

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

public opinion watch

by ruy teixeira

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Generation Y and American Politics

If you haven't already encountered it, I urge you to take a look at a new study about the values and politics of Generation Y, which may be loosely defined as those born between 1980 and 2000 (though the report really only covers only the adult members of this generation, those currently 18 to 25 years of age). The report, with the somewhat gimmicky title of "**OMG: How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era**," was written by Anna Greenberg and is based on **a large-scale survey with oversamples among Jews, blacks, Asians, Hispanics and Muslims**, as well as supplementary analyses of Census and other data, all conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner.

Much of the report focuses on the detailed religious and civic attitudes of Generation Y adults and I won't go into those findings here—read the instructive report to get the full picture. But there are some broader findings in the report that are worth highlighting.

Generation Y is extraordinarily diverse in a race-ethnic sense. Only 61 percent of Generation Y adults are white; 15 percent are black, 4 percent are Asian, and 17 percent are Hispanic.

Generation Y is more secular and less Christian. Almost a quarter (23 percent) have no religious preference or are agnostic/atheist, 4 percent are Jewish or Muslim, and another 7 percent are other non-Christian; only 62 percent identify themselves with some Christian faith.

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Generation Y is at the leading edge of what Chris Bowers has pointed out is an extremely fast-growing demographic: **the non-Christian coalition**. Between 1990 and 2001, according to **CUNY's American Religious Identification Survey**, non-Christians grew by 84 percent (from 20 million to 37 million adults), including an astonishing increase of 106 percent (from 14 million to 29 million) among seculars.

Generation Y is very liberal on social issues. A majority (53 percent) flat-out support allowing gay marriage. And 63 percent say women should have the legal right to choose an abortion.

Generation Y is unusually liberal in an ideological sense. More Generation Y adults say they are liberal (31 percent) than say that they are conservative (30 percent).

Generation Y leans strongly Democratic. Generation Y adults give Democrats an eleven-point edge on party identification (39 percent to 28 percent).

Of course, there's no guarantee Generation Y adults will stay as Democratic and liberal as they are now—change is possible (but much less likely after the age of 30, which is not so far away for the leading edge of this generation).

But they're off to a good start! If Generation Y is the future of American politics, their relatively diverse, secular, liberal, and Democratic character can only make those on the center-left smile, and the conservative establishment in Washington scowl.

Revolt of the Middle?

In E.J. Dionne's April 26 column, "**Revolt of the Middle**," he remarked:

[S]omething important has happened since President Bush's inauguration. America's moderates may not be screaming, but they're in revolt. Many who reluctantly supported the president and the Republicans in 2004 are turning away. The party's agenda on Social Security, judges and the Terri Schiavo case is out of touch with where moderate voters stand. Worse for Bush and his party, most moderates have a practical, problem-solving view of government and think these issues are far less important than shoring up a shaky economy and improving living standards.

The moderates have rebelled before. This period in American politics is beginning to take on the contours of the years leading up to the 1992 election. That's when Ross Perot led an uprising of the angry middle and Bill Clinton waged war on the "brain-dead politics of both parties." Bush's decision to read the 2004 election as a broad mandate for whatever policies he chose to put forward now looks like a major mistake. In fact, Bush won narrowly in 2004, and he won almost entirely because just enough middle-of-the-road voters decided they trusted him more than they did John Kerry to deal with terrorism.

That seems entirely correct to me. Bush is losing the center of American politics, which, as

Alan Abramowitz points out in his analysis of “[The New Independent Voter](#),” leans Democratic to begin with. Bush’s actions seem designed to accentuate those leanings, rather than counter them, and have contributed mightily to his declining political fortunes.

[The new Washington Post/ABC News \(WP/ABC\) poll](#) provides exceptionally clear evidence of these declining fortunes. Bush’s approval rating is now 47 percent approval/50 percent disapproval, as low as it’s even been in this poll. His ratings on the economy and Iraq are, respectively, 40 percent/56 percent (his second-lowest ever) and 42 percent/57 percent. On energy policy, his rating is 35 percent/54 percent. And on Social Security, his approval rating has sunk to 31 percent/64 percent, by far his worst rating ever.

Other results in the poll underscore how Bush is losing the political fight on Social Security. The *Washington Post/ABC* poll has asked the following question since 2000:

Would you support or oppose a plan in which people who chose to could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market?

Note how the question does not mention any tradeoffs and does not associate the plan with Bush—both of which tend to depress support for privatization. Indeed, this question has about as favorable a wording for privatization as you are likely to see and has never returned a negative response—until now. But now it yields 51 percent/45 percent opposition. And when combined with a follow-up to supporters on whether they would approve of the plan if it “reduced the rate of growth of guaranteed Social Security benefits for future retirees,” opposition skies to an overwhelming 70 percent.

