**The Partisan Foundations of Generational Polarization**

**Patrick Fisher**

Department of Political Science

Seton Hall University

South Orange, NJ 07079

(973) 275-2866

patrick.fisher@shu.edu

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**Abstract**

Generational polarization in American politics today is unprecedented and this polarization significantly shapes the landscape—both present and future—of American politics.

There is a marked difference politically between those born before 1973 and those born in 1973 onwards. Using the 1973 dividing line produces politically distinct older and younger cohorts.

Those born since 1973 (Young Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Zers) have begun their adult lives voting considerably more Democratic than older generations (Older Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation). The strength of generational voting is evident even when contrasted to other demographic variables, including race, suggesting the generational political divide has become an important part of contemporary American politics. Given the marked political differences of the pre-1973 and 1973+ generational cohorts, there is the potential for enormous change in the partisan makeup of the electorate. As more liberal Younger Gen Xers, Millennials, and Generation Z vote in increasing numbers and replace Older Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation in the electorate, the American polity will unquestionably undergo significant changes.

**The Partisan Foundations of Generational Polarization**

Generational polarization in American politics today is unprecedented. The generational differences—demographic, political, economic, social, and technological—are more pronounced now than at any time in recent memory. This polarization significantly shapes the landscape of American politics.

While a generational gap describes differences between age groups, generational polarization refers to more intense conflicts and divisions that arise from these differences. Generational polarization indicates a deepening divide and increasing antagonism between older and younger age cohorts, driven by political, social, and economic issues. It involves strong, conflicting views and a lack of understanding or empathy between generations.

Generational polarization thus suggests adversarial age divides concurrent with a sense of opposition and conflict between age cohorts. It is fueled by perceived injustices and inequalities that a generation feels are caused or perpetuated by another. Contemporary examples of generational polarization include sharp disagreements over climate change policies, economic opportunities, social justice issues, political ideologies, and partisanship. Younger Americans increasingly feel that older generations have left them with significant environmental and financial challenges, while older Americans feel that younger people have become too radical and entitled.

The concept of generational personality is based on the notion that individuals within the same generation share similar worldviews.[[1]](#endnote-1) Generational differences can be due to varying historical experiences, technological advancements, and societal changes that each generation has lived through. The political environment experienced by successive generations as they become adults shapes their political attitudes throughout their lives. Consequently, different generations can develop distinct political leanings that they maintain over their lifetimes. A political generation gap is not inevitable; in the latter part of the twentieth century, the political differences among generations were not especially notable. Studies from that time found that period effects—from election to election and in terms of longer trends—were more significant drivers of change than generational differences.[[2]](#endnote-2) This lack of an age divide led political science to focus more on other demographic gaps in American politics rather than generational differences.

Ignoring the intense generational divides in American politics today, however, would be a grave mistake.[[3]](#endnote-3) The last half-century has witnessed dramatic demographic, social, and technological changes, and different generations of Americans have distinct reactions to these changes. The racial and ethnic makeup of the country has been transformed. Generally, older generations have a harder time processing these changes, while younger generations are more likely to take them in stride. Among older Americans, there is a tension between their belief that America is the greatest country in the world and a sense of pessimism about the country’s future. Younger Americans are less convinced of America’s greatness but more comfortable with the path the country is currently on.[[4]](#endnote-4) These differing attitudes among older and younger Americans are a significant catalyst for today's political polarization.

***Political Polarization by Age Cohorts***

There are strong trends of increasing partisan sorting as well as an increase in ideological divergence across all generations and age cohorts.[[5]](#endnote-5) The youngest generations, however, are the most responsive to the growing polarization of party elites.[[6]](#endnote-6) Consequently, younger Americans are more polarized than they have been in the past.[[7]](#endnote-7) The partisan sorting and issue alignment of younger Americans is greater than that of previous generations.[[8]](#endnote-8) Growing up in a more polarized landscape has left an imprint on younger generations and has encouraged the creation of an environment in which younger cohorts are considerably more polarized than they have been historically. The United States is thus experiencing a fundamental generational break. The differences between younger and older Americans are reshaping the country’s values, media habits, and politics.

Younger Americans have become politically socialized in an extremely polarized era in which people are discouraged from changing their partisan preferences. Adherence to in-group norms is a critical basis of status among in-group peers. Conformity generates peer approval and leads to personal pride. These same mechanisms can spur between-group polarization. In this case, differentiation from the norms of disliked out-groups results in peer approval and pride, while conformity to out-group norms brings disapproval and embarrassment or shame. Political conformity, therefore, helps lead to polarization.[[9]](#endnote-9) For younger Americans, this in-group political conformity has markedly increased their dislike for the Republican Party.

