



MILLENNIALS: A PORTRAIT OF GENERATION

NEXT

The Pew Research Center's in-depth survey of a new generation of 18- to 29-year-olds finds them confident, self-expressive, upbeat and open to change. [BY TOM FERRICK JR.](#)

It is a sign of their thoroughness

—or perhaps of their innate intensity—that when the folks at the Pew Research Center decided to study Americans who are aged 18 to 29, they devised surveys that not only asked whether members of this new generation had a cell phone (94 percent do). They also asked if they kept the cell with them or next to the bed while they slept (yes, said 83 percent).

They asked them if they used their cells to send and receive text messages (88 percent do), and they also asked if they texted while driving (64 percent admitted to that bad habit).

In the same way—and perhaps in an even greater sign of the researchers’ intensity—they also asked these young Americans not just “Do you have a tattoo?” but how many and where the tattoos were located. (For the record, nearly 4 in 10 do, more than half of them have more than two, but the majority keeps them hidden under clothes.)

These were just a few of the questions on the surveys, but they give a sense of how the center’s researchers went about their mission. They clearly did not want to skim the surface. They wanted to dig down so they could capture the psyche, habits and beliefs of this new generation and explain it to the rest of us. They succeeded.

When the report, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, was released early this year, it caused a stir in the media. The adjective most often applied to the study was *exhaustive*. But what caused the public to sit up and pay attention was the way the report rendered a portrait of a distinctive generation, different in many ways from those who came before it and one which has already had real

political impact. It was a theme signaled in the opening paragraph of the report:

“Generations, like people, have personalities and Millennials—American teens and twenty-somethings who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of a new millennium—have begun to forge theirs: confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change.”

The author of that passage was Paul Taylor, the center’s executive vice president. His principal co-author was Scott Keeter, the center’s director of survey research.

They represent the two sides of the center’s brain. Taylor, 61, is a former reporter who spent 25 years as a journalist, principally with *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Washington Post*. Keeter, 59, is an expert on survey research and the author of four books on politics and demographic change.

The Millennial report—as with most of the center’s many reports—is infused with what Taylor described as a “mix of journalistic story-telling sensibility with authoritative research and scientific method.”

In an interview at the center’s L Street headquarters in Washington, DC, Taylor and Keeter explained that the report was truly a collaborative effort, involving most of the seven entities that comprise the center and make it—in the words of its president, Andrew Kohut—a “fact tank.” More about that later.

The more immediate point is that Taylor and Keeter are bona fide Baby Boomers, the generation that has gotten most of the ink over the years. As Kohut put it in his remarks on the day the Millennial report was issued, “For a long time, it’s been my view that young people were out of fashion.”

When asked about Kohut’s remarks, Keeter agreed, saying, “The shadow of the Baby Boomers was a very long one, both because of the size of the generation and the cultural changes that accompanied its coming of age. Subsequent generations have gotten less attention, simply because of



THE GREATEST GENERATION

1920



THE SILENT GENERATION

1930



BABY BOOMERS

1950

the size of the Baby Boomer cohort, but some of it is that as the Boomers got older, they took over the narrative of the country—and may have wanted to keep the spotlight on themselves.”

The spotlight shifted in 2008, as Millennials made their presence felt in a significant way in the presidential election. Not only did they vote at a much higher level than ever before, they embraced the candidacy of Barack Obama. Voters under 30 gave Obama 66 percent of their vote, compared to the 50 percent share he got from voters older than 30.

Young people were back in fashion. But the question arose: who exactly were these Millennials? Taylor, Keeter and their colleagues at the center decided to look for answers.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We love to apply labels, and there are popular names given to each of the five generations co-existing in America today. The oldest are called the Greatest Generation because they were the ones who fought and won World War II. They are followed by the Silent Generation. Next came the Baby Boomers and then Generation X. Millennials are the generation born after 1980 who reached adulthood after the turn of the century—the beginning of a new millennium.

