



THE NEW GENERATION GAP

What divides Americans most isn't race, gender, geography or ideology. It is the year we were born

By Michael Crowley/Boca Raton

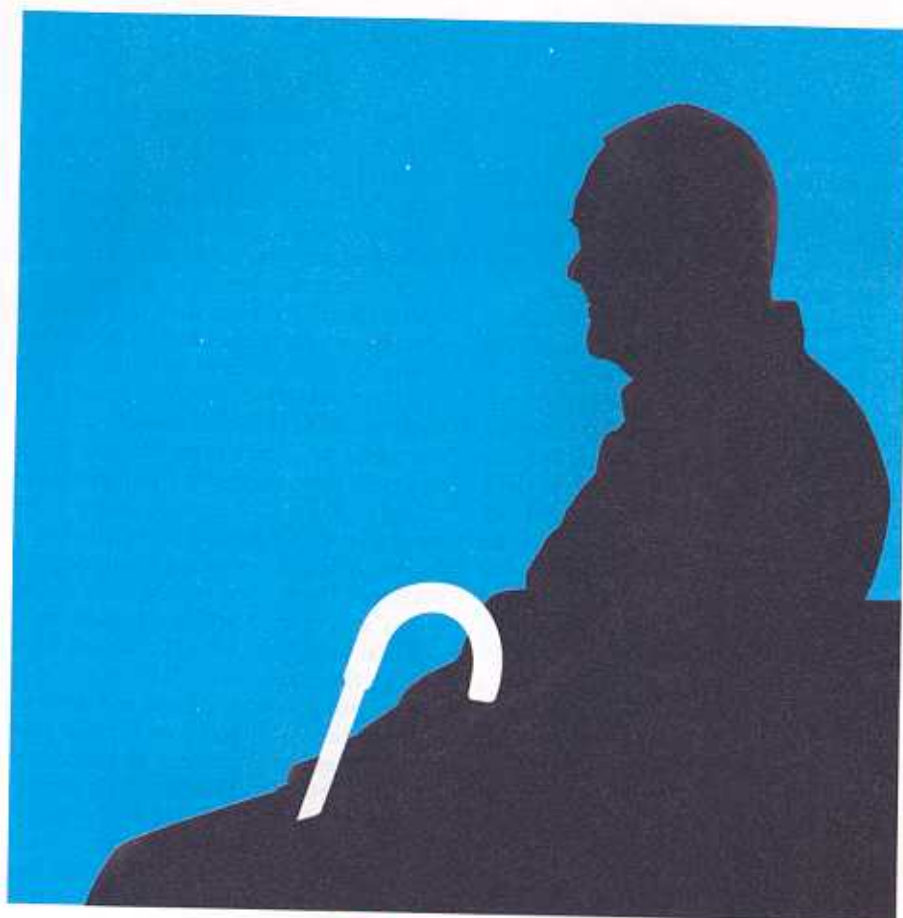


The Millennial Generation
Current age: 18-30

ALEXANDRA SERNA CAST THE FIRST presidential vote of her life in 2008, for Barack Obama, with enthusiasm and hope. Three years later, the 24-year-old, earning a degree in accounting at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), still supports the President. But her optimism has faded. "I think he's trying really hard," Serna says in a study room on the school's Boca Raton campus. Yet she's anxious about finding work after she gets her degree, and when asked whether she's politically engaged nowadays, she replies, "Personally, I'm not." While Serna isn't about to vote Republican in 2012, she hardly seems a sure bet to turn out for Obama.

Eating lunch in the food court of a sleepy shopping center 10 miles from the FAU campus, 78-year-old Walter Levy has few kind words for the President. The Navy veteran, who voted for John McCain in 2008, grouches about the state of the country and its government. "We're going backward right now," says the Fort Lauderdale resident. "The government's gotten itself too involved in everybody's life." His wife Concetta, 77, is more blunt. "I don't like the President's policies," she says. "I don't like Solyndra." The Levys are primed to vote Republican next year.

