives, the Millennials seek a new atmosphere of consensus and well-behaved amiability. Seventy-four percent of 18- to 24-year olds agree that “politics has become too partisan,” and 78 percent agree that “elected officials seem to be motivated by selfish reasons.”¹²² Today’s youth agree more strongly than any older age bracket that “I like political leaders who are willing to make compromises in order to get the job done.”¹²³ This is an astonishing development to anyone who recalls young Boomers back in their heyday.

Barack Obama’s post-election pledge to “create an atmosphere where we can disagree without being disagreeable”¹²⁴ has been immensely attractive to Millennials. Obama’s cool discipline and post-partisan image helped him jump ahead of rivals among Millennial voters, particularly in a primary battle that painted Hillary Clinton as hotheaded and deeply divisive. Obama also appeals to Millennials by showcasing his team’s intelligence and credentials. The slogan of the Millennial-run youth advocacy group Youth Entitlements Summit sums up this new attitude: “Governance, not politics.”¹²⁵

Plan ahead for the long-term

Millennials show a new determination to plan for the long-term future, both in managing their personal lives and in making policy for the nation. For Boomer youth, “live for today” became both a lifestyle motto and an antidote for repressive public institutions. By the time Gen Xers arrived, everyone assumed that free agency trumped careerism and that there was little use bothering about long-term policy objectives. Today’s youth are reviving the view that success is the predictable outcome of effort and planning. They want policy makers to plan strategically for the long term—and they believe that if this is done right, America’s greatest problems can be solved and potential difficulties averted. Like older liberals, Millennials believe that major public priorities, such as providing benefits to the elderly or protecting the environment, should be established as

permanent and planned functions of government. Like older conservatives, they want government, while carrying out these functions, to protect the living standards of future generations and avoid burdening them with unaffordable liabilities.

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Starting in elementary school, Millennials have faced rising pressure to set long-term personal goals—for education, for extra-curricular pursuits, for careers—and to meet each milestone “on time” in order to keep up with their peers. By the late 1990s, the majority of high school students said they had detailed five- and ten-year plans.¹²⁶ Eighty-two percent of young adults age 18 to 25 agree that, by the time people reach their mid-20s, it is important to have a good plan for what they will do with the rest of their lives.¹²⁷ Today, both college students and their parents agree six to one that students today spend more time planning for the future than their parents did at the same age.¹²⁸ Millennials continue to think long term as they plan their careers. On a 2006 Universum survey, graduating college seniors came up with the most detailed list of desired long-term job benefits in the history of the poll, from retirement plans to life insurance to health insurance for dependents.¹²⁹

In public policy, Millennials want leaders to put more energy and effort into solving long-term national problems, from Social Security and Medicare to global warming and storing nuclear waste. Today’s youth tend to assume that government entitlements are (and should be) permanent social fixtures—but they also favor major systemic changes to make them sustainable for their lifetimes and for future generations: Nearly 40 percent of 18- to 29-year olds want to reduce the growth rate of social security benefits, far more than any other age bracket.¹³⁰ Millennials strongly support a government overhaul of the healthcare system. Clearly, they want a long-term environmental

strategy. Nearly nine in ten teens believe “world leaders should do ‘whatever it takes’ to tackle climate change.”¹³¹ Boomers defending their own interests may resist sweeping change in these areas. But Millennials will be steadfast in insisting that the needs of America’s future should come first—and they will remind everyone that an investment in the rising generation is equivalent to an investment in that future

This generation also seeks ambitious policy programs that will help them keep their own long-term life plans on track. Millennials are very aware that, in today’s globalized economy, planning for a secure future means pursuing a post-secondary degree. They strongly favor policies that facilitate successful completion of postsecondary education, from aligning curricula through “P-14” initiatives to helping students retroactively with college debt to supporting community colleges and trade schools. Millennials are more likely than older generations to say that government should ensure that everyone has a good job and standard of living, demonstrating both their focus on long-term life stability and their faith that government can help deliver it.