The findings of this study will be primarily derived from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File. It is important to emphasize that the 2024 data is preliminary and will probably change somewhat when the data file is released. Another point to highlight is that data regarding presidential vote in 2024 is vote intention in the Pre-Election Data File, not actual vote choice. Utilizing data from the ANES, the degree to which older and younger Americans have polarized politically can be seen in Figure 1. This figure indicates the degree to which different age cohorts were more Democratic or Republican in the 13 presidential elections from 1952-2000 and in the 6 presidential elections from 2004-2024. From 1952-2000, there was remarkably little difference between age cohorts in presidential vote preferences. The youngest cohort was slightly more Democratic than older cohorts, but not by much. Interestingly, the most Republican age cohort was the 30-39 cohort, not the older cohorts. However, beginning in 2004 (the first election in which the oldest Millennials could vote), the age cohorts diverged markedly, with younger cohorts being significantly more Democratic in presidential elections than older cohorts.

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**Figure 1**

**The Increase in Partisan Polarization among Age Groups**

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

Since Millennials have reached adulthood, American politics has polarized significantly by age cohort. However, the divergence between older and younger cohorts began before the Millennials. As Figure 2 displays, before 1992, the 18-29 age cohort generally voted similarly in presidential elections to those aged 30 and older, with exceptions in the 1964 and 1972 landslide elections where they were notably more Democratic than their older counterparts. In some elections, the 18-29 age cohort was actually more Republican than older voters, as seen in Ronald Reagan’s victories in 1980 and 1984, as well as Richard Nixon’s initial win in 1968. Since 1992, however, there has been a steady age gap in presidential elections, which has increased considerably since Millennials entered the electorate.

**Figure 2**

**Younger Voters Compared to Rest of Electorate in Presidential Elections**

Figure represents plurality for Democratic presidential nominees.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

The age gap that emerged with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 is consistent with the idea of a generational effect that impacts the long-term politics of age cohorts. Today, there is a notable dividing point in political behavior based on the birth year 1973. There is a marked difference politically between those born before 1973 and those born in 1973 onwards. Using the 1973 dividing line produces politically distinct older and younger cohorts. Figure 3 shows that those born before 1973 have been considerably, and most importantly, consistently, more likely to support Republicans than those born in 1973 onwards. Since those born in 1973 onwards began reaching voting age in large numbers at the end of the 20th century, there has consistently been a pronounced age gap in American politics. Younger Americans have been the Democratic Party’s strongest supporters in both vote preferences and partisan identification, while older Americans have been the most reliably Republican.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Figure 3**

**Age Divisions in Presidential Elections by Birth Year 1973**

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

In 2024, the median age of a voter was 53 years old[[11]](#endnote-11), meaning that the 1973+ cohort is approaching becoming the majority of the electorate. In other words, we have currently reached a stage in American politics where approximately half of the voters in presidential elections were born before 1973 and half in 1973 onwards. The relative size parity of these politically disparate groups is a prime source of contemporary polarization in the United States.

Figures 1-3 indicate the possibilities of generational polarization research. Political polarization in the United States today is, to an underappreciated degree, a generational phenomenon. Generations are more than ascriptive groups; instead, they are composed of self-conscious members capable of acting as collective actors on the political stage. It is the contention of this book that generations have become defining points of cultural and political division and are thus catalysts of political polarization. An individual’s age cohort has emerged as a notable predictor of political polarization in contemporary American politics. On partisanship, ideology, and issues ranging from social policy to foreign policy, differences in generational viewpoints today are considerable.[[12]](#endnote-12) In short, generational disparities are a critical component of modern political polarization in the United States.

Regardless of how one defines the generational cohorts, there has unquestionably emerged significant generational polarization in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This generational polarization, however, can be sorted in numerous different ways that can potentially be critiqued as subjective. Though the popular generational typology is a useful tool for understanding political differences between contemporary age cohorts in the United States, there are potentially numerous other ways to classify age cohorts in a manner conducive to analyzing political generational divides. Yet, the traditional definition of the generations, I will demonstrate, has important utility for understanding contemporary political polarization.

