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Race, Aging, and Politics: America’s Cultural Generation Gap

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The surprising-to-many 2016 election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency was the result of a variety of factors: economic uncertainty, working class discontent, and just the quest for change, to name a few. But it was also a consequence of powerful, ongoing demographic forces that will continue to roil the nation’s politics and society at large. They contribute to what I have called America’s cultural generation gap (Frey, 2015).

This is a gap which pits the interests of the nation’s growing, largely White, older population, including baby boomers and their elders, with those of its increasingly racially diverse younger generations. Highlighting these opposing interests, Trump’s greatest support came from the former, while the greatest gains for his opponent, Hillary Clinton, came from the latter. Yet the nation’s demographic dynamics moving forward dictate an urgent need to bridge these differences across generations, among politicians, and within the public at large.

Old Versus Young

On one side of this generation gap is a general resistance on the part of many older White citizens to change, especially that associated with globalization and the nation’s changing demography. On the other side is a much more open and tolerant attitude on the part of the young. This division is rooted, in part, in distinctively different racial backgrounds and experiences. Today, Whites comprise more than 75% of baby boomers and their seniors, with Blacks as the largest racial minority. This contrasts with...
both millennial adults, who are 44% White, and children, who are nearly half racial minorities and one-quarter first- or second-generation Americans. In both of these groups, Hispanics make up the largest minority, comprising about one quarter of children under age 18 (see Figure 1).

The distinctions between old and young on their views regarding the nation's demographic change took place well before Trump ran for office. A 2011 Pew Research Center study showed that just 23% of baby boomers and seniors saw the nation's growing population of immigrants as a change for the better, compared with 42% who saw it as a change for the worse. Greater than one half of White baby boomers and seniors thought that the growing number of newcomers from other countries posed a threat to traditional U.S. values and customs (Pew Research Center, 2011).

A number of questions on the Pew survey contrast baby boomers with millennials on whether the following social changes are for the better: (1) more interracial marriages (36 vs. 60%, respectively); (2) a growing population of Hispanics (21 vs. 33%); and (3) a growing population of Asians (24 vs. 43%). More broadly, a 2015 Public Religion Research Institute Survey raised the question of whether, since the 1950s, American culture and way of life has changed for the better. Among millennials, 55% agreed, but among White baby boomers and seniors only 39% did (Public Religion Research Institute, 2015).

Not only are older Americans more resistant to immigration and demographic change, they also are less likely to favor big government spending. The Pew survey found that, given a choice between a larger government that offers more services and a smaller government that offers fewer, only four in ten White baby boomers favored the larger government compared with seven in ten millennial minorities.

One may wonder why today's White baby boomers are so fearful of demographic change and large government programs. After all, this is a generation that grew up during the rebellious 1960s, with many of their numbers on the front lines of the civil rights and women's movements. With the assistance of Great Society programs, they were the most well-educated generation at that time and became a large part of the nation's middle class.

However, baby boomers also grew up during a period when the nation was more isolated than it had been for much of its history. Raised in segregated, mostly White suburbs, White baby boomers had less experience with immigrants and foreign wars than their parents. In fact, between the baby boom birth years of 1946 and 1964, the immigrant share of the nation's population reached an all-time low (under 5% compared with 13.5% today) and most immigrants then were White Europeans. Moreover, compared with young people today, baby boomers themselves were far less likely to speak a foreign language or interact with persons of Hispanic or Asian origin.

White baby boomers' reticence to support government programs, particularly those impacting young people, is also grounded in the fact that the White population is older (at median age 43.4) than the nation as a whole (at 37.9) and especially the youthful Hispanic population (at 29) and other minority groups. This means that child dependents are less of a concern for Whites than other minorities.

Because of the rapid aging of the White population, this will continue to be the case. Thus, race-demographic disparities between the young and the old can exacerbate the competition for public resources—federal, state, and local—because the rise in the number of senior dependents is occurring more rapidly among Whites than among Hispanics and other minorities, for whom dependent children are a larger issue. Moreover, older Whites may be less interested in paying taxes for programs such as education, health care, and family supports that benefit members of a younger generation when those beneficiaries are not their own children and grandchildren.

The 2016 Election

In light of this cultural generation gap, it is not surprising that Donald Trump's campaign to "Make America Great Again" appealed especially to older White voters, who feel disconnected from a changing America and a rapidly diversifying younger population. While many of these voters were drawn to Trump's promise of creating a better economy, his messages were also directed to nostalgia, as well as fears of growing immigrant populations, political correctness, and other aspects of America's emerging demographic changes.