Listen to these three closely and you can hear the two Americas speaking. For the past several years, our political conversation has focused on great divides in our national life: red and blue, the coasts vs. the heartland, the 1% vs. the 99%. But the deepest split is the one that cuts across all these and turns not on income or geography but on age. In the past few national elections, young and old Americans have diverged more in their voting than at any other time since the end of the Vietnam War, according to the findings of an extensive new Pew Research Center poll. The survey reveals that the youngest and oldest voters have strikingly different views on everything from the role of government to the impact of the Internet and suggests that the 2012 election could be one of the starkest intergenerational showdowns in American history, not just in Florida but coast to coast. Different generations rarely vote in lockstep; each is shaped by different formative influences. But this is something unusual. "We've got the largest generation gap in voting since 1972," says Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center. "Since 2004 we've seen younger people voting much more Democratic than average and



The Silent Generation
Current age: 66-83

older people much more Republican than average. And that may well play out again in 2012." Indeed, Pew's *Generational Politics* poll shows a yawning generation gap in a hypothetical matchup between Obama and Republican Mitt Romney. Voters 30 or younger favor Obama 61% to 37%. Seniors over 65 choose Romney 54% to 41%. With Americans born from 1946 to 1980 (baby boomers and Gen Xers) almost evenly divided, the youngest and oldest voters stand in even starker contrast.

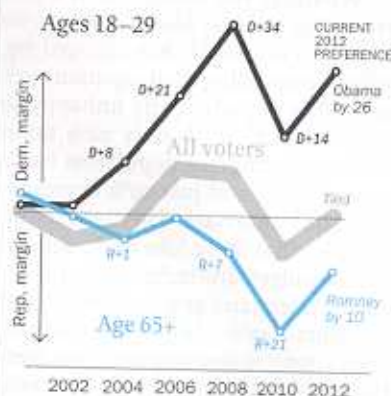
iPhones vs. IRAs

ON ONE SIDE ARE THE MILLENNIAL VOTERS, meaning Americans born after 1980 who have come of age during the Clinton, Bush or Obama presidencies. Having lived through a period of dramatic social and demographic change, these voters harbor strongly liberal-leaning views about society and government. That's partly because the U.S.'s youngest voters represent change: about 40% of them are nonwhite. As a group they lean left on social issues—strongly supporting interracial and same-sex marriages by wide majorities. They believe government has a positive role to play even in seniors' lives. Millennial voters, like so many

other Americans, consider themselves economically dissatisfied. And yet they believe, 46% to 27%, that life in the U.S. has improved since the 1960s, in part thanks to the technology revolution they have inherited. "I have an iPhone, and I would die without it," says FAU freshman Lizzie Barnes.

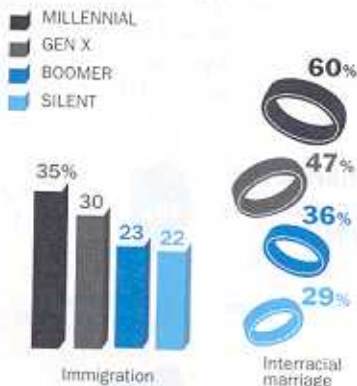
Whiter, less plugged in and feeling much grumpier is the Silent Generation, Americans over 65 who reached adulthood between World War II and the Vietnam War. The Silent Generation was profiled in a November 1951 *TIME* cover story that described its members as hardworking but docile and detached from political protest. Now in their 60s and 70s, members of this generation are restive, as likely to believe that the country has gone downhill as millennials are to think it has improved. They're more conservative than the so-called Greatest Generation seniors, who are older, remember the New Deal, may have served in World War II and are steadily passing away. "Part of what's going on is generational change," says Andrea Louise Campbell, an MIT professor who studies the senior vote. "Seniors who may have been socialized with memories of FDR and the Depression are being replaced by younger cohorts of seniors for

The Young and Old See the 2012 Vote Differently



Older Americans Are Less Enthusiastic About Growing Diversity

% saying each is a change for the better



Which Issue Matters Most In Deciding Your Vote





whom Eisenhower and Reagan are more relevant political figures."

Whatever the reason, today's seniors are nearly twice as likely as young voters to say life in the U.S. has changed for the worse, expressing that opinion 50% to 31%. They're particularly unhappy about social change, with only 22% saying a growing immigrant population has been a good thing and just 29% approving of interracial marriage. They're wary of the America that Steve Jobs built, dominated by new gadgets and technologies that many don't understand or use. Fewer than half of Silents—45%—believe the Internet has been a positive development. "You don't see the kids' faces anymore," says Sue Leese, 77, sitting outside a Bagel Works restaurant in Boca Raton. "They're constantly texting!"

Silent Generation members are twice as likely as millennials to call themselves "angry" with the government, and they trust Republicans more than Democrats on nearly every key issue. Obama appears to be a contributing factor in their discontent; they are the most disapproving of the job he's doing. How much of this disdain is a function of Obama's policies and how much is a comment on his background is anyone's guess. But some combination of the change he has

championed and the change he actually represents is too much for some of these voters to accept. "There is this sense that comes out of the poll that Obama represents the changing face of America that some older people are uncomfortable with," says Kohut.