***Partisan Polarization by Generation***

Generational differences heavily influence partisan polarization in the United States today. While younger Americans do not inherently display distinct partisan views than older Americans, their political preferences today are significantly different, contributing to increased polarization. In recent years, younger Americans have largely supported the Democratic Party in terms of voting and party affiliation, while older Americans have been more consistently aligned with the Republican Party.[[13]](#endnote-13)

This may seem obvious to many people, but it's not always the case. Despite the common belief that younger adults tend to be more Democratic, this isn't necessarily true. Generally, younger voters are more open to current partisan trends, while people become less open to partisan change as they get older.[[14]](#endnote-14) As a result, some generations lean more towards the Democratic Party while others lean more towards the Republican Party, based on the political climate during their formative political years. After this formative period, people's political affiliations tend to remain stable. The lasting nature of party identification and voting behavior is one of the main reasons why generational cohorts are seen as important.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Generational polarization is not inevitable. In the latter part of the twentieth century, there weren't significant political differences among the generations. Figure 4 shows the surprising lack of generational voting differences in presidential elections during the second half of the twentieth century. Except for 1972, when Richard Nixon performed considerably worse among younger voters than older voters, there were relatively few partisan differences among the generations in presidential voting until the Millennials became adults.

**Figure 4**

**Presidential Vote Choice by Generational Cohorts 1952-1996**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent:* 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

Leading up to the end of the twentieth century, the oldest Americans, also known as the Greatest Generation, tended to support the Democratic Party. The experiences of the Great Depression and World War II had a significant impact on shaping this generation's views, making them strong advocates for government involvement and supporters of the Democratic Party for many years. Even as they grew older, this generation continued to lean towards the Democratic Party. Before the Millennials, there wasn't a significant difference in voting patterns between the generations, and the youngest generation was not consistently inclined toward the Democratic Party.

**Figure 5**

**Presidential Vote Choice by Generational Cohorts 2000-2024**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X*: 1973-1980; *Millennial*: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

The generational dynamics in American politics, however, have undergone a significant shift in the twenty-first century. Today, there is an unprecedented partisan divide across generations (see Figure 5). Young Gen Xers, Millennials, and in their short span as voters Gen Z, have been much more supportive of Democratic presidential nominees than older generations. Since entering the electorate Millennials have consistently shown stronger support for the Democratic Party in presidential elections than any other generation, until they were surpassed by Gen Z in 2020. Figure 5 also neatly demonstrates the utility of dividing Generation X into younger and older cohorts. Younger Gen Xers have consistently more Democratic in presidential vote choice than Older Gen Xers, the only exception being 2008 when both younger and older Gen Xers strongly supported Barack Obama. There has consistently been a marked presidential preference difference between the pre-1973 and 1973+ cohorts even since the 1973+ has become old enough to vote.

The political behavior of Millennials has in particular been distinct. In 2004, when Millennials first voted in large numbers, they overwhelmingly supported John Kerry, making them his strongest supporters among all generations. However, this support for Kerry was largely due to their dissatisfaction with George W. Bush rather than a strong endorsement of Kerry himself.[[16]](#endnote-16) The dynamics changed in 2008 and 2012 when Barack Obama gained substantial popularity among Millennials from the start of his campaign in 2007. Obama won an impressive two-thirds of the Millennial vote in 2008 and continued to have strong support from younger voters by receiving over three-fifths of their vote in 2012. Obama’s popularity among Millennials played a crucial role in his victories in both 2008 and 2012. In 2008, the vote among those aged 30 and older was nearly evenly split, and without the Millennial vote in 2012, Obama would have lost his bid for re-election.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The Democratic Party solidified its standing with Millennials because of Trump's inability to appeal to them in 2016 and 2020, following Obama's successful appeal. Although Clinton performed worse among Millennials than Obama in 2016, she also lost ground with other generations compared to Obama. This resulted in a significant generational gap, with Clinton notably underperforming among Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation. Overall, her poor performance among older voters resulted in a large generational gap similar to that of 2008 and 2012, despite her relatively less impressive showing among younger Americans compared to Obama.

The 2020 presidential election highlighted the significant impact of generational differences in the electorate. Although Biden performed somewhat better among older voters compared to Clinton in 2016, the remarkable generational trend in the 2020 election was the strong support of younger voters for Biden. Gen Z showed the highest margin of support for any presidential nominee since 1952, surpassing the record set by Millennials for Obama in 2008. According to exit polls, without the votes from Gen Z, Biden would likely have lost key states such as Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia, resulting in Trump's reelection.[[18]](#endnote-18) Additionally, the substantial support from Gen Z in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Nevada was crucial for Biden to secure victory. It is ironic that Joe Biden, the oldest president, owed much of his success to the votes of the youngest American voters.

