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# US Politics and Generation Y: Engaging the Millennials

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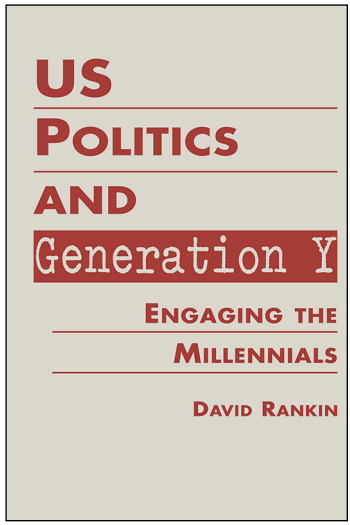



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# The Millennial Generation and US Politics

Politics is only as good as the people willing to participate.
*—Presidential candidate George W. Bush, 2000*

Yes we can. *—Presidential candidate Barack Obama, 2008*

"I've been looking [forward to this inaugural] ball for quite some time because when you look at the history of this campaign, what started out as an improbable journey, when no one gave us a chance, was carried forward, was inspired by, was driven by, young people all across America." These were the words of the nation's newly inaugurated president, Barack Obama, as he spoke to a beaming young crowd gathered at the MTV inaugural ball. It was a historic night for the United States, but a particularly profound night for the youth vote that had turned out in droves to support Obama's candidacy.

The 44th US president's words were punctuated by joyous cheers and chants of "yes we can," a central slogan of the Obama campaign. President Obama chuckled along with the boisterous enthusiasm of the memorable scene and continued his thoughts. "I can't tell you how many people have come up to Michelle and myself about how their daughter, she wouldn't budge, she just told me I need to vote for Obama. Or suddenly I saw my son, he was out volunteering and traveling and knocking on doors and getting involved like never before. And so a new generation inspired a previous generation and that's how change happens in America."

As the nation's 47-year-old president and the first lady danced to Etta James's "At Last," in a style he referred to as old school, a glowing sea of cell phone cameras captured this new millennial moment. It was the culmination of a pathbreaking campaign in which the emergence of

the so-called Millennial Generation played a critical role in shaping the future of US politics.

It would have been hard to conceive of this moment as we entered the new millennium. After the Y2K scare had worn off and with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal a fading memory, a new generation of students entered college campuses facing the first election of the twenty-first century or perhaps the last election of the twentieth century. Either way, it was a significant moment in US political history. And college students were generally uninspired and disengaged. Perhaps best exemplifying the mood during most of the 2000 election was a joke frequently posed that seemed to sum up the general sentiment about both candidates: "What do you get when you combine Bush with Gore? Bore."

Then something happened on Election Night 2000, on the way to choosing a president, and we have had little time since to catch our collective civic breath. In the new millennium, we have had a historic election, 9/11, a war on terrorism, war in Iraq, another historic election, Hurricane Katrina, continued war, and yet another historic election contest, not to mention economic crisis and other concerns. By 2004, whatever one thought at that point about George W. Bush and the election facing America, it was unlikely that "Bore" would elicit anywhere near the same meaning. And by 2008, the widespread enthusiasm of young voters seemed a millennium away from the apathy sweeping college campuses at the turn of the new century.

This book considers a relatively recent yet already historic period in US politics, one filled with sudden change as well as developing trends in political behavior, attitudes, and knowledge. In it, I examine how an emerging generation of citizens has contemplated the political world over time and at these critical moments. The book focuses particular attention on the college population nationwide while also contributing a unique survey of undergraduates enrolled in introduction to US politics courses over the first decade of this new millennium. From "freedom fries" to *The Daily Show*, the war in Iraq and YouTube, the Bush era and the age of Obama, we explore how a new generation is learning, thinking, and acting concerning US government and politics as the world swirls and unfolds inside and outside of the educational experience.

Students are refining and solidifying an emerging political consciousness in light of critical moments, the political context, related information resources, and learning. Inherent possibilities and challenges are always present as a younger generation finds its political place and civic footing. A succession of highly salient current events and political realities in this new century arguably heightened students' interest in and attention to aspects of US politics and government. Within this context,

I explore the role of higher education and, in particular, the introduction to US politics course in facilitating the connection between heightened political awareness and related knowledge. In a political environment often rife with emotion-laden symbolism, the book examines how political knowledge and learning can mitigate the influence of emotion while facilitating reasoned judgment as these young minds contend with all of the related information swirling around them.

