

THE MILLENNIAL MANIFESTO

A YOUTH ACTIVIST HANDBOOK
BY, FOR, AND ABOUT
THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION.

Including:

- ✓ *Twelve Steps to Youth Activism*
- ✓ *A Guide to Millennial Generation Politics*
- ✓ *A Roadmap to the March Across America*
- ✓ *A Blueprint for the National Youth Platform*
- ✓ *And What to Expect on Election Day 2004*

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“Whether you're a citizen, student or activist, a voter or a non-voter, one thing is clear: democracy in the US is not living up to its name. Just over a year after the 2000 elections memorable for butterfly ballots, voter intimidation, illegal voter roll purges, and the Supreme Court "selection" of the President, young people are still being told that we're apathetic because we don't participate! In a democracy full of corruption, racism, monotony and inequality, our question is, "Participate in what!?" – **Democracy Action Project**

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YOUTH VOTE

When looking at the political future of the generation, we should start with the recent history – especially the campaign and election of 2000 (E2K) and what these years mean for our generation's future. The election controversy, particularly the hundreds of thousands of uncounted votes nationally, made the country cry out for reform. In Florida, the House and Senate passed a bill that sets statewide standards for elections, ushering in optical scanning ballot systems in time for 2002 elections and doing away with hanging chads and butterfly ballots. A few years later the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) passed to take election reform a step beyond just updating machines from the 1920s.

While Palm Beach County dominated the news, there remains the untold story of Millennials running for office, young people calling for reform, and the youth reaction to the historic event. The 2000 Election was an exciting time period that clearly affected the way Millennials think and behave. As

Millennial Andrea Perullo put it, “I think the closeness of the election definitely turned people on. How could it not? It was in your face everywhere you went.” Heather Moore was a student at James Madison University. She said there was commotion in the halls as Florida kept changing colors on the television. Heather felt “that the age old saying ‘My vote doesn't matter’ just got thrown out.”¹

Millennials even invented a new way to end run the 200+-year-old Electoral College. With an innovative, web-based system called “Nader Trader,” Nader supporters in battleground states traded their votes for Gore votes in states that were blowouts. Since almost every state has a winner-take-all system in the Presidential election, then if you don’t live in a battleground state your vote has a lower chance of actually making a difference in the final outcome. Therefore creative voting-age Millennials said buzz off to the Electoral College by trading votes online in an effort to try to elect Gore and also find Nader his five percent to create a strong national party. Wouldn’t election reform be easier?

With less than half the country voting in non-presidential year congressional elections, we must question the health of democracy. The system needs to be changed for young and old Americans. Further, because of low overall turnout, the opportunities for Millennials to rock the system through voting are huge.

Third Parties

We, as Millennials, continue some of the Gen X trends to adhere less to party alignment than Boomers by registering as Independent and engaging in split ticket voting. This is due, in part, because of what we have learned from the political landscape. A twelve-year-old Gen Xer, born in 1968, would have

¹ Andrea Perullo and Heather Moore’s quotes come from emails to Scott Beale.

witnessed John Anderson, a major third party candidate for President in 1980, receive about six percent of the votes. A ten-year-old Millennial, born in 1982, would have witnessed Ross Perot receive almost twenty percent of the votes with a realistic chance of actually winning. Furthermore, that same Millennial was sixteen when pro-wrestling sensation Jesse Ventura became the second Governor in the 90s elected on a third party ticket. Our generation's willingness to vote third party has been shaped by many factors, including: the decline of the strength of political parties, the increase in the role of media in elections, the increased focus on personality in elections, and the above mentioned Xer willingness to vote third party out of desperation and disgust with the system.

However, we have not given up on the political parties like so many Gen Xers have. "A Close Up Foundation survey of 500 high school students learned that Millennials share a rather traditional view of political parties – which they consider useful, albeit too argumentative."² We are not blindly loyal to parties that have ignored us or too blind to see that third parties rarely work. As a generation, we are far too practical to vote for third parties en masse, unless we are successful in our fight for election reform.