Young voters, however, never embraced President Biden the way they did Obama and throughout his presidency his approval ratings among younger Americans were consistently low. After his first 8 months in office, Buden’s approval ratings among those under thirty never got above 50% and reached as low as 24%.[[19]](#endnote-19) After Biden dropped out of the presidential race and Kamala Harris replaced him as the Democratic nominee in 2024 the Democrats regained some support from younger cohorts, but the drop off of the Democratic youth vote from 2020 was one of the major story lines of the 2024 presidential election.[[20]](#endnote-20) Though Harris received a much lower vote share of Millennials and Gen Zers than previous Democratic nominees her vote share for Young Gen Xers was in line with what previous Democratic presidential nominees received, and overall even though the Democrats lost ground among the 1973+ cohort young Americans once again proved to be notably more supportive of Democrats than the pre-1973 cohort.

**Figure 6**

**Relative Generational Partisanship by Presidential Election Cycle**

**after Entering the Electorate 1952-2024**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen* X: 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012. The X-axis denotes the presidential election cycle after the oldest of each generation reached 20 years old. First presidential election cycle for *Greatest* = 1936; *Silent* = 1952; *Baby Boomer* = 1968; *Older Gen X* = 1988; *Younger Gen X*  = 1996; *Millennial = 2004*; *Gen Z* = 2020.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

Figure 6, which compares the generations by presidential election cycle after entering the electorate, further emphasizes the degree to which Young Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Zers are partisan outliers. By comparing generational partisanship relative to the overall electorate, it is clear that 1973+cohort began their adult lives voting considerably more Democratic than previous generations. It is also obvious that generations do not necessarily become progressively more Republican as they grow older. On one hand, the Silent Generation started out Republican-leaning and, with a couple of exceptions (including the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater race), maintained its Republican tendencies. On the other hand, at the end of their lives the Greatest Generation completely contradicting the stereotype that people become more Republican as they age, became more supportive of Democratic presidential candidates than they had been previously.

Figure 6 reinforces the general lack of consistent partisan generational differences from 1952 to 2020, but there are a few noticeable exceptions, mostly regarding the 1973+ cohort. Generations which exhibited consistently strong partisanship for three or more presidential election cycles include the Greatest Generation from 1992-2000 (their 15th, 16th, and 17th presidential elections); 2) the Silent Generation from 2012-2020 (their 16th, 17th, and 18th presidential elections); 3) Younger Gen Xers from 1996 to 2024 (their first eight presidential elections); and 4) Millennials in 2004-2024 (their first six presidential elections). Combining the consistent support for Democrats of Younger Gen Xers and Millennials with Gen Zers now reaching adulthood and one can see just how different the 1973+ cohort has been politically than older generations. It is important to stress that the pre-1973 generations were generally not substantially more Democratic when first entering the electorate. In fact, Silents, Baby Boomers, and Older Gen Xers all started off relatively Republican. Interestingly, while the Greatest Generation and Silent Generation were both partisan outliers towards the end of their lives, as noted previously, their partisan preferences were opposite as the Greatest Generation strongly supported the Democratic nominee and the Silent Generation strongly supported the Republican nominee.

Figure 7, which displays the trendlines of partisan presidential vote preferences by generational cohort over time, reinforces the idea that each generation has its own unique partisan characteristics. Young Gen Xers and especially Millennials have started out strongly Democratic, and though the generations have moved towards the GOP, the generations are clearly loyal Democratic cohorts. Among generations older than Millennials, each entered the electorate at a unique spot, with some being more Democratic and others being more Republican. In terms of partisan change over time, two generations became somewhat more Democratic (the Greatest Generation and Baby Boom Generation) while four became more Republican (the Silent Generation, Older Gen X, Younger Gen X, and the Millennial Generation). Figure 7, therefore, also clearly reinforces that generational cohorts are not destined to become more Republican as they age.

**Figure 7**

**Generational Trendlines**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X:* 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

The findings presented here are consistent with other data that strongly support generational voting.[[21]](#endnote-21) Despite the stereotype that older Americans are predominantly Republican, it's worth noting that in the past, they haven't always been more Republican than younger people. Democratic candidates have often relied on the support of seniors who value programs like Social Security and Medicare. The shift of older Americans towards the Republican Party is mainly due to generational changes. As the heavily Democratic Greatest Generation passes away, the elderly population, now made up of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation, has become more aligned with the Republican Party. At the same time, younger voters entering the electorate in recent years tend to be more liberal and Democratic than older generations. This has led to an unprecedented level of generational polarization in American politics.