Understanding how media and new media sources are utilized by this emerging generation is critical to understanding how information is accessed and related to learning. This book explores how the college introduction to US politics can work with media consumption trends and tendencies in order to facilitate knowledgeable media consumption within and beyond the classroom. Internet media is just one of many emerging resources that translate Millennial thought into action. How students are introduced to and learn about US politics also stimulates related interest and engagement.

This book looks at how a developing framework was already in place that would serve as a springboard for the widespread youth mobilization on behalf of the historic Obama candidacy. Yet the Millennial Generation also exhibits traits that raise questions about long-term civic commitments beyond a recent surge in their political interest and electoral engagement. Introductory lessons and experiences in US politics as our students make their way out of college campuses and into the work and civic space are not only a relevant consideration for our nation's institutions of higher education, but also an age-old concern for the health of American democracy.

First and foremost, we need to understand what stimulates political learning and engagement among Millennials as they are introduced to US politics. This book explores how an introduction to US politics course can facilitate new Millennial connections through the integration of contemporary issues of concern. This process includes recognizing the most salient of events for our students, identifying relevant points of political interest, building on surveillance knowledge, enhancing capacity for related policy judgments, and understanding more accessible channels for political participation. Students' attentiveness to salient new millennial political events can be connected to related political learning, interest, policy reasoning and preferences, traditional and new media sources, and familiar as well as emerging forms of political engagement. I examine how successful and sustained political learning and engagement derives from how Millennial cohorts come to connect their understanding of US politics with the unique events of their time.

## Talking About a New Generation in US Politics

Each US generation has its defining and enduring attributes (Lancaster and Stillman 2002; Strauss and Howe 1991). There is the World War II generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X. They each have their identities and their slogans. And each generation can also experience critical moments that suddenly change complacency into concern and apathy into action (Delli Carpini 1989; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Meredith and Shewe 1994).

In this book, I explore how salient Millennial generational experiences facilitate political learning connected to related interest, relevant concerns, resources, and engagement. However, the younger generation often is or at least feels misunderstood as it secures its own identity, related concerns, and actions. In 1965, Baby Boomer Roger Daltrey of The Who sang in "My Generation" about how "people try to put us down." In 2000 the rock rap outfit Limp Biskit took on the angst of Generation X and its perceived disrespect, screaming out, "Go ahead and talk s*** about my generation."

Generations seem to be stuck with the labels and impressions formed through the most visible youthful "time-bound" moments and experiences. Madison Avenue and pop historians seem to like it that way. Boomers are the "peace and love" and/or "protest" generation associated with Vietnam, civil rights, Woodstock, and challenge of authority. Gen Xers have their time-bound stereotypes like Grunge and Nirvana, *Slacker*, and MTV (when it was still considered a relatively new medium for music videos), but are not necessarily recognized for the high-tech jobs they shaped and manage or a booming economy steered by new skills and innovation (see, e.g., Gordiner 2008).

Unlike Xers, Boomers are also associated with more active engagement in politics, coming of age as they did during the JFK administration and grappling with such issues as the Kent State shootings, from service to the country to challenging the government. Generation X carries the more negative mantle of lower interest and engagement in politics, an expectation that they won't necessarily take on government but prefer that it leave them to their own devices (Craig and Bennett 1997). Yet as Robert Putnam (2000) observed in the national bestseller *Bowling Alone*, each successive age group since the World War II generation has fallen increasingly short in terms of participating in their civic duties and governmental expectations. According to some observers, the World War II was the "Greatest Generation" (Brokaw 1998; Mettler 2005), in large part because of general perceptions about their handling of historic events and crises as they came of age.