Election Reform

Instant run off voting (IRV) is an idea whose time has come, but the parties fear it and the public is not yet unaware of it. IRV is a system that lets you rank your candidates and guarantees that the winner of the election earns a majority of the vote. For example, a voter in Florida might rank his top three choices as Pat Buchanan, George Bush, Al Gore, then Ralph Nader. When the polls closed, if no candidate won a majority of the first choice votes, then the computer would eliminate the candidates who received the least amount of votes. Eventually you would

² Howe and Strauss, Millennials Rising, p. 232.

have two candidates remaining and a winner who earned a majority of the votes; in this example our hypothetical voter would have his vote go to George W. Bush.³

If IRV legislation were to pass, then it would enable people to vote guilt-free for third or fourth party candidates and also protect the major parties from losing an election to a party that does not command a majority of the population's support. It is revolutionary because it would guarantee a majority vote for the victor without the expense and negative effects of a runoff election. To win, it would be more difficult to appeal to a small set of "base" votes and win over their support; you'd actually have to get people to consider you as their second pick, too. This could also lead to cleaner campaigns since candidates would need to appeal to a broader base. IRV is particularly useful in primary elections when you have multiple candidates. The 2003 MoveOn.org web primary for the Democratic Party resulted in no clear winner of the nine candidates, despite the fact that Dean received almost 44 percent of the vote, nearly doubling the second place finisher.⁴ If MoveOn had used IRV, which would have been especially easy online, then the organization could endorse a candidate who commanded a majority of the voters support.

The technology is available to make such voting possible and easy. It is currently being used in San Francisco, as well as in other cities and countries all over the world. Most importantly, it is being done in dozens and soon hundreds of college student government elections all over the country. By

**Youth Activism
Resource:**

Youth Vote Coalition

The Youth Vote Coalition is a national, nonpartisan, diverse coalition of organizations established to increase civic participation and political activity among youth. If you want support with your voting efforts, start here.

³ For more information on IRV see fairvote.org.

⁴ See moveon.org/primary/report.html. Vied on: 06/27/03.

the time Millennials start running for President, IRV will be used in elections. With our increasingly diverse society, we will need to use a method that guarantees an election winner supported by a majority of the voters.

Voter Turnout

While there are a number of proposals out there to increase voter turnout, there are also many people who argue that we don't need greater turnout. Their argument is that it is better to have well informed voters than simply more voters. This is all well and good, but why can't we have both!?

The government should actively look at ways to promote voting. For example, elections could be held on a Saturday, or over a two-day period. Polls could be open longer. Youth could be recruited to be poll workers to help teach the basics of democracy to our generation. The average age of poll workers in Palm Beach County, Florida is 72-years-old;⁵ nationally it is 68-years-old.⁶ This is over three times the age of your first time eighteen-year-old voter! Recent election law is beginning to address the poll worker problem, but we can bridge this gap if we take the initiative.

Online Voting

Online voting could revolutionize participation. Imagine this scenario: during lunch, you check out espn.com to see how your fantasy football team is doing, pay your cell phone bill online, and still have time to go vote, too. Online voting would increase the information voters have access to. With access to candidates' bios, incumbent voting records, and party platform information easily available at the time of voting, there would be no excuses for not making an educated vote. It sure would make

⁵ Minor, Emily. "I Expected Drama As a Poll Worker." Palm Beach Post, 3/13/02, p. 10A.

⁶ This is the age that is repeatedly cited in "Help America Vote Act" conversations, Youth Vote Meetings, NASS Meetings, and other conversations about poll workers.

absentee voting easier, too. Some people are concerned about the costs of this system, the ramifications of the digital divide, voter intimidation, and the authenticity of each vote. But the technology is there to do this and to make it legitimate.