***Negative Partisanship by Generation***

The onset of negative partisanship happens early in life. Today, high levels of favoritism towards one's own group and distrust of other groups are already established before early adulthood. This is unlike the pattern in the 1970s and 1980s, when young children generally had positive feelings toward political leaders, and partisanship gradually became more prevalent in teenagers before reaching its peak in adulthood. It seems that polarized parents not only pass on their own partisanship to their children, but also their negativity towards their political opponents. As a result, the least-polarized young people are those who have not adopted their parents' political loyalty.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Early socialization research dating to the 1960s showed that children could have a partisan identity without expressing polarized evaluations of political leaders and institutions. Today, however, adolescents who identify as Republican or Democrat have become just as polarized as adults. The increased level of polarization among youth occurs not because partisans became more positive in their evaluations of their own party but primarily because their distrust of the opposing party increased dramatically. The onset of polarization in childhood is predicted by parental influence; adolescents who share their parents’ identity and whose parents are more polarized are apt to voice polarized views.[[23]](#endnote-23)

**Figure 8**

**Average Thermometer**

**Partisans of Own Party 1980-2024**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X:* 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Figures represent the average thermometer rating given on a scale from 1-100.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

By utilizing party thermometer ratings conducted by the ANES every presidential election year, we can deduce the generational dynamics of negative partisanship. The thermometer ratings ask respondents to place the Democratic and Republican parties on a scale of 1-100, with 1 denoting the most unfavorable score and 100 the most favorable score. Among partisans, there is clearly a generational divide on the favorability of one’s respective self-identified party. Figure 8 indicates that though generally partisans have favorable attitudes towards their own party, the generational differences are limited. In particular, there does not appear to be a pre-1973/1973+ divide among the generations regarding their own party. The most distinct generation is Millennials, which give their own party lower ratings than older generations, but this tendency is not found with other younger generations. While still alive, the Greatest Generation gave their own party considerably higher ratings than contemporary generations, indicating a bygone era of more favorable attitudes towards parties, and political in general.

For Democrats, older Democrats tend to give their own party higher scores than younger Democrats.[[24]](#endnote-24) During the two Obama elections of 2008 and 2012, the generational thermometer ratings of the Democratic Party by Democrats were relatively small but have notably widened since 2012. Today, Millennial and Gen Z Democrats give the Democratic Party lower marks than older generations. For self-identified Republicans, on the other hand, the situation is notably different. Republicans have generally not had as large of a generational difference in attitudes towards the GOP as Democrats, except for Trump’s first election in 2016. In 2016, Millennials Republicans gave their party noticeably lower thermometer ratings than older generations, but by 2020 this difference had largely dissipated. Consequently, Millennial Republicans have thus generally been more supportive of their own party than Millennial Democrats. The relatively low ratings Millennials give their own party, therefore, is driven by Millennial Democrats.

The key measure regarding negative partisanship and the resulting affective polarization is the thermometer rating of the opposing party. Here, we observe a dramatic shift among both Democrats and Republicans across all generations. The thermometer ratings of the Republican Party by Democrats and the ratings given to the Democratic Party by Republicans have plummeted across all generations (see Figure 9). There is little generational divide apparent for either party: the opposing party is widely disliked among all generations. Negative partisanship has thus markedly increased across all generations.

**Figure 9**

**Average Thermometer**

**Partisans of Opposing Party 1980-2024**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X:* 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Figures represent the average thermometer rating given on a scale from 1-100.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

It may be hard to believe today, but looking back to the 1980s, Democrats and Republicans of all generations tended to give the opposing party thermometer ratings averaging greater than 40 on a scale of 1-100. However, today, among partisans of all generations, the average score for the opposing party is around 20.

Overall, the party thermometer ratings reveal that partisans' views of their own parties, though they have fluctuated somewhat, have not markedly changed over the long term, regardless of generation. What has unquestionably changed is the perception of the opposing party among all generations. Consequently, there has been an increase in affective polarization among all generations.

