College-Age Millennials: A Brief Profile of a Generation in Transition


The survey of 2,000 college-age Millennials provides a new lens for examining the moral and religious values that animate young adults, and how these values impact their views and voting preferences on a range of issues including religious pluralism, social and economic inequality, immigration, and issues of race and gender. The survey also provides insights into younger Millennials’ outlook on the future, as well as their feelings about present-day Christianity, and explores the significant shifts between Millennials’ current religious affiliation and the religious tradition in which they were raised. ¹

Generally, the survey paints a portrait of a complex generation in transition. These younger Americans still have close ties with their parents. Strong majorities speak with their parents every day, and nearly half live at home. However, they are less religious than the general public, and for many, their religious identities are already shifting away from their childhood religion. They are less actively engaged in the electoral process than older adults, with only half saying they are absolutely certain they will vote in the 2012 election and nearly 1-in-4 reporting they could not offer an opinion about Mitt Romney, the likely Republican presidential nominee. They are strongly supportive of proposals to reduce economic inequality, but they hold concerns about reverse discrimination and dependence on government social programs. Perhaps most significantly, this cohort is still in the midst of educational formation. The survey finds significant differences of opinion not only between those with different levels of educational attainment, but also between those who have attended different types of colleges and universities.

¹ Throughout the report, the terms “younger Millennials,” “college-age Millennials,” and “Millennials” will be used interchangeably to describe Americans between the age of 18 and 24.
Education, Race/Ethnicity, and Region

Most college-age Millennials are still in the process of completing their education. Only 11% of college-age Millennials (age 18-24) have completed a bachelor’s degree or at least some graduate school. A plurality (45%) have completed some college but have not received a bachelor’s degree, compared to 28% who report that they have completed high school and 16% who report that they have less than a high school education. Among those who are currently attending college or who have graduated from college, nearly half (47%) attended or are currently attending a public college or university, 26% attend or attended a community college, 8% attend or attended a non-religious private college or university, and 8% attend or attended a religiously affiliated college or university.

Millennials report a wide range of debt incurred to attend college. Among those who have graduated from a four-year college or university, 14% report borrowing more than $50,000, nearly one-quarter (24%) report borrowing between $20,000 and $50,000, and 28% report borrowing less than $20,000. Twenty-nine percent say they did not borrow any money to finance their undergraduate college education.

Millennials are also considerably more diverse than the general population. More than 7-in-10 (72%) American adults identify as white. In contrast, fewer than 6-in-10 (57%) Millennials self-identify as white. Approximately 1-in-5 (21%) identify as Hispanic, 14% identify as black, 6% identify as some other race, and 3% identify with 2 or more racial categories.

The geographic distribution of college-age Millennials is roughly similar to the general population. They are most heavily concentrated in the South (35%), followed by the West (25%), the Midwest (22%), and the Northeast (18%).
Party Identification and Political Ideology

Compared to the general public, younger Millennials are more likely to identify as liberal and politically Independent. A plurality (45%) of younger Millennials identify as Independent, compared to 33% who identify as Democrat and 23% who identify as Republican. However, when asked whether they lean more toward one party or the other, Millennials are significantly more likely to lean toward the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. Nearly 6-in-10 (58%) Millennials identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared to 39% who identify with or lean toward the Republican Party. Despite these partisan disparities, younger Millennials are nearly evenly divided between self-identified political conservatives and liberals. A plurality (44%) identify as moderate, 27% identify as liberal, and 25% identify as conservative.

Like Americans overall, Millennial Republicans are much more likely to be ideologically homogeneous than Millennial Democrats. For example, nearly two-thirds (65%) of Millennial Republicans identify as conservative, compared to 30% who identify as moderate and only 3% who identify as liberal. In contrast, fewer than half (46%) of Millennial Democrats identify as liberal, compared to 42% who identify as moderate and 10% who identify as conservative.