The Future of the Millennial Generation

A generation in its youth, observed Ortega y Gasset, is like “a species of biological missile, hurled into space at a given instant... with a preestablished vital trajectory.”¹³² Mannheim called this path a generation’s “essential destiny.”¹³³

The overall timing of the Millennials’ trajectory can already be foretold. Through the 2010s, Millennials will be marrying, starting families, and giving birth in large numbers, returning to college for their fifth-year and tenth-year reunions—and swarming into business and the professions, no longer as apprentices. Already in the 2010s, some will enter state houses and the U.S. Congress. In the early 2020s, they will elect their first U.S. Senator—and perhaps in the early 2030s, their first U.S. President. Their share of the national electorate will rise sharply in the coming years, from 13 percent in 2008 to 35 percent in 2024,¹³⁴ when the next youth generation begins to reach voting age.¹³⁵ (See Appendix A.) Their share is likely to peak (at about 39 percent) in 2044, when the negative effect of mortality begins to overwhelm the positive effect of age on voting rates.

Middle-aged Millennials are likely to dominate the White House in the 2050s, during which period they will also

provide majorities in the Congress and Senate, win Nobel prizes, rule corporate boardrooms, and fill the ranks of collegiate parent bodies. Thereafter, into the 2070s, they will occupy the Supreme Court and be America's new elders. They will make lasting contributions to literature, science, technology, and many other fields. Their children will dominate American life in the latter half of the twenty-first century—and their grandchildren will lead us into the twenty-second. Their influence on the American story, and the memory of their deeds and collective persona, will reach far beyond the year 2100.

How will this generation's collective life story reshape America? Though the ultimate substantive impact of Millennials as a political generation cannot be foreseen, the attitudes and priorities they will bring to public life over the next few decades can in some measure be anticipated. Though we do not know what specific national challenges Millennials will face, we can describe thematically how they will try overcome such challenges—and how they will see themselves, and be seen by others, as they do so.

We believe that Millennials are on track to become a generation of extraordinary political power, both as voters and as leaders. They are already acquiring a reputation as more civically engaged than the next older generation. By the time they reach their legislative apogee in Congress and in state houses, sometime around 2050, they will be regarded as more civically engaged than younger generations.

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Millennials will remain as busy and programmed in their 30s, 40s, and 50s as they already have been in their youth. They will have high hopes and design ambitious social programs. They will fortify the sense of community and energize government. They will champion the family and

launch vast public works. They will strengthen public institutions and restore the trust of citizens at home. They will reinforce multilateral institutions and restore the image of America abroad. They will continue their blanding of the pop culture, put an end to the culture wars, and restore a respectability to the politics. They will build a new and durable social contract, redefining the fundamental relationship between citizens and public institutions.

In their effort to unify the nation and concentrate their votes, Millennials will be more likely than most generations to gravitate toward a single political party (a tendency already revealed in the 2008 election). This will probably be the Democratic Party, though perhaps it could be a reborn Republican Party or a new third party if either were to emerge over the next two or (at most) three Presidential terms. For decades thereafter, both within parties and across party lines, Millennials will have to forge alliances with, or wage struggles against, the leaders of older generations—Boomers and Gen-Xers in particular. In support, Millennials will be enthusiastic and deferential. In opposition, they will be respectful but implacable. On both sides, they will be easy to organize.

Unavoidably, during the 2010s and especially the 2020s, the mounting pension and health-care costs associated with the retirement of the large Boom Generation will push entitlement reform to the top of the Millennials' domestic policy agenda. Unlike young Boomers, Millennials are serious about long-term economic stewardship and worry about their future living standards. Unlike young Gen-Xers, Millennials have the collective self-confidence to demand that something be done about unsustainable fiscal commitments. Millennials will insist that the social contract between generations be redrawn. They are likely to frame their argument as the crusade of a special rising generation to safeguard the nation's future against the selfish interests of entrenched elders. Investment (in the young) will be pitted against consumption (of the old). Piece by piece or all of a sudden, the Millennials' argument will prevail.

Some Boomers will resist this agenda. But in an era of strengthening extended families and tightening personal relationships between generations, most Boomers are likely to go along. Boomers will accept less material support from the young in order to retain extra moral authority over them. In their own youth, Boomers would never have

agreed to such a trade with their own elders—and in fact, back then, the retiring G.I.s made a deal which ran in the opposite direction. Millennials, however, are accustomed to leaving the realm of vision and values in the hands of their Boomer (and Gen-X) parents. They may find this arrangement perfectly acceptable.