Another historical measure that can be used to gauge the levels of negative partisanship among voters is split-ticket voting, where voters choose one party for Congress and another for the president. Relatively low levels of split-ticket voting suggest that voters see the opposing party as largely an unacceptable vote choice while higher levels indicate a higher level of tolerance for the opposing party. After spiking in the 1970s, split-ticket voting has steadily diminished, and Americans today are much more likely to vote a straight ticket, supporting the same party for Congress and the president, than they were a generation ago. Younger age cohorts have long been seen as more likely to split tickets because their partisan development was still fluid.[[25]](#endnote-25) Yet if this was once the case, it certainly is not now. As Figure 10 displays, younger generations are no more likely to split their tickets than older generations. In the twenty-first century, in fact, those most likely to vote straight ticket have been Millennials.

**Figure 10**

**Split-Ticket Voting by Generation 1980-2024**

*Greatest*: 1910-1927; *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X:* 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Figures indicate the percentage of split-ticket voting for the president and the House of Representatives. Third-party vote excluded.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

Americans, young and old alike, are increasingly likely to have a strong dislike of the opposing party and to see it has an unacceptable vote choice, even occasionally. The decline of split-ticket voting among all generations is thus yet another indication of generational political polarization. Older, Republican-leaning generations are increasingly unlikely to see the Democrats, even occasionally, as a viable vote choice option. Conversely, younger, Democratic-leaning generations are more and more reluctant to be willing to ever pull a level for a Republican at the ballot box.

***Demographic Influences on Generational Polarization***

There are potentially many factors than contribute to America’s current generational divide. One obvious difference between older and younger Americans is their racial and ethnic composition. The generational gap in present-day American politics is to an important degree shaped by race. The political views and policy preferences of younger Americans are strongly impacted by their racial and ethnic diversity.[[26]](#endnote-26) It's not surprising that younger generations tend to be more liberal and Democratic-leaning, given their increased diversity. The changes in American politics in the twenty-first century may also be a response to the diversity of younger Americans and the change it represents. However, the left-leaning inclinations of younger Americans are not solely a result of their diversity. Among non-Whites, there's minimal difference between generations, as most non-Whites, regardless of age, lean liberal and strongly favor the Democrats, especially African Americans. However, among Whites, there's a notable generational gap in partisan preferences.

In recent presidential elections, White Millennials and Gen Zers have consistently shown a strong tendency to support Democratic nominees, in contrast to older generations of White voters (see Figure 11). This trend was evident in the 2020 election, as White Gen Zers overwhelmingly favored Biden over Trump. Conversely, White voters from the Silent Generation have increasingly leaned towards the Republican Party since 2008. Notably, there was a significant gap in support for Trump between White Gen Zers and the Silent Generation in the 2020 election, with the Silent Generation showing over 40 percentage points higher support for Trump compared to White Gen Zers.

**Figure 11**

**Generational Polarization in Presidential Voting Among Whites 2000-2024**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928-1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946-1964; *Older Gen X:* 1965-1972; *Younger Gen X*: 1973-1980; Millennial: 1981-1996; *Gen Z:* 1997-2012.

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

The Democratic preferences of younger generations, therefore, are not solely a result of younger Americans’ diversity; they are also due to the tendency of younger Whites to have notably different political attitudes than Whites of older generations. Consequently, the political differences between Whites and non-Whites are much more pronounced for older Americans than for younger Americans.

The generational differences in racial and ethnic composition in the U.S. today suggests that it is possible that it could be demographic characteristics other than generational cohort are the actual catalyst for Americans diverging political attitudes. Since there is such a strong relationship between generation and other demographic characteristics, it is possible that generational polarization is simply a result of other demographic divisions in American politics. To test for this possibility, a multivariate analysis was conducted utilizing ANES data to demonstrate the degree to which generation stands alone as a demographic predictor. Table 1 contains the results of a binary logic regression model predicting the likelihood of two-party presidential vote for Donald Trump in 2020, with the model including the 1973 generational cohort divide as an independent variable as well as the demographic variables of race, gender, religiosity, and education.

**Table 1**

**Demographic Gaps and Vote for Donald Trump in 2020**

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B (S.E) Wald

White 1.529 (.058)\*\*\* 693.401

Female -.336 (.049)\*\*\* 46.134

Religiosity .907 (.072)\*\*\* 158.403

College -.417 (.052)\*\*\* 64.404

1973+ -.200 (.050)\*\*\* 15.810

Constant 1.395 (.084)\*\*\* 277.328

Nagelkerke R2  .174

Cases Predicted Correctly 66.1%

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Binary logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

Significance levels: \*\*\**p* < .001; \**p* < .05

Dependent Variables: 1) Presidential Vote = Respondent’s Presidential Vote in 2020 (1 = Vote for Trump). Independent Variables: 1) White = Respondent’s Race (1 = White); 2) Female = Respondent’s Gender (1 = Female); 3) Religiosity = Respondent’s Religious Services Attendance Frequency (1 = Weekly or More); 4) College = Respondent’s Education Level (1 = College Degree); 5) Respondent’s Birth Year (1= Born 1973 and afterward).