There is arbitrariness to these labels: who is to say that someone who is 29 is a Millennial and someone

who is 30 is automatically a Gen Xer? There are Millennials who neither own nor use cell phones, albeit very few. But, as the center's studies illustrate, generational analysis can be useful and insightful, even though it requires that boundaries be drawn around certain age groups.

There are 50 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 today. We know from census data that this group is

GENERATIONS HAVE LABELS

Generational names are the handiwork of popular culture. Some are drawn from a historic event, others from rapid social or demographic change, others from a big turn in the calendar. Generational names are works in progress. The zeitgeist changes, and labels that once seemed spot on fall out of fashion. It's not clear if the Millennial tag will endure, although a calendar change that comes along only once in a thousand years seems like a pretty secure anchor.

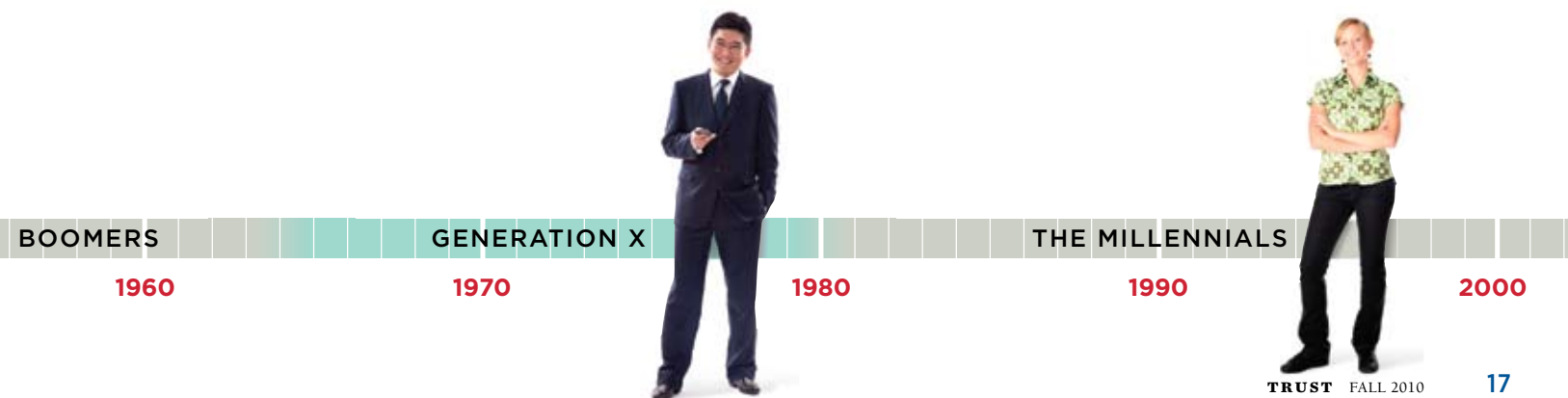
The **Millennial Generation** falls into the third category. The label refers to those born after 1980—the first generation to come of age in the new millennium.

Generation X covers people born from 1965 through 1980. The label long ago overtook the first name affixed to this generation: the Baby Bust. Xers are often depicted as savvy, entrepreneurial loners.

The **Baby Boomer** label is drawn from the great spike in fertility that began in 1946, right after the end of World War II, and ended almost as abruptly in 1964, around the time the birth control pill went on the market. It's a classic example of a demography-driven name.

The **Silent Generation** describes adults born from 1928 through 1945. Children of the Great Depression and World War II, their “Silent” label refers to their conformist and civic instincts. It also makes for a nice contrast with the noisy ways of the anti-establishment Boomers.

The **Greatest Generation**, those born before 1928, “saved the world” when it was young, in the memorable phrase of Ronald Reagan. It's the generation that fought and won World War II.



more diverse than older Americans, with a higher proportion of blacks and Hispanics. Sixty-one percent of Millennials are white, compared to 70 percent for adults 30 and older.