Many seniors resent any implication that race or ethnic background is driving their political preferences. "When I voice my opinion, I don't like being called a racist," Concetta Levy says. It is true, however, that white voters of all ages are more likely to strongly disapprove of the President. But strong disapproval of Obama and "unease" about him are dramatically higher among white voters over 65 than among millennial whites.

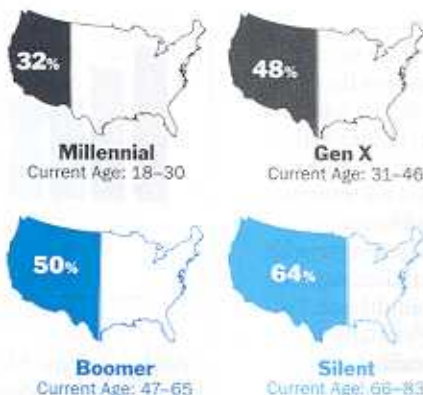
Apathy and Entitlements

AND YET FOR BOTH PARTIES, THERE'S A cautionary wobble in the simple notion of two generations colliding as the 2012 elections approach. The millennials and the Silents alike have deep qualms about their probable choices at the polls next year. That's especially true for the 30-and-under crowd. Although a massive turnout of voters like FAU student Serna helped carry Obama to the White House in 2008, young voters' approval of his job performance has

plummeted. So has their interest in the political process. Four years ago, 28% of voters age 30 or younger said they had given a lot of thought to the presidential candidates. Today that number is down to a paltry 13%. Young voters also say they care less about who is elected President than they did four years ago, when the presidential race meant nearly as much to them as it did to their grandparents. Only 69% of millennials now say they care "a good deal" about who wins the presidency, down from 81% four years ago. Such views suggest that many of those young 2008 Obama voters may be tuned out for good and that Democrats will do battle in 2012 without their most energetic foot soldiers. "They're not feeling loyal to the party," says Molly Andolina, a professor of political science at DePaul University who studies the youth vote. "Whether or not they're going to get out there and work in the trenches and show up on Election Day is a big question." Andolina also wonders whether the Occupy Wall Street movement could become a substitute outlet beyond the political system for the energy of frustrated young people. It's no wonder Obama has reached out to a younger audience of late through gestures like his new plan to relieve the crushing burden of student loan

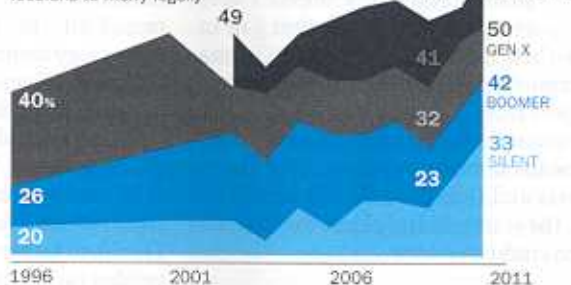
America the Exceptional, Or Not?

% saying the U.S. is "the greatest country in the world"



Same-Sex Marriage Divides The Generations

% who favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally

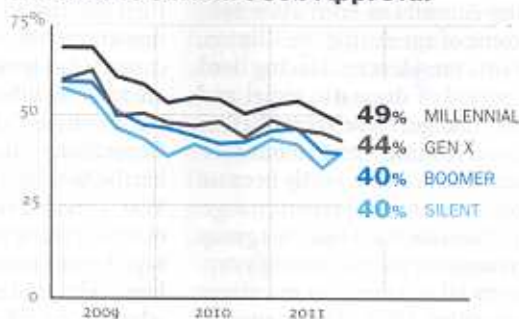


Silents Not Wild About the Web

% saying the invention of the Internet has been ...