Religious Identification: Present Religion vs. Childhood Religion

College-age Millennials (age 18-24) are more likely than the general population to be religiously unaffiliated. One-quarter (25%) of Millennials identify as religiously unaffiliated. One-in-five (20%) identify as Catholic, which is roughly equivalent to the proportion in the general population. However, among Millennial Catholics less than half are white. Among all Millennials 9% are white Catholic, while an equal number (9%) are Hispanic Catholic and 2% are some other race or mixed race Catholic. Roughly equal numbers of Millennials identify as white mainline Protestant (13%), white evangelical Protestant (12%), and black Protestant (10%). One-in-10 (10%) identify as some other type of Christian, and 6% identify with a non-Christian religion.4

Despite their relatively young age, Millennials report significant levels of movement from the religious affiliation of their childhood. By far, the group seeing the highest increase in membership due to this movement is the religiously unaffiliated. While only 11% of Millennials were religiously unaffiliated in childhood, one-quarter (25%) currently identify as unaffiliated, a 14-point increase. This means that most of today’s religiously unaffiliated Millennials were raised in a specific religious tradition. Among those who are currently unaffiliated, 35% were raised unaffiliated, 21% were raised white mainline Protestant, 23% Catholic, 8% other Christian, and 4% non-Christian

4 The “non-Christian affiliated” category includes religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other world religions that are too small to measure separately due to sample size limitations in the current survey.

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affiliated. Those who were raised white evangelical Protestant or black Protestant make up only 4% each of Millennials who are currently unaffiliated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Change Among Millennials</th>
<th>Childhood Religion</th>
<th>Entering Group</th>
<th>Exiting Group</th>
<th>Current Religion</th>
<th>Net Gain/Loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White Catholic</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Latino Catholic</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Other Catholic</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>-5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian Religions</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK/Other</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, Millennial Values Survey, March 2012 (N=2,013)

Catholics and white mainline Protestants saw the largest net losses due to changes in religious identity. Overall, the percentage of Millennials identifying as Catholic dropped by 8 points, from a childhood affiliation of 28% to only 20% today. Most former Catholics now identify as unaffiliated, a movement that is more pronounced among whites. Among white Millennials who were raised Catholic, fewer than two-thirds (64%) remain Catholic, while one-quarter (25%) now identify as unaffiliated, and approximately 1-in-10 (11%) now identify with another religious group.

The percentage of younger Millennials identifying as mainline Protestant dropped by 5 points, from a childhood affiliation of 18% to 13% today. Most former white mainline Protestants now also identify as unaffiliated. Among whites who were raised mainline Protestant, fewer than 6-in-10 (59%) remain mainline Protestant, while nearly 3-in-10 (29%) now identify as unaffiliated, and approximately 1-in-10 (12%) currently identify with another religious group.

Ethnic minority religious groups saw far fewer losses than white religious groups. Latino Catholics saw a net loss of only two percentage points, and black Protestants saw a loss of only one percentage point. The only religious group, other than the religiously unaffiliated, to experience a net gain due to Millennials’ religious movement was the subcategory of non-Christian religions, which increased by 1 percentage point.
Relationship with Parents

College-age Millennials report strong ties with their parents. Six-in-ten (60%) say that they talk with their parents at least once a day, and 25% talk to them once or twice a week. Fewer than 1-in-10 (8%) say they talk with their parents a few times a month, and only 5% say they seldom or never talk with their parents.

At least one reason why younger Millennials frequently speak with their parents is that nearly half (48%) are living at home. However, even among those Millennials living on their own, nearly 8-in-10 report that they talk with their parents at least once a day (36%) or once or twice a week (41%). Millennial men are significantly more likely to report living at home with their parents than Millennial women (56% vs. 41% respectively), but both men and women talk to their parents with about the same frequency.

"In Their Own Words": Millennials Compare their Generation to their Parents

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, Millennial Values Survey, March 2012 (N=2013)
When asked to offer one or two words that describe how their generation is different from their parents’ generation, college-age Millennials are twice as likely to offer a negative, rather than positive, remark. Four-in-ten (40%) offer negative comments, compared to 19% who give positive comments and 40% who respond more neutrally. The most frequently mentioned difference between the generations was a neutral assessment that Millennials are more “tech-savvy” than their parents (16%). Among the negative evaluations, younger Millennials most frequently cast themselves as “lazier” (8%) and more “entitled” (5%) than their parents. One respondent illustrated these observations by mentioning “participation trophies” as a hallmark of his generation. Six percent also volunteered that Millennials are less religious and less moral than their parents. There were, however, some positive evaluations. Younger Millennials see themselves as more “open-minded” and “tolerant” (6%), and “better educated” and more “worldly” (5%) than their parents.