On who the public trusts to do a better job on Social Security, less than a third (32 percent) now say they trust Bush, compared to half who pick the Democrats in Congress. That eighteen-point gap in trust is by far Bush’s worst performance ever on this indicator. On Iraq, members of the public continue to regard the situation with little enthusiasm. By 54 percent to 44 percent, they say that the war was not worth fighting and, by 58 percent to 39 percent, they say that the United States is bogged down in Iraq.

As for the current brouhaha on ending the filibuster for judicial nominees, the public is overwhelmingly opposed (66 percent to 26 percent) to “changing Senate rules to make it easier for the Republicans to confirm Bush’s judicial appointments.” That includes 80 percent opposition among Democrats and 70 percent opposition among independents, demonstrating once again how the GOP’s actions are activating the political center against them.

The poll also demonstrates that Bush and the GOP are not faring well on the values front, supposedly a critical underpinning of their hold on power. Consider these data from the poll:

1. By 63 percent to 28 percent, the public supports embryonic stem cell research.
2. By 56 percent to 40 percent, the public supports some legal recognition of gay relationships and, by 56 percent to 39 percent, it opposes a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, preferring that states make their own laws on gay marriage.

3. By 56 percent to 42 percent, the public says that abortion should be legal in most or all cases.
4. By 51 percent to 47 percent, members of the public thinks that Bush does *not* share their values and, by 58 percent to 40 percent, believe that Bush does not “understand the problems of people like you.”
5. And how about this one: *by 47 percent to 38 percent, members of the public say that Democrats, not Republicans, better represent their own personal values.*
6. Does the public actually believe political leaders should rely on their religious beliefs in making policy decisions? No: by 57 percent to 40 percent, the public rejects that proposition, including by 65 percent to 27 percent among Democrats, by 59 percent to 38 percent among independents, and by 58 percent to 36 percent among moderates—once again showing how today’s political center leans very close to the Democrats. Along the same lines, independents (46 percent) and moderates (45 percent) are almost as likely as Democrats (52 percent) to think that religious conservatives have too much influence over the Republican party.

The center is there for the taking. When these voters lean Democratic to begin with and are edging close to outright revolt against the way Republicans are currently running the country, Democrats would be foolish to ignore this opportunity. Mobilization is great, but without the center it’s defeatable. With the center, it’s not. Need I say more?

Economic Pessimism Continues to Grow

New Gallup data show that the public’s negative views about the economy are only becoming more negative. Here’s the lead paragraph from their report on these data:

The latest Gallup survey finds Americans to be the most pessimistic they have been in two years about where the economy is headed. Today, 61% say the economy is getting worse, while just 31% say better—a net negative 30 percentage points. That is the worst rating since early March 2003—just prior to the beginning of the war in Iraq—when Americans gave the economy a net negative rating of 44 points, with 67% saying the economy was getting worse and only 23% saying better.

The data in the report also show that independents are particularly pessimistic about economic conditions. Among independents, 78 percent say that the economic conditions are only fair or poor, compared to 68 percent among the public as a whole. And independents believe by an incredible 69 percent to 22 percent margin—a net negative forty-seven points—that the economy is getting worse rather than better.

More raw material for the “Revolt of the Middle” (see above).

Oh Sure, Telling People You Want to Cut Their Benefits Will Certainly Turn These Numbers Around

A little bit before Bush told everyone that, yes indeed, he did want to cut their guaranteed Social Security benefits, Americans United to Protect Social Security released a Hart Research poll that showed how little progress—negative progress—his sixty-day tour to promote privatization had made. How anyone could look at these and similar data and conclude that Bush can turn things around by specifying how much he wants to cut benefits is beyond me.

Here are the key findings from the Hart Research poll:

1. Bush's approval rating on handling Social Security is now 32 percent, down from 43 percent on February 6.
2. In January, voters opposed Bush's Social Security proposals by 46 percent to 39 percent; today, they oppose them 52 percent to 41 percent.
3. The more voters hear about Bush's Social Security plan, the more they dislike it (52 percent), rather than like it (27 percent).
4. By 43 percent to 19 percent, voters say that, if their Congressional representative voted for Bush's plan, it would make them less likely, not more likely, to vote for them in the next election.
5. By 51 percent to 34 percent, voters believe Bush's plan would make the Social Security system weaker.
6. By 58 percent to 26 percent, they believe that Bush has been misleading about his plan, rather than providing a full and accurate description.
7. By 58 percent to 32 percent, voters say that Democrats are raising legitimate concerns about Bush's plan, rather than engaging in unfair political attacks.
8. Only 18 percent believe that Bush's plan would mean higher overall Social Security benefits.
9. In January, voters thought Congress should develop a new plan (64 percent), rather than pass the Bush plan (20 percent). Today, they believe the same thing by a bigger margin: 73 percent to 16 percent.
10. By 82 percent to 16 percent, voters say that Congress should wait on changing Social Security and educate the public, rather than make it a priority to change the system this year.

Sounds like good advice. We'll see if Congress and, especially, George "I'm going to cut your benefits" Bush take it.

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Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers—and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about—you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject. This and other publications can be found at The Century Foundation Web site:

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