Source: American National Election Studies. Time Series Cumulative Data File from 1948-2020 and the Preliminary Release of the 2024 Pre-Election Data File.

There are several reasons why we may expect these non-generational variables would be associated with political polarization. Race is a pervasive influence in American politics that serves to function as an important social identity.[[27]](#endnote-27) Education rather than income has emerged as a strong indicator of political views, especially in the Trump Era.[[28]](#endnote-28) The national gender gap that emerged as the Greatest Generation began to die off in the 1980s has also been an important attribute of contemporary American politics.[[29]](#endnote-29) Similarly, how religious one is has become a much more prominent influence on political values as American adults since the 1970s have expressed significantly less attachment to organized religion than did the cohorts they replaced.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Whether one was born before 1973 or 1973 and afterwards, the model indicates, is a strong predictor of 2020 presidential vote. Controlling for other demographic factors, the 1973 generational divide was a statistically significant independent at p < .001. Consequently, the multivariate analysis demonstrates that the 1973 generational divide was a robust predictor of 2020 presidential vote on its own. The multivariate analysis thus underscores that generational cohort proves to be a robust predictor of partisanship in the 2020 presidential election. In terms of size effects of the independent variables, race, religiosity, and education displayed the larger size effects, yet all the independent variables, including generational cohorts, displayed relatively robust size effects. Overall, the model predicted 66.1% of the cases correctly, indicating just how strong demographic factors—including the 1973+ generational cohort—were in predicting the dependent variables.

***Generational Replacement and the Future of Partisan Polarization***

Generational replacement occurs when new, mainly young, citizens enter the eligible electorate and older, mainly older, voters die off. Generational replacement suggests the possibility of mass political change. When newer cohorts with distinctive political preferences enter the electorate and replace older cohorts, aggregate partisan change occurs, even as individuals maintain their initial party identification throughout their political life cycle.[[31]](#endnote-31) Generational replacement is all-inclusive: every aspect of society and every individual within that society is affected by it. It is therefore one of the most essential issues a nation faces, as over time it involves placing its future into the hands of an entirely new population. At the heart of this process is the handover of a society’s collective values, beliefs, and norms.[[32]](#endnote-32) Yet, despite the magnitude of the immense possibility of changes due to generational replacement, generationally inspired political and social changes are the exception more than the rule.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The possibilities for generational change can be demonstrated by the growing partisan polarization in the American public over the past 50 years. The growing partisan polarization in the United States has been driven by generational replacement as new entrants demonstrate greater party-issue consistency than those they replace in the electorate.[[34]](#endnote-34) A noteworthy example of this can be seen in the South in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1952, 82% of White Southerners born before 1900 were Democrats, and this cohort of adults constituted 34% of all native Southern Whites. Forty years later, this cohort had mostly died off. The age cohorts that entered the electorate after 1900 diluted the Democratic composition of the southern White population. Before 1964, three-fourths of native Southern White respondents aged 21-24 described themselves as Democrats. By the end of the 1970s, however, just 27% of White Southerners called themselves Democrats as older, ardently Democratic generations were replaced by younger Southerners, who were much less likely to identify themselves as Democrats.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Generational replacement can thus be a major driver of electoral change when those who enter the electorate vote differently than those they replace. A critical component of contemporary generational replacement in the electorate can be found by differentiating between those born before 1973 and those born since 1973. As has been demonstrated throughout this book, the pre-1973 and 1973+ cohorts have immense political differences that suggest a changing of the guard of older Americans by younger Americans has underestimated political consequences. Older Americans tend to come from White, Christian, and conservative generations, that are being replaced in the electorate by much more diverse, less religious, and liberal generations.

The stark differences between the pre-1973 generational cohort and the 1973+ generational cohort suggest that generational replacement could have a profound impact on American politics in the coming decades. Younger generations have fundamentally different political preferences than older generations, and as those born 1973+ become larger shares of the electorate, the United States is destined to change not just demographically, but also politically. In terms of political polarization, this has potentially important implications.