In 2000, Youth E-Vote sponsored an online election with students from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Fifty-six percent of over one million registered students voted for George W. Bush to become their President. The experience was a very positive one for the Millennials involved. "If you think about it, all of us will be casting votes over the Internet someday -- we may as well begin now!" noted Bryant Hall, a participating high school junior from Galesville, Maryland.⁷

Already, the Net is educating the public a great deal. Project Vote Smart is an outstanding, non-partisan organization located in Montana. They are using web pages (vote-smart.org) and 1-800 numbers to provide non-partisan candidate information. The League of Women Voters has a great site with similar content as well. Dnet.org tells you all about the candidates who will be on your ballot on Election Day. Sadly, many politicians and professional political advisors are fighting against these online systems. Project Vote Smart gives candidates an opportunity to say where they stand on a wide variety of issues, but candidates fear that their opponents will use this information against them. If say-nothing television commercials have replaced meaningful efforts to take stands on issues, then it is long past time for reform. If candidates are working to keep you ill informed, then we have to rise up and demand a better system!

Millennials may one day support many creative types of reform. What about providing a financial incentive to vote? The government shows that it is important for people to save for retirement or to own a home by providing tax credits; what about a \$100 tax credit if you vote? What about requiring voting?

⁷ 11/2/02 Election.com press release election.com/us/pressroom/pr2000/1102b.htm

You would not be forced to choose a candidate, since the ballot could have a “no vote” option. That way we could tell if, in fact, all those people not voting are actually registering their discontent, or just couldn’t make it to the polls. How about requiring a half-day off from work, if we insist on doing this thing on a Tuesday. We take time off for parades on the Fourth of July and President’s Day, but we cannot have a national half-day off work and school to actually vote for the President? The current two hours doesn’t provide enough of a break.

Case Study: Lowering the Voting Age in Cambridge

Jesse Baer and Paul Heintz were two sixteen-year-old activists with the Campaign for a Democratic Future who led an effort to lower the voting age to sixteen in Cambridge

Massachusetts for municipal unsuccessful their first year trying, so they came back the next year, compromised on the age and were successful in lowering the voting age to seventeen. Cambridge became the first city in the country to do this.

**Youth Activism Step #10
Maintain Momentum**

Everything in life worth having is worth fighting for. Never assume it will be easy and never give up. “We’ve worked as hard as we can,” said Paul Hentz, “The moral of this story is to keep at it.”

Youth-run organizations like the National Youth Rights Association (NYRA) and Generation Net have been advocating lowering the voting age. In Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Dakota, and Texas, bills have been introduced in the state legislature or in city councils to lower the voting age. In England, the Mayor of London has even proposed legislation to lower the voting age to sixteen. If sixteen-year-olds were allowed to vote, not only would it have the esoteric benefits of expanding democracy in our country and encouraging politicians to pay attention to youth issues, but it would also have the practical benefit of teaching high school

students how to vote by voting in their schools.⁸ And don't make the mistake of thinking that all of us pimply-faced teens will be Democrats. (Remember: 41%I, 29%D, 26%R)⁹ We're most likely to vote with our parents. Or we may even have independent opinions!

Same Day Voter Registration

How about same day voter registration? It is no coincidence that the two states with the highest voter turnout (Maine and Minnesota) also have same day voter registration. In fact, this is an important issue for Millennials because while same day registration increases turnout among all ages, it increases turnout even more for younger voters.

Jason Stefany, the Membership Director of the Wisconsin Democratic Party believes that same day voter registration has made it far easier to increase voting numbers among students. Through "knock and drag" efforts (i.e., knocking on doors and dragging students to the polls), youth voting has been remarkably high in that state. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, for example, the voter turnout rate was 85 percent for students in the 2000 election, the highest student turnout in the nation.¹⁰

Could the lack of same day voter registration be more evidence that the parties don't want to hear what we have to say? Are we that unpredictable, that dangerous? We are not unpredictable voters! Don't look at how many of our peers are registered independent or how uncertain their turnout may appear to be. Millennials vote on issues over personality and personality over party.¹¹ In many cases, the issues we value may

⁸ NYRA has a lot of research on this issue and a great list of reasons to lower the voting age, see: youthrights.org/vote10.html

⁹ *CampusKids*

¹⁰ Burd, David. "Civic Engagement with Political Engagement." University of Pennsylvania, JWS Senior Research Paper. 05/02/02, p. 27.