Compounding the fiscal meltdown over entitlements, Millennials will likely find the period in which they are entering adulthood to be an era of national urgency and perhaps even global crisis—for geopolitical and economic reasons (ranging from nuclear proliferation to a financial collapse) perhaps too obvious to mention. If history continues to accelerate, fear will spread, need will be obvious, and government will be called upon to assume unprecedented responsibilities. Over a decade or two, our political and economic institutions may be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up.

If an era of crisis is indeed on America's horizon, it is easy to see how the Millennials' constructive new approach to politics could be of rising value to the nation. If old institutions fail and America needs to build new institutions rapidly to fill the gap, Millennials will be able to put their generational strengths to work.

The prospect of an ideal match between the collective personality of the rising generation and the mood of the coming era may seem fortuitous, but it is nothing new. In fact, this happens repeatedly throughout American history. Consider how well prepared the rising Silent Generation was for the caution and conformity of the 1950s, or how well prepared Boomers were the passion and idealism of the 1970s, or how well prepared Gen-Xers were for the free agency and carnival culture of the 1990s. This recurring match may not be a coincidence. Every generation of youth comes of age just as the generation of parents who raised them are assuming the full leadership roles of midlife and setting the mood of the era. The rising generation is, in a sense, expressly raised to handle what's coming.

To be sure, the Millennial political agenda is hardly at this stage a coherent and well-structured program. Some parts of it seem to contradict others. Millennials prioritize close community but favor open borders and globalization. They are increasingly patriotic, but want to defer to the United Nations. They trust free markets but want to

close the gap between rich and poor. Today, from the perspective of our current political landscape, these points of view seem irreconcilable. Yet in the decades ahead, in the new political landscape that Millennials will shape as voters and leaders, they will all seem to make sense. Every rising generation approaches timeless political questions from a different perspective than their elders. The internal logic of each new approach becomes clear only when the youth generation is empowered to redefine the very context of those questions.

Ultimately, of course, there is no such thing as good or bad generation. The collective personality traits that seem so welcome in a rising generation—because they promise to correct for excesses and errors of the older ruling generation—eventually contribute to the excesses and errors of the rising generation itself as it ages. The future will likely be no different for Millennials. For every trait now hailed as positive, one can easily imagine flip-side that will eventually be criticized as negative. Given a few decades and a few gray hairs, the Millennials' attraction to teamwork may come across as collectivism, their consensus as groupthink, their aversion to risk as aversion to spontaneity, and their conventionality as complacency. No one will remind them of this more effectively than the generation of youth due to come of age in the 2040s.

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By that time, when today's youth have become the dominant generation of public leaders, America will be a very different place. No one can tell exactly how their collective life story will unfold. Yet by thinking generationally, by understanding who the Millennials are and how they are spurring nonlinear social and political changes, certain themes in this drama can be anticipated and their implications made clear. ❏

Appendix A: Millennials as Projected Share of the Voting Electorate in Presidential Elections¹³⁶

Year	Millennial electorate <i>(in millions)</i>	Total U.S. electorate <i>(all ages)</i>	Share of total U.S. electorate
2000	1.7	110.8	1.5%
2004	8.7	125.7	6.9%
2008	17.3	133.3	13.0%
2012	27.5	139.4	19.7%
2016	37.6	145.0	25.9%
2020	47.9	150.3	31.8%
2024	54.8	155.6	35.2%
2028	59.5	161.2	36.9%
2032	63.4	166.9	37.9%
2036	66.3	172.5	38.4%
2040	68.8	177.8	38.7%
2044	70.9	182.7	38.8%
2048	72.7	187.7	38.7%

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- 135 In Appendix A, we assume that the first birth cohort of the next generation begins in 2005. Following the results of a reader survey, we tentatively label this the “Homeland Generation.” For a brief summary of “Homelanders” to date, see Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials and K-12 Schools: Educational Strategies for a New Generation* (LifeCourse Associates, 2008), chapter 15.
- 136 Millennials are defined as born between 1982 and 2004. Projections use latest U.S. Census projections to 2050. They assume continuation after 2008 of projected voting rates by age averaged over the last five Presidential elections (also calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau)F, except for Millennials, for whom we used a higher turnout rate of 4 percentage points in each future Presidential election year. (Four percentage points is approximately the increase in the voter participation rate observed with Millennials thus far.)

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