The generations of Americans born since 1973 are nearing the stage of their lives where they are destined to be a dominant force in American politics. It has been suggested that younger Americans are less politically engaged than older generations due to a continuation of the decline in civic engagement among citizens who have come of age in the decades after World War II.[[36]](#endnote-36) There are concerns that if this declining trend in civic engagement among younger citizens continues, it could lead to a deeper "Democracy Deficit."[[37]](#endnote-37) Younger Gen Xers, Millennials and Gen Zers, however, are no less engaged than past generations. Rates of participation among younger generations in contacting public officials and discussing politics with friends and family, for example, are nearly equal to that of older adults.[[38]](#endnote-38) There is also no statistically significant variation among the generations when asked “Do you feel like you are engaged in the political system or politics?”[[39]](#endnote-39) Both enthusiasm and civic duty matter in the sense that high levels of civic duty can substitute for a lack of enthusiasm, and high levels of enthusiasm can substitute for a lack of a sense of civic duty.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Voter turnout trends among younger Americans also indicate that concerns about their lack of political participation are overblown. Contrary to the belief that Millennials and Gen Zers will be less likely to vote as they age, both generations have registered and voted at rates slightly better than those of prior generations.[[41]](#endnote-41) In its brief electoral history, Gen Z has particularly had impressive voter turnout rates.[[42]](#endnote-42) Gen Z voter turnout was around 40 percent in the 2024 presidential election, and this figure was closer to 50 percent on aggregate in battleground states, rates that were high by historical standards.[[43]](#endnote-43) Moreover, young non-White voters have shown higher turnout rates than their White counterparts, suggesting they have considerable potential for increased turnout in the future.[[44]](#endnote-44) Given the demographic size of these generations, particularly Millennials, they are expected to become a powerful political force as they age.

**Figure 12**

**Eligible Voters by 1973 Birth Year Demarcation**

Generations are defined by the following birth years: *Silent*: 1928 through 1945; *Baby Boomer:* 1946 through 1964; *Gen X:* 1965 through 1980; *Millennial: 1981-1996; Gen Z* adults born after 1996.

Source: Author analysis of “Census Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement, 1972-2024”

The future, therefore, might be here more quickly than people realize: a majority of eligible voters have been born since 1973. Figure 12 demonstrates the impending political strength of Younger Gen Xers, Millennials and Gen Zers. When George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000, there were almost five times as many eligible voters born before 1973 than 1973+. By 2020, there were approximately as many eligible voters born before 1973 as those born 1973+. Today, with more than 130 million eligible voters, the 1973+ cohort is for the first time a larger proportion of the potential electorate than those born before 1973. An important political generational change is thus currently imminent. The future is indeed now.

Given the marked political differences of the pre-1973 and 1973+ generational cohorts, there is the potential for enormous change in the partisan and ideological makeup of the electorate. As more liberal Younger Gen Xers, Millennials, and Generation Z vote in increasing numbers and replace Older Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation in the electorate, the American polity will unquestionably undergo significant changes.

Generational differences will thus reshape the United States. As Younger Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Zers flex their electoral muscles, these generations have the potential to alter the course of American politics. From a partisan perspective, the emergence of younger generations as electoral forces means that generational replacement is unquestionably working to the advantage of the Democrats. An important question to ask is what will be the impact on political polarization?

The Republican Party's unpopularity among Millennials, Gen Zers, and Younger Gen Xers has resulted in the emergence of a new cohort of overwhelmingly Democratic voters. For Millennials in particular their disaffection with the Republican Party has become a defining characteristic of the generation.[[45]](#endnote-45) Conversely, Baby Boomers. the Silent Generation, and Older Gen Xers have become significantly more Republican than younger generations.

The current generational division in partisan politics is unprecedented. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, there was surprisingly little disparity in partisan preferences among different generational cohorts. This absence of an age-based divide in American partisan leanings led political science to focus more on other demographic gaps in American politics, rather than generational differences. However, with the entry of the Millennial Generation into the electorate at the turn of the century, a substantial generational gap in American politics has emerged. As newer cohorts with distinct political preferences replace older ones, aggregate partisan change occurs, even as individuals generally maintain their initial party identification throughout their political lives.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The critical question for the future is whether this generational partisan divide is a temporary phenomenon or indicative of a long-term redefinition of American politics. If younger generations maintain their Democratic leanings as they age, the political landscape could shift significantly. Conversely, if these preferences change with age, the generational divide might narrow over time. Understanding these trends and their potential impact is essential for anticipating the future dynamics of American politics.

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