For the rest, we look to the Millennial report and parse its opening paragraph, adding detail.

Millennials are confident...

They have reason to be. They are headed towards being the most educated generation in American history, and 61 percent think of their own age group as distinct and unique. What makes them so?

Asked an open-ended question, Millennials cited five factors most frequently: 24 percent said it was their use of technology, 11 percent their music and pop culture, 7 percent said it was because they were liberal and tolerant, 6 percent said they were smarter than other generations and 5 percent cited their clothes. (Don't be put off by their claims of being smarter. Every generation mentioned it in the survey.)

The Millennials seem to have a love of technology—and technological competence—embedded in their DNA. As the report puts it, “They are history’s first ‘always connected’ generation, steeped in digital technology and social media,

use is ‘all about me.’ The online behavior is ‘Hey, look at me. Look at what I’m doing.’ The off-line behavior—with the tattoos—is also ‘Hey, look at me.’”

This can also be read as indicating Millennials are self-absorbed, but that may be more of a function of youth and not this particular generation.

On other levels, they are generous in their judgments of older generations. For instance, in previous surveys done by the center, older people have expressed the belief that they have better values, work ethic and more respect for others. Millennials agree.

They may be saying “We’re different,” but they are not saying “We’re better.”

Unlike the Baby Boomers, there is very little conflict among the generations. As Taylor put it: “Millennials say, ‘We are different from Mom and Dad, but we are all cool.’”

Millennials are liberal...

Not only when it comes to politics, but also on most social issues.

In 2008, 62 percent of Millennials identified themselves as Democrat or as leaning Democratic, the highest support for the party among all age groups. In the same year, 66 percent of the Millennial vote went for Barack Obama and only 32 percent for Republican John McCain in the presidential race.

These are staggeringly high numbers, but they are not set in stone. More recent data collected by the center shows a drop in support for

President Obama and the Democrats among Millennials. Although the president remains personally popular among 18- to 29-year-olds (with a 65 percent approval rating), his job-rating declined among younger and older voters as 2009 progressed.

Why are Millennials liberal?

“A combination of things,” said Keeter. “First, this is a diverse generation and its liberalism is tied up in its racial and ethnic identity. You have a significant percentage being nonwhite, and being nonwhite in America is associated with being less conservative and more liberal. Second, they have come of age in a time when rapid changes in social mores had occurred and is still occurring and they internalized these as tolerant, progressive and liberal.”

**More than one-third of Millennials
said they depended on their
parents for some financial support.**

they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost as a body part—for better or worse.”

Three-quarters of them have a profile posted on a social networking site, such as Facebook. One-fifth of them have posted videos of themselves online.

Millennials are self-expressive...

The Facebook profiles. The personal videos posted online. The tattoos. The body-piercing (23 percent have piercing at some place on their body other than their earlobes). Taylor believes the self-expressiveness is a manifestation of their confidence. “Part of the reason [for their confidence] is that they do feel empowered by their moment in history and their technology use,” he said. “And some of the technology

HOW MILLENNIAL ARE YOU?

As it turns out, this Baby Boomer doesn't have much in common with today's Millennial generation of 18- to 29-year-olds.

I can say that with certainty because I scored in the 23rd percentile on the Millennial quiz, which can be found at the Pew Research Center's Web site.

Go to www.pewresearch.org/millennials to take the quiz.

Don't worry: it is not Trivial Pursuit with questions about pop idols or obscure video games. Instead, the interactive, 14-question quiz is based on life habits, such as time spent in front of a TV (more than your average Millennial, according to my results) or time spent texting (zero, in my case). Millennials send and receive an average of 20 text messages a day.

My overall score was better than many Boomers, who average in the 11th percentile on the quiz, but stratospherically below the average Millen-

nial, who scores in the 73rd percentile.

The Web site www.pewresearch.org also features regular interactive news quizzes. I got 10 out of 11 on a recent quiz, probably because I read a newspaper nearly every day, as do 58 percent of Boomers. For Millennials the figure is 43 percent.