¹¹ *TrustMatters*, p. 36.

align with a certain party – young women who are pro-choice tend to vote Democrat. Not because the candidates are Democrats, per se, but because they agree on a certain issue, or set of issues. However, that same nineteen-year-old woman may vote for a different party if a pro-choice Republican comes along who supports education reform that she favors. Issues trump party for Millennials.

We are not dangerous voters; in fact, we are very sensible voters. “Millennials are highly adaptable and have an upbeat, albeit pragmatic outlook on life.”¹² Fundamentally, our generation is willing to advocate for change from within the system. When an opportunity arises to vote for a candidate (or a proposition) that supports change that we want, then we will turnout, often in great numbers, to make that change.

The ballot initiative and referendum processes are a good example of this. In general, ballot initiatives can increase turnout in an election by seven to nine percent in a non-presidential election year and three to four and half percent during presidential election years.¹³ Ballot initiatives allow the citizens to address issues that legislators are too scared to touch. The whole process, from gathering signatures to public education campaigns, has a very positive effect on turnout. However, ballot initiatives are not shielded from other problems within the system, specifically the role of money. Wealthy people can almost buy new laws with expensive, confusing campaigns and few limits on spending.

In Nevada, election officials saw an increase in the number of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds registering to vote when marijuana, abortion and the environment were on the ballot. Eighteen-year-old Eric Renninger said that the proposition motivated him to register to vote. “I wanted to have a say in that because I don't think government should tell you what to do,” he

¹² Becker, T.J. *ChiTrib*, 1/31/99 “Enter, the Millennials.” p. C1.

¹³ Tolbert, Gummel and Smith, “The Effect of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout in the American States.” *American Politics Research*, 11/01.

said.¹⁴ One student from Maine said she chose to vote solely on local referendums and initiatives. She stated, “There were state-wide issues that were very important; there was an abortion question, there was a medical marijuana question, and there was another one about allocating a large sum of money for conservation issues.”¹⁵ These issues motivated her to vote.

Issues that we care about motivate our generation when we believe our vote can make a difference. We believe that national ballot initiatives should be started to further expand democracy in our country – especially if the effect of big money in campaigns can be controlled.

Why Youth Don't Vote

There are three main reasons why young people do not vote. They do not have enough information, they feel as if their votes may not make a difference, and they are simply not asked to turn out on Election Day. This isn't rocket science. The generation is generally neither stupid nor apathetic. We just feel ignored and powerless.

The E2K taught us all a lot about politics. One thing that it reinforced among young voters is the effect of the Electoral College on voter turnout. A Millennial from Texas may decide that it is not worth the effort to vote in the Presidential election since then-Governor Bush was sure to win his own conservative state. If there was neither a close Congressional election nor a local election with candidates paying attention to her, then she might decide to sit this one out. Groups like the Center for Voting and Democracy are fighting for proportional representation to fix this problem. If a state like California had proportional representation then if 49 percent of the state voted for George W. Bush in the next Presidential Election, then the

¹⁴ “Young Voters Have Say in Nevada Ballot Initiative” 9/26/02 See: jointogether.org/sa/news/summaries/reader/0,1854,554504,00.html. Viewed on 4/1/03.

¹⁵ *NewStudentPolitics*, p. ii.

parties would nearly split the 56 electors, rather than have it go to only one party. Then Republicans in California and Democrats in Texas would no longer feel disenfranchised in a winner-take-all-system.

Our generation is also unmotivated when the election appears to be a landslide. When polling numbers indicate a significant lead for one candidate, we may stay home. We are a generation that has grown up on polling numbers. We understand how they work; we believe in their accuracy. While polls do not guarantee a candidate winning, there are plenty of times when elections are seemingly decided well before Election Day.

Charlie Cook, publisher of a widely respected political newsletter, stated before the 2002 congressional elections, “Not more than two to three dozen of the 435 congressional races will be competitive.” The lack of competition is mostly due to money and politics and this was during a time when both the congressional houses and the general public were very evenly divided. After 9-11 and E2K, the 2002 elections had the potential to be an important event across the country, but most incumbents walked to reelection. In fact, over the 210-year history of the congressional races, incumbents have won 85 percent of the time.¹⁶ In our lifetime they have won over 92 percent of the time. For these reasons, many in our generation may not vote unless there are other reasons they are going to the polls.

