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Millennials: The unspoken generation

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MILLENNIALS:

The Unspoken Generation

By: Meghan Johnson

Millennials are the newest generation to enter the realm of political participation, at the age range of 18-34. But whether millennials engage in this realm is the question.

Millennials, born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, make up almost one quarter of the U.S. population at 83.1 million, according to the U.S. Census. Millennials outnumber the 75.4 million baby boomers in the United States, according to the census. Because of this, millennials have the opportunity to have real influence on issues, if they so choose.

According to the Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) Survey, millennial involvement in politics, specifically voting, peaked in

2008 and has since declined. The survey, an ongoing project at the IOP since 2000, has determined factor of this increase and decrease of political involvement throughout the years. The IOP determined that Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 terrorist attacks both proved to be crucial events that have had an effect on millennials because they happened during formative years.

According to the Pew Research Center (PWC), President Barack Obama won votes from 66 percent of millennial voters in the 2008 election, and the millennials who voted turned out in greater numbers than in past elections to support Obama. This could be because of many different aspects of the political sphere, but PWC showed research that Obama's campaign targeted millennials more

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– *Steffen Schmidt*

rights gun control education economy

in 2008, thus millennials showed up to vote.

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) says that voter turnout is less likely for millennials in midterm elections compared to presidential elections. According to an estimate from CIRCLE, 21.5 percent of millennials voted in the 2014 midterm national election.

The IOP survey's finding of a drop in political involvement since 2008 doesn't mean that millennials don't care about political issues. The 2014 Reason-Rupe millennial survey found that 62 percent of millennials define themselves as socially liberal, while the majority define themselves as centrists on fiscal issues.

In the political world, Duverger's law shows that most people are drawn to the middle of political issues — not too liberal and not too conservative. Maurice Duverger, a French sociologist and politician, is a developed academic in politics and the evolution of political systems. According to the Reason-Rupe survey, most millennials tend to side democratically when voting, but a large percent went to the polls as independent, staying in the realms of Duverger's law.

So what issues matter to millennials? This could be answered in many different ways. The Reason-Rupe millennial survey had millennials, shown as a national figure, rate which issues they felt had the highest priority. Of a diverse list of issues, 28 percent of millennials mentioned economy

as a priority issue while only four percent believed social issues were a priority.

At Iowa State University, with a total of 211 political science majors in the fall of 2015, according to Iowa State's Office of the Registrar, a different suggestion is offered to the idea of what millennials care about. Herman Quirnbach, Iowa state senator from Ames, has served millennials at ISU as part of his constituency since 2003. He said that millennials are passionate about issues that directly affect them, such as college tuition, K-12 education and many other public policies.

"Religion plays a dramatically less important role in our lives, and we accordingly aren't held hostage by the unchanging opinions of religious leaders," said Elijah Decious via email, the treasurer for the ISU Political Science Club.

"We recognize the importance of equality in groups that past generations ignored, such as LGBT. Millennials don't seem to have as much of an attitude of American exceptionalism. We look at other countries without bias and see that they do things better than we do."

According to the Reason-Rupe Millennial survey, nine percent of those surveyed mentioned foreign policy and 11 percent mentioned equal rights.

"I think millennials care about the conditions close to their lives, which is jobs, affordable education, healthcare, and a declining environment, which they will

inherit and which may make their lives so much more difficult and less enjoyable," said Steffen Schmidt, an ISU political science professor.

He went on to say that millennials also care about personal safety, global issues and threats and fair treatment of sexual orientation, gender and race. Schmidt mentioned six out of the top 10 issues mentioned by millennials on the Reason-Rupe millennial report.

Erin Norton, an ISU political science student, said millennials care about education, women's rights, equal rights and the environment. Personally, she said she also cares about gun control from a more personal experience. Norton was born and raised in Aurora, Colorado. Shortly after midnight, at the showing of "The Dark Night Rises" at a Century Theater in the summer of 2012, a gunman opened fire into an unknowing audience.

This public shooting killed 12 and wounded 70, according to news reports. Norton's political stance was heavily influenced by this tragedy. Even though she wasn't present for the attack, the occurrence in her hometown left a lasting impact on her stance on gun control and its importance.

According to the Reason-Rupe report, only one percent of millennials mentioned gun control or gun violence as an important issue in the 2014 report.

In the same report, 18 percent of those surveyed chose not to declare which issues

were important to them or didn't know which issues were important to them. This percentage is equal to the amount of millennials that mentioned health care or the Affordable Care Act, the second most mentioned issue on the list.

As these professors, students and senator show, millennials have different views on many different issues. It is hard to depict what is most important, but social issues and economic issues do show a common thread at Iowa State.

This suggestion that millennials care about certain issues, but they don't care about politics begs the question: What went wrong? The question of why millennials don't show up to vote or to participate in politics, even though they care about the issues, could be answered by political delusion or confusion.

"I think they live in a time when there is information input overload, too much information on candidates and issues, which makes it very hard to sort through it all and make good [political] decisions," Schmidt said.

He added that millennials have not been active enough to get the attention of leaders and candidates as well as legislators.

When it comes to voting, campaigning and communication with legislators, millennials have thus far failed to do so, according to the Harvard IOP.

Quirnbach said that he represents his constituency and he represents what his constituents show him that they care about, and that the local level of politics is where people have the most influence.

"If young people want to have an effect on policy, they need to get involved on all levels of politics," Quirnbach said.

Issues are important to millennials. When this importance will show an effect on politics is the question that lies ahead.

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