According to Scott Keeter, the center's director of survey research, 249,000 people have taken the Millennial quiz since it went up earlier this year.

Paul Taylor, the center's executive vice president, said the Web site



averages nearly half a million unique visitors a month, a healthy audience that has built over time as the center has worked to make the site more accessible. Overall, the Pew Research Center's family of eight Web sites attracts nearly a million unique visitors each month. The quizzes are one example of why people are drawn to the sites

The Web site contains a veritable plethora of information, to quote Boomer icon Howard Cosell (a man unknown to most Millennials), that comes from the seven entities and projects that comprise the center. Dig a little and you can find the full text of every report done by the Pew Research Center in recent years. There is also timely poll data.

The logo of the Pew Research Center site promises "Numbers, Facts and Trends Shaping Your World." It delivers on that. **—TOM FERRICK JR.**

For instance, Millennials are the only generation that favors gay marriage (50 to 36 percent, with the remainder undecided). Whether the issue is interracial dating, affirmative action, same-sex adoptions, immigration or favoring an activist government, Millennials land consistently on the liberal side. They grew up with the culture wars in America and they are taking sides with the progressives.

As Keeter pointed out, another factor in the Millennials' liberalism may be related to their relationship to organized religion. Fully one-quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds say they are not affiliated with any church, and those who are affiliated tend to go less frequently than their elders. Participation in religion is often a marker for conservatism.

Millennials are upbeat and open to change...

No one would criticize Millennials if they were angry or depressed. The recession has hit them with full force, stopping many of them from even getting the first foot on the career ladder. Yet they remain optimistic about the future and have a higher satisfaction level (41 percent) when it comes to the

state of the nation than do those over 30 (26 percent).

They do not blame the government for their problems, nor are they cynical about big business.

While there is evidence that a long stretch of low wages and unemployment can harm a person's earning potential in the long run, the Millennials think they will be okay. As Taylor noted, young people are not marching on City Hall or taking over the dean's office to protest the state of the world.

"As we well know, there is an angry populace out there, but it is basically not these kids," Taylor said. "It is the older folks who feel dislocated. But these kids are out there putting one foot in front of another and doing the best they can. I find that to be—maybe *surprising* is not the right word—but distinguishing."

We've talked so much about how Millennials differ from other generations that it would be wise to mention some similarities. What Millennials say they want out of life is very similar to what older generations want: being a good parent, having a successful marriage, helping others in need are their



life priorities. Fame and wealth are low on the list.

Significantly, as a sign of their respect for their elders, 63 percent of Millennials state that adult children should allow an elderly parent to live in their homes, if that is what the parent wants to do. This is in line with the attitude of Gen Xers (67 percent say parents should be allowed) but higher than Baby Boomers (55 percent) and the Silent Generation (38 percent).

Some of the data in the report is based on a telephone survey of 2,020 people—via landline and cell phones—that was taken in January, 2010. All generations were surveyed, but Millennials were over sampled.

But that is only part of the story.

A CULMINATION

In a way, the Millennial report represents a culmination of years of polling by the Pew Research Center. The center's continuing work on the new generation marks the first collaboration by all of its seven entities and projects: the Center for the People and the Press, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the Internet & American Life Project, the Forum on Religion and Public Life, the Hispanic Center, the Global Attitudes Project and the most recent addition, the Social and Demographic Trends Project.