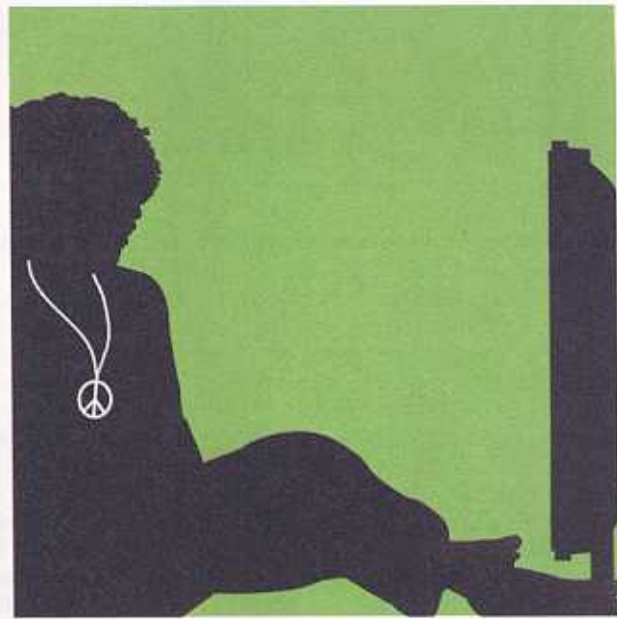
President Obama's Job Approval



Source: Pew Research Center telephone surveys of 2,003 Americans 18 or older, conducted Sept. 1-15, and of 2,410 Americans 18 or older, conducted Sept. 22-Oct. 4. Because numbers have been rounded, some may not add up to 100%.



Generation X
Current age: 31-46



The Boomer Generation
Current age: 47-65

debt and a series of Obama Student Summits kicking off this month.

Silent Generation voters, by contrast, appear, well, fired up and ready to go in 2012. They're more than three times as likely as young voters to be closely following the presidential candidates, and 84% say they care a good deal about who wins the next election. That makes them even more focused on this election than the millennials were in 2008. And they have already aced the dress rehearsal: young voters turned out in lower numbers in the 2010 elections, while the senior vote spiked in the midterms.

However, even as Silent Generation voters tilt heavily toward Republicans, they are hardly GOP loyalists. While they register a 39%-to-56% favorable-to-unfavorable opinion of Democrats, they dislike the Republican Party by a virtually identical ratio. The difference is that Silent Generation voters say they trust Republicans more to handle major issues like the economy, health care and immigration—with one exception: voters over 65 said they trusted Democrats to better handle Social Security. "That could undermine the Republican advantage" with seniors, says Kohut. That's all the more likely given that Silent voters care more about Social Security than any issue other than jobs.

Bracing for "Scare Tactics"

WHICH MEANS YOU CAN COUNT ON HEARING Obama and the Democrats talking nonstop over the next year about how

Republicans plan to slash entitlement programs, including Medicare and Social Security. Most Republicans counter that seniors don't have anything to worry about. Any such cuts, they say, like those in the budget blueprint of Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan, wouldn't touch benefits for voters currently 55 or older. "Republicans should expect the scare tactics that Democrats always go to," says Republican pollster Whit Ayres. Veteran consultants from both parties agree that a fierce Democratic message about entitlements helped the party win a longtime Republican seat in a May special election in New York State, where Democrats relentlessly attacked the GOP candidate, charging that she would rather slash Medicare and Social Security than raise taxes on the rich. Says MIT's Campbell: "Romney, I believe, is aware of this, and that's why I believe he's been careful to stick to a very moderate course on entitlement reform." Think of how the former Massachusetts governor pounced like a lion on his rival, Texas Governor Rick Perry, for calling Social Security a "Ponzi scheme."

For all the differences in their worldviews, the generations are not in direct conflict, the Pew poll found, a mildly heartening conclusion in a country divided in many other ways. They disagree, but they don't view each other as the enemy: millennials are about as concerned as Silents (57% and 59%, respectively) that there may not be enough money in

the future to maintain Social Security and Medicare benefits at their current levels, which is a source of greater anxiety among the middle-aged Generation X and baby boomers (70% and 71%). Nearly every age group, including Silents, is concerned that sustaining those benefits might place too great a financial burden on younger generations, but the youngest Americans, who might have the most to fear from entitlement cuts, express slightly less concern than any other age group. If anything, the concern goes the other way: seniors seem ready to accept modifications in entitlements if it helps the next in line. In other words, young people don't want to pull the plug on Grandma to ease their student-loan repayments, while Silents don't reject the idea of means testing to spare their grandchildren a crushing debt burden. "I feel sorry for the young people," says Len Kaufman, 82, of Boca Raton. "We had a good run."

Things could still get tense. Although Washington has spent months deferring hard choices about the country's fiscal future, it may not be long before new austerity plans pit the generations in a clearer zero-sum game. For now, however, the young and old aren't competing. They are simply advocating two very different visions of what's good for, and about, the U.S. as a whole. And Obama's re-election may depend on which side speaks loudest next November. —WITH REPORTING BY HECTOR FLORIN/BOCA RATON ■