



Millennials - “Generation O”!

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On November 9, 2008, the *New York Times* published “Generation O Gets Its Hopes Up,” an article by Damien Cave that gave yet another sobriquet to the oft-renamed Millennial Generation. The “O” to which Mr. Cave refers is, of course, the new President of the United States, Barack Obama, but he could just as easily be calling them “Generation Optimistic” as “Generation Obama.” Cave suggests that the generation may now forever be known as Generation O; I think time will tell with that, but I certainly agree that Obama has captured the hopes and dreams of many up-and-coming youth in a huge way, and represents a vision of the future to a generation who look to government overall, and – in many cases – Barack specifically, to make positive change in the world.

It is estimated that somewhere between 21 and 24 million voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2008 Presidential election—this is up at least 2 million, and possibly as much as almost 4.5 million from four years prior. According to some exit polls, nearly 70% of these young voters went for Obama. This is due, in large part, to the fact that Obama “gets” the Millennials, and they know it. Take Facebook, for example: in a November 17, 2008 *Online Media Daily* article, Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta discuss the huge role that Facebook and other social networking sites played in this groundbreaking electoral season: “[t]his election was the first time that all candidates – presidential and congressional – attempted to connect directly with American voters via online social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. It has even been called the ‘Facebook election.’ It is no coincidence that one of Obama’s key strategists was 24-year-old Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder. It was Hughes who masterminded the Obama campaign’s highly effective Web blitzkrieg—everything from social networking sites to podcasting and mobile messaging.”¹ According to the authors, Obama was savvy enough not to limit himself to the better-known networking sites like Facebook; he, like the Generation that may now even carry his name (or at least his initial), tuned to a wide plethora of sites, including YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, Flickr, Digg, BlackPlanet, LinkedIn, AsianAve, MiGente, Glee, and

others I wouldn’t begin to pretend I have even heard of, and in doing so, connected with Millennials in a way that his rivals – first Hillary Clinton and then John McCain – were unable to duplicate.

The proof is in the numbers on this one: while McCain could only count approximately 600,000 “friends” on Facebook, Barack’s buddies numbered over two million. As of this writing, in late November, 2008, a YouTube search for Barack Obama channels on YouTube turns up 1,080 hits, while a similar search for John McCain provides 387. Now, it should be noted that a general search on YouTube for videos for each of these candidates shows McCain in the lead with 171,000 videos to Obama’s 139,000; on the other hand, a search for “Yes We Can Obama” produces 8,690 results, including the ‘Yes We Can Barack Obama Music Video’ which, from its posting ten months ago, has been viewed an astounding 14,149,623 times. Further, as Fraser and Dutta report, “[o]n the micro-blogging platform Twitter, Obama could count on more than 112,000 supporters ‘tweeting’ to get him elected. McCain, for his part, had only 4,600 followers on Twitter.”²

In short, this is a politically active generation, and a lot of their activity does take place online. The October 2006 Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) survey of 18-24 year olds reported that 48% said they had signed an online petition, 31% had written an email or letter advocating a political position, 29% had contributed to a political discussion or blog advocating a political position, 21% had attended a political rally, 18% had donated money to a political campaign or cause, and 14% had volunteered on a political campaign for a candidate or issue. Additionally, 60% said they followed news about national politics closely.³ In a June 2007 report by the New Politics Institute, a political thinktank, this IOP survey is further analyzed, noting that “60% [of the 18-24 year-olds surveyed] thought political engagement was an effective way of solving important issues facing the country, and 71 percent thought such engagement was an effective way of solving important issues facing their local community. Millennials disagree with the idea that if the federal government runs something,

2. Ibid.

3. Harvard University Institute of Politics, “The 11th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service,” November 1, 2006, 11/28/08 [http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/Research-Publications/fall_2006_topline.pdf].

1. Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta, “Obama and the ‘Facebook Effect,’” *Online Media Daily* November 17, 2008, 11/28/08 [http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticleHomePage&art_aid=94861].