The oldest is the Pew Center for the People and the Press, which was created 15 years ago with Kohut, a veteran of the Gallup Organization, who headed the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press. (Pew took the center

MILLENNIALS: A DISCUSSION

In conjunction with the release of *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next* on February 24, 2010, the Pew Research Center held a conference at the Newseum in Washington, DC. More than 150 academics and other observers attended the conference, including, from left to right, danah boyd (who does not use capital letters in her name), social media researcher, Microsoft Research New England and fellow, Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society; Dylan Casey, product manager, Google; Amanda Lenhart, senior research specialist, Pew Internet & American Life Project; Tom Rosenstiel, director, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism; and the conference moderator, Judy Woodruff, PBS *NewsHour* senior correspondent. An additional 2,000 people listened to a live Web cast. During the conference, Pew and the *NewsHour* staff gave regular updates on Twitter.

under its wing when the Times Mirror Company decided to stop funding it.)

In 2004, the entities consolidated under the umbrella of the Pew Research Center, a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, with Kohut as president and Taylor as executive vice president. The way Taylor describes it: "This was a collection of colonies before it was the United States."

Each entity had its own identity and mission so, Taylor said, "Our notion was 'First, do no harm.' We basically said that we may get some collaborations, but let us not force it."

The Millennial project offered an opportunity at true collaboration across the various entities at the center. It was born out of an understanding after the 2008 election that the 18- to 29-year-old generation was coming into its own, certainly politically.

“We were only going to do this if we had something that thematically made sense and was the kind of topic that could march its way across the centers,” Taylor said. “And the Millennial project was sort of the first one that rose to that challenge. The original hope that this could be greater than the sum of its parts has been proven true.”

All of the Pew Research Center’s studies are rich with information, but they are not simply a collection of numbers.

“The sweet spot is to be very aggressive in presenting not just a whole bunch of numbers, but also an analysis of over how those numbers relate—and over time,” Taylor said. “It’s everything that goes into good journalism—except that we stop short of making inferences from the numbers.”

The Millennial report, for example, does not speculate on the future. It will let the future arrive and then survey and probe on how the 18- to 29-year-old generation has—or has not—changed. One of the purposes of this study was to set a baseline for information on the Millennials, in the same way Kohut and the center’s researchers have gathered information on other generations over a number of decades.

But it is tempting to speculate on what impact Millennials will have on politics and on society in the future. The potential is for the Millennials, who are expected to rival the Baby Boomers in number, to have a significant impact, especially if they keep up their level of voter participation (by no means a sure thing) and their liberal/Democratic tilt.

We know they did have a large role in electing President Obama, and pundits and political observers were quick to declare 2008 a “redefining election”—one that changes the contours of politics.

Keeter and Taylor are not so sure.

“I would say let’s keep our powder dry,” Taylor said. “Does this mean that they will carry those judgments through the rest of their lives? We have to see more of this movie.”

On the societal level, both Taylor and Keeter said they were surprised by two findings outlined in the report: the Millennials’ respect for their elders and their stated willingness to have elderly parents move in with them.

(By the way, the reverse is certainly true. This is the “boomerang generation” that has often returned home to live, especially in these tough economic times. More than one-third of Millennials said they depended on their parents for some financial support.)

As Boomers age and put stress on everything from the health care system to Social Security, it may be a godsend for those elders who need help to have children willing to give it.

“While they are a distinctive generation, they are not a conflictual one,” Taylor said. “They are not wagging their

“These kids are out there putting one foot in front of another and doing the best they can.”

fingers at older folks, saying ‘We know better.’ I think that bodes well for our society. The Boomers are about to cross the threshold of 65, and that will put pressure on our public safety nets. It will be very complicated for our economic and political system. It is potentially a source of generational conflict. I don’t know how it will play out in public policy, but the fact that this [Millennial] generation is the one that will live with this through its life cycle is surely a good thing. And speaking as a Boomer, it is probably a better break than we deserve.”

In the meantime, the center’s researchers are looking forward to this year’s elections to measure how the Millennials act: Will they turn out to vote or revert to their earlier habit of low participation? Will they continue to trend Democratic or nudge closer to Republican candidates? Answers to come, courtesy of Pew, at a later date. For as thorough as it was, this year’s Pew Research Center Millennials report is just the first chapter on this generation. ■



The full Millennials report can be read at www.pewresearch.org/millennials

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