The 2016 election's exit polls showed that such messages resonated with this base. Among those that favored building a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border to keep out immigrants, 85% were Trump's mostly-older White voters compared, with 10% who were Clinton voters. Among those favoring the deportation of illegal immigrant workers, 83% were Trump voters compared with 14% who were Clinton voters (CNN, 2016).

In contrast, younger generations, especially the millennials, were less susceptible to these messages given their racial tolerance, liberal tendencies, openness to bigger government, and past inclinations to vote Democrat. Moreover, they were the most diverse of all 2016 voters. Racial minorities comprised 37% of voters aged 18-29.
and 31% of those aged 30–44. In contrast, Whites comprised 75% of voters aged 45–64 and 82% of those aged 65 and above.

The nationwide voting margins (percent votes for Trump minus percent votes for Clinton) are shown in Figure 2. As in all presidential elections since 1968, Whites voted overwhelmingly for the Republican candidate (Trump). Minorities voted for Democrat Clinton (Blacks have voted Democratic in every election since 1936; Hispanics and Asians voted Democratic in recent decades). Noteworthy, in light of the cultural generation gap, are voting patterns by age and race.

It is clear that the two oldest age groups, representing large portions of the voter population, showed a preference for Trump, while the two youngest age groups showed a preference for Clinton. Importantly, Whites in all age groups voted for Trump and minorities in all age groups voted strongly for Clinton. The fact that older age groups are “Whiter” than younger age groups had a strong impact on those age groups and the overall result. Among younger age groups where minorities comprise larger shares of voters, minority preferences for Clinton overcame the Trump preferences for Whites.

This age-race split is not unique to the 2016 race, as it also occurred in the 2008 and 2012 elections. Democrat Barack Obama’s victories in both of those elections rested with wins among the youngest two age groups and racial minorities, despite losing older voters and Whites. Yet, there is a delicate balance. In 2012, Obama won a net of 8.6 million votes among voters under age 45 and lost a net of 3.6 million votes among those over age 45, for an overall net gain of 5 million votes. Trump, who lost the national popular vote in 2016, won a net of 5.8 million votes among voters over age 45 and lost a net of 8.7 million voters among those under age 45, for an overall net loss of 2.9 million votes. Of course, Trump won the presidency in the Electoral College, which is discussed below. But it is clear that the cultural generation gap played a role in the last three presidential elections, due to the precarious balance between primarily White voters in the older generation and largely minority voter in the younger generations. Trump, especially, played strongly to the former group.

Is Demography Destiny?

The demographic seesaw between the young and old in recent elections has been swayed by the nation’s changing demographics. If past political proclivities continue into the future, with racial minorities voting Democratic and Whites voting Republican, then demographic forces would seem to favor Democrats. In fact, the Census Bureau’s most recent projections show that the U.S. population will become minority White in 2044 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Yet, as shown above, racial diversity begins to rise from “the bottom up” of the age distribution, as the White population ages and as younger minorities contribute more to births and immigrant waves. Already there is an absolute decline of White youth under age 18, as more Whites age
Figure 3. Projected eligible voters by race and age, 2016 and 2028. Note: Author's calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau Projections. Source: Current Population Survey, November 2016 Supplement.

into adulthood than become born or immigrate. By 2026, the entire White population is projected to decline. In fact, the only part of the White population that is projected to grow noticeably in the immediate future is the over age 65 population, as the baby boom's "pig in the python" advances into those years. Meanwhile, the younger population will become increasingly diverse.

Because of this youth-driven diversity, and the fact that many Hispanics and Asians are both too young to vote or are noncitizens, the voting population was, and for some time will continue to be, less racially diverse than the population at large. This is compounded by the lower turnout rates of eligible voters among minorities than Whites. In November 2016, Whites comprised 61% of the total population, but 73.3% of all voters. In contrast, Hispanics made up 18% of the total population but just 9.3% of voters. White overrepresentation among voters has been rising in recent decades and has likely peaked, but it will still exist in several election cycles to come (Griffin, Frey, & Teixeira, 2017).

Furthermore, the staying power of older Whites will serve to counter the increasing gains among younger minorities. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which depicts eligible voters in 2016 and projected eligible voters for 2028 across different age groups. It is evident that younger age groups will become more racially diverse as the millennial generation enters middle age and is followed by its more diverse successor cohort. By 2028, racial minorities will comprise 41% of 30- to 44-year-olds and over half of those under age 30. They represent voting blocs which could continue to supply Democrats with strong support.