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it is necessarily inefficient and wasteful.”⁴

According to the Harvard University 15th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service, “when young Obama voters were asked to describe as thoughtfully as possible the reason that they are supporting the Illinois Senator, 30% mentioned, ‘can make a change’ and 14% said ‘fresh new voice and perspective’ – for a total of 44% citing change-related themes.”⁵ Obviously, it is not just about the numbers; it is really about the message that has garnered this kind of support, including financial support. As early as February 17, 2007, Peter Levine, deputy director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, a nonpartisan research center at the University of Maryland, was quoted in an article by Jose Antonio Vargas for the Washington Post discussing Obama’s appeal to today’s younger voters, saying, “Obama’s message is attractive to a certain type of young person. He’s saying: ‘You have a role to play. This is about you. About your role.’ There’s a real hunger for that kind of message.”⁶ This has great appeal for a generation that has been raised with such strong messaging about their value and worth to the world around them. The verbatim comments from the young adults surveyed in the Harvard Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service best exemplify this feeling amongst Millennial voters:

“He speaks to my generation in a way that no other candidate has and actually addresses the concerns that are specific to us. He represents change and hope in a political climate that is falling apart in a way that speaks to even the most cynical and bitter citizen.”
– 18-year-old white male at Oregon State.

“He supports progress toward a better global reputation and foreign relations. He supports a healthcare system that is on the side of the people, not the corporations. He represents a

4. New Politics Institute, “The Progressive Politics of the Millennial Generation,” June 20, 2007, 11/28/08 [<http://www.newpolitics.net/node/360>].

5. Harvard University Institute of Politics, “The 15th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service,” October 22, 2008, 11/28/08 [<http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Research-Publications/Polling/Fall-2008-Survey>].

6. Jose Antonio Vargas, “Young Voters Find Voice on Facebook,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2007.

change in the direction of the nation, toward greater equality for men, women, and minorities.”

– 20-year-old white female enrolled at Georgia Tech.

“He is a dynamic candidate who understands the struggles faced by the poor, middle class, and generally disadvantaged.”

He is ready to set the nation on a different path than it is heading.”

– 20-year-old African American female enrolled at Barnard College.⁷

This faith in government and optimistic hopes for a new path will be especially important if, as seems likely, we continue with the current economic downturn. Remember, Millennials can be typified by their belief that it is up to them to improve the world from the mess that was made by their predecessors. Obama’s inclusionary and consensus-oriented approach has great appeal to a generation that is so used to teaming and groupwork. They are well-documented as trusting of teams and systems – at least until their expectations are not met, at which point there may be hell to pay – and Obama, from the outset, at least appears to embody the optimism that typifies this younger generation. They seem to believe that Obama’s government is one that will value transparency, much like that of Facebook and other social networking sites. I find this faith quite amusing given that he is a Gen X-er himself, a generation that is often held in contempt by our Millennial successors due to their view that Generation X is just a bunch of jaded complainers. Personally, as an X-er myself, I take umbrage with this, but one cannot deny the force of optimism that personify the Millennials.

So, “Generation O”...these optimists are not just Obama supporters; after all, more than 30% are believed to have voted for another candidate for President, so they are not all connected by a common political candidate or ideology. But they may be connected by a common desire to make the world a better place. Even amongst business students, who are often stereotyped as only being concerned with the “almighty dollar,” there is a revolution happening. In his November 24,

7. Harvard University Institute of Politics, “The 15th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service,” October 22, 2008, 11/28/08 [<http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Research-Publications/Polling/Fall-2008-Survey>].

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2008 article “The Millennials Invade the B-Schools” appearing in *Business Week Magazine*, Geoff Gloeckler reports, “[s]ure, MBAs are still attracted to investment banks and accounting firms, but students from the Millennial Generation are increasingly interested in jobs where they feel they can make a positive difference—whether that’s building solar panels, running a food bank, or making microfinance loans in Africa.”⁸ Gloeckler goes on to state, “[e]lectives in such areas as sustainability and renewable energy are appearing in more course catalogs. And at Harvard, the Social Enterprise Club has replaced the finance and management clubs as most popular on campus. Carl Kester, finance professor and deputy dean of academic affairs, says that while idealism wasn’t altogether absent in the past, it has picked up steam. ‘It’s become very prominent since the Millennial Generation arrived at our doorstep,’ he says.”⁹

Business schools are not the only ones who are reacting. Plenty of companies are overhauling their employee recruitment materials to bring attention to their community service and environmental initiatives, all in an effort to attract the interest of prospective Millennial employees. The message here: if you want to recruit a Millennial to come to work at your organization, be prepared to answer some tough questions about what your company stands for, and how prospective employees can find meaning in their work and feel good about the company’s mission and the way in which it conducts its business.

This is the way of “Generation O.”

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8. Geoff Gloeckler, “The Millennials Invade the B-Schools,” *Business Week*, November 13, 2008.

9. Ibid.

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