A few reasons that Millennials may vote include propositions they support (or actively don't support), viable third party candidates, young candidates, or candidates who focus on issues that they care about. We are not a generation of dangerous or unpredictable voters. We are quite the opposite. If you speak to us, then chances are, we'll speak for you.

¹⁶ This chart came from: bettercampaigns.org/standard/display.php?StoryID=5.

Money and Politics

It comes down to this: if you don't have the dough, then you don't have the same access to elected officials as those who do. Contrary to popular belief there is not a direct quid pro quo among big money interest and politicians. It is, however, a much more insidious relationship. Candidates and politicians (who are automatically candidates again if they want to run for re-election) are spending far too much time raising money for office when on the campaign trail and raising money again when in office. Public policy decisions do consider political ramifications and in particular how policies may affect donors. Rarely will a big oil tycoon give money to an elected official and tell them how to vote; it is just understood. So, unless you are an independently wealthy candidate, you cannot even try to take the high ground with the money and politics issue. This situation prevents the vast majority of average Americans from running for office.

The other problem with money and politics is how non-representative it is of the general public. In fact, it is not even representative of the wealthy public. "Less than one percent of the population contributes more than 80 percent of all money in

federal elections in amounts of \$200 or more.”¹⁷ We believe that meaningful campaign finance laws need to be enacted, but we can also begin to fix the system by making small donations to candidates that we support. It clearly does not have the same value, but candidates would notice if hundreds of young people contributed to his/her campaign and may even pay closer attention to youth issues as a result.

There are a lot of good groups addressing campaign finance reform including Public Campaign, Democracy Matters, Common Cause and the youth-run GenerationNet.org. While many Millennials feel this is very important, we believe that many more have not yet identified campaign finance reform as the solution to the larger problem of feeling disenfranchised. The fact of the matter is that speech in America, especially political speech on television, is not free; but it should be. The Supreme Court and the political parties will continue to debate this issue and play loophole games with campaign fundraising until we take notice of how insidious the current financing of campaigns is to our democracy. And, at the end of the day, while money corrupts our political system, it does not completely take away the power of the vote.

The Low Down

We’ve interviewed dozens of people working for professional campaigns and the dirty secret in Washington is that candidates do not actually want you to vote! They actively work to lower voter turnout to a predictable and winnable size. Negative campaigns work by keeping swing voters home and mobilizing the party base supporters against an opponent they demonize. Candidates don’t discuss issues because issues are complicated, but emotional appeals to an identified group of voters work well. Political parties only fight over twenty House

¹⁷ Bonifaz, John C. “Not the Rich, More Than the Poor.” Poverty & Race Research Action Council. Oct.1999. See: prrac.org/topics/sep99/bonifaz.htm Viewed on 06/10/03

seats to see who controls Congress and state legislators gerrymander¹⁸ districts to protect incumbents and parties. Election reform that starts with good intentions becomes watered down and the only legislation that can ever pass is for show. It seems impossible to find a majority of elected officials willing to sincerely fix campaign finance, free airtime, or voter representation.

If our generation can bridge the activist gap and the service gap and express our political opinions by voting and not just volunteering or protesting, then Millennials will have a powerful influence over other generations. Although it is a common misconception that Boomers hold a lock over political issues due to their size, Millennials are a larger segment of the population than Boomers are now. Furthermore, we are even a larger generation than the Boomers were twenty years ago when they were our age.

So, in short, the system is messed up; but we are not powerless because of faults in the system. We are powerless because we have chosen not to seize power. If you think we can continue to blame all the problems of the world on our parents, well fugettaboutit, we need to stand up and be heard. We need to be citizens, not spectators.¹⁹ It is time to get off the sidelines.

¹⁸ “Gerrymandering” means to draw the boundaries of an electoral district around certain population (e.g. black voters, republican voters.)

¹⁹ This is the motto of the Aarsalyn Foundation. For more information on Aarsalyn and their civic work see: arsalyn.org.