Over the same period, the two mostly-White, older eligible voter groups, that have been voting Republican in prior elections, continue to be formidable blocs. Between 2016 and 2028, the ages 45- to 64-year-old eligible voter population loses some of its baby boomers to a sharply rising senior population aged 65 and above. The senior eligible voters increase by 11 million over this period, while the under age 30 population rises by just 2 million. In 2028, the largely White eligible voter population aged 45 and above will be 29% larger than their heavily minority under-age 45 counterparts. Thus, the precarious political balance, across the race and age divide, could very well continue.

Our discussion up until now has focused on the national popular vote in 2016, which mirrored those in both 2008 and 2012 with respect to race- and age-related Democratic and Republican preferences. Yet, 2016 differed in the outcome due to the Electoral College, which brought the win to the Republican, Donald Trump. An important part of this win has to do with the changing demography in different regions of the country, which favored Democrat Barack Obama in the two previous elections.

In both 2008 and 2012, Obama benefitted from the growth of racial minorities into parts of previously-Republican leaning South and Mountain West states. This involved the expansion of Hispanics and Asians to these states, as well continued flows of Blacks to fast-growing southern states. Largely due to minority votes, Obama won key swing states, including Florida, Virginia, Colorado, and Nevada in both elections and North Carolina in 2008. He also won long-standing Democratic-leaning industrial and "Whiter" northern states, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

What changed with 2016 was Trump's appeal to voters in the latter states, evidenced by higher voter turnout and Republican voting preferences by Whites, and especially by older, blue-collar Whites. At the same time, Obama's previously-strong support among these states' small minority populations, and particularly blacks, fell back (Frey, 2017; Griffin, Teixeira, & Halpin, 2017). In addition, the newfound gains that Obama made in southern states and in the swing states of Florida and North Carolina were lost for Clinton in her match against Trump.

Thus, the 2016 election, in the aftermath of the previous two, portends a geographic cultural generation gap that
could divide different sets of swing states. Key voting blocs in older, White, northern states that previously trended Democratic could become more susceptible to Republican messages that appeal to their interests. And faster-growing Sun Belt states, where minorities make up increasing shares of voters, could trend more Democratic, including potentially Arizona, Georgia, and Colorado.

**Generational Co-Dependency**

The sharp divisions in voting patterns between older Whites and younger minorities that flared up in the 2016 presidential election represent an underlying cultural divide that is counterproductive, both economically and politically. This needs to be understood by politicians as well as the public at large. The main reason that the United States is not facing the declining labor force and extreme aging that is now impacting Japan, Italy, and other first-world countries is the infusion of Hispanic and Asian American populations. As a consequence, significant investments in the young, multiracial generations need to be made. This is not only to support their own well-being, but also to create a future labor force whose members can contribute to the nation's economic well-being, and whose taxes will be counted on to maintain Social Security and Medicare for aging White baby boomers.

Getting older Whites to understand this demographic reality will be a tall order in the current political environment. Yet if today's multicultural youth are to contribute to a growing economy, there is much work to do. Too many minority children attend under-resourced, segregated schools and do not have the guidance or finances to attend the two- and four-year colleges that are pathways to middle-class jobs (Carnevale & Smith, 2016; Orfield, Kucera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Four-year college enrollment for Hispanics and Blacks, while rising, stands well below that of Whites. Income inequality has hit minority youth particularly hard, as seen in continued high child poverty levels; and can only exacerbate the nation's inequality in the future (Pew Research Center, 2017; Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Trends such as these make it clear that major public interventions are necessary to improve the well-being of the next generation.

Rather than inflaming this generational divide for political gains, leaders at all levels of government need to emphasize what investing in today's younger minorities and their families—via education, job training, medical care, and housing—represents for the nation's future economic and demographic sustainability. They need to make the case to all citizens that investment in our largely-minority next generation would bring a substantial return in our economic growth as the White population ages.

Leaders of both parties need to emphasize the older and middle-aged Whites' generational co-dependency with younger minorities. While the younger generation would benefit from greater investments in their well-being today, the aging generation will receive support later in the form of contributions to Social Security and Medicare once that younger generation enters the labor force and pays taxes. Perhaps even more importantly, taking this stand would go a long way toward healing the sharp racial and generational divide that now pervades the nation's politics.

**References**