Outlook on the Future

Younger Millennials are divided on whether the economy will improve in the near future. Approximately 4-in-10 (38%) predict that the economy will get better over the next two years, while 27% say it will get worse, and 35% say it will remain about the same. This short-term economic outlook is closely tied to partisan attachment. Nearly 6-in-10 (57%) of Democratic Millennials say that the economy will improve in the next two years, compared to 24% of Republican Millennials. Politically Independent Millennials are roughly evenly divided, with 31% reporting that the economy will get better, 30% saying it will get worse, and 37% predicting that it will stay about the same.

Millennials are fairly optimistic about their long-
term financial prospects, when they use their parents’ financial situation as a point of comparison. Approximately 4-in-10 (42%) believe that, in their lifetime, they will be better off than their parents, compared to 18% who expect to be less well off than their parents, and 38% who predict that their financial situation will be about the same as their parents’. Unlike their short-term economic outlook, Millennials’ long-term economic outlook is not tied to party affiliation. Instead, there is a significant racial and ethnic divide. A majority (52%) of Hispanic Millennials and nearly half (47%) of black Millennials say that they will be better off financially than their parents, compared to fewer than 4-in-10 (36%) white Millennials.

On the broader question of career satisfaction, college-age Millennials express fairly high levels of concern. Two-thirds of younger Millennials say they are somewhat worried (43%) or very worried (23%) about finding a rewarding or satisfying career, while only about one-third who say they are not too worried (24%) or not at all worried (8%). Hispanic Millennials express more concern about their ability to find a satisfying career than Millennials of other ethnic or racial backgrounds. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Hispanic Millennials say they are somewhat or very worried about finding a rewarding career, compared to 65% of white Millennials and 62% of black Millennials.

There are no substantive differences in gender on this question. Millennial men and women are about equally as likely to express concern about finding a satisfying career.

Social Media and Legacy Media

The widespread use of technology is one of the defining traits of the Millennial generation. Among social media outlets, Facebook visibly dominates Millennials’ attention. Only about 1-in-10 (11%) Millennials report that they do not have a Facebook account, compared to a majority (53%) who say they do not have a Twitter account, and nearly three-quarters (73%) who report that they do not have a Tumblr account. More than 6-in-10 (63%) of Millennials report that they use Facebook at least once a day, including nearly half (49%) who say they

![Facebook Usage by Gender](image-url)
use it several times a day. In contrast, only 16% say they use Twitter at least once a day, and only 5% say the same of Tumblr.

There are significant differences in Facebook usage by gender and party identification. More than 7-in-10 (72%) Millennial women report that they use Facebook at least once a day, compared to 54% of men. Roughly 7-in-10 Republican (70%) and Democratic (68%) Millennials say they use Facebook at least daily, compared to 58% of Independent Millennials.

When younger Millennials go online for information about current events and politics, they turn to Yahoo.com (23%) more frequently than any other single website. Approximately 1-in-10 say they most rely on Google.com (11%) or CNN.com (11%). Only 1% of Millennials say they use traditional legacy broadcast news sites such as ABC.com, NBC.com, and CBS.com. About 1-in-5 (19%) say they do not follow current events and politics online.

With regard to television news, Millennials’ most trusted sources for accurate information on current events and politics are broadcast network news (17%), CNN (15%), and Fox News (15%). Six percent name Comedy Central’s “Daily Show With Jon Stewart,” 4% cite MSNBC, and 3% mention public television (PBS). Approximately 3-in-10 (31%), however, say they do not watch television news. Republican Millennials are three times as likely as Democratic Millennials to cite Fox News as their most trusted source of accurate information on current events and politics (27% vs. 9% respectively), while Democratic Millennials are more likely than Republican Millennials to say they trust CNN (22% vs. 10% respectively).