As we entered the twenty-first century, Generation X passed on the younger generation torch and, with it, future hopes and concerns for American democracy. Those born at the tail end of Generation X—in 1976 or 1977—would have been approaching their mid-twenties in 2000 and moving out of the 18–24 or 15–25 demographic by the early part of the new century. But for those born between 1980 and 1990, many were entering and exiting the college experience amidst the multiple, sudden, and transformative events of the early twenty-first century. Although the beginning point of what is called Generation Y, as the successor to X, has been debated, ranging from the late 1970s to early 1980s, one statistic is widely accepted: Students entering colleges in the twenty-first century are members of the largest generation in absolute numbers since the Baby Boomers born within the period 1946–1964. Members of Gen X have also been referred to as "Baby Busters" because of their small demographic impact, while the successor Generation Y has been called an "Echo Boom," more in the mold of another baby boom. With many of this latest group entering young adulthood and college around the turn of the new century, they were thus dubbed "Millennials."

In *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation,* Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) describe a generation born during the twentieth century's final decades, starting in 1982. Rather than growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, this generation was largely born in those decades. By 2000, this cohort numbered close to 80 million compared with about 78 million Boomers and about 40 million Xers. In *Generation We*, Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber (2008, 13) describe a Millennial cohort as those born between 1978 and 2000, comprising 95 million young people up to 30 years of age, the biggest generation in the history of the nation.

The sheer volume of this age group is beginning to make an impact on the democratic process and political life. By 2006, there were approximately 32 million 18- to 25-year-olds and 42 million in the age range of 18–29 years old. In 2008, 18- to 31-year-olds reached nearly 50 million strong, with about 40 percent of Millennials eligible to vote by Election Day. Based upon where one draws the starting and ending birth points for this generation, anywhere from 80 to 100 million Millennials will be of voting age by the 2016 election. Two presidential election cycles from now, this group we are just beginning to understand and that is still in the process of learning about and shaping its unique role in American democracy will be the most significant generational presence in US politics.

## Recognizing Millennial Differences

Entering the new millennium, there was increasing concern about the democratic prospects of the younger generation. Based on decades of accumulated findings, Putnam (2000) suggested that the younger generation was less knowledgeable about politics and less interested and involved in it than were earlier generations at the same age. He warned that the under-30s were paying less attention and thus knew less about current events than not only their elders but their same age groups in earlier decades. In *The Vanishing Voter*, Thomas Patterson (2002) argued young adults were less politically interested and informed than any cohort of young people on record, with 1960–2000 as the longest period of decline in US history. Other studies demonstrated that a younger age cohort was decreasingly likely to care about, know about, and engage in US politics and democracy (Macedo et al. 2005; Wattenberg 2008).

However, a number of trends started to reverse as we moved into the new millennium (CIRCLE 2002; Harvard IOP 2004). While the annual survey of our nation's college freshmen revealed a three-decade trend of declining political interest, hitting a record low in 2000, by 2006 more entering freshmen had expressed interest in discussing politics than at any point in the history of the forty-year survey, including the 1960s (HERI 2007). Studies concluded not only that the emerging generation was more politically engaged, but that we needed to recognize new forms of such democratic participation (Bennett 2007a; Dalton 2008; Zukin et al. 2006).

The nature of this generation's engagement (or lack thereof) has continued to be a matter of debate as Millennials find their way into or away from democratic life, depending on their individual perspectives. For example, Mark Bauerlein's (2008) book *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* and Jean Twenge's (2006) *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* describe troubling and self-absorbed, civically disengaged aspects of this age group. On the other side, Greenberg and Weber's (2008) *Generation We: How Millennial Youth Are Taking Over America and Changing Our World Forever* and Winograd and Hais's (2008) *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics* paint a much more optimistic, politically savvy, and civically engaged picture of early Millennial impact.

There are clearly differing perspectives on how this emerging generation will or will not contribute to democratic life in the United States. However, there is agreement that the Millennial experience is unique and the opportunities and challenges for this generation are very much associated with the times. In addition to technology, Winograd and Hais point to triggering events such as 9/11, war, and environmental disasters as critical moments that have shifted Millennials toward civic realignment. And Greenberg and Weber argue that such critical events and issues have spurred this generation to engage more in communities and in politics, armed with the promising possibilities of new technology, related skills, and understanding. On the other hand, Bauerlein (2008, 201) argues that today's pervasive technology allows Millennials to "steer competitive instincts toward peer triumphs and not civic duty . . . preferring the company of peers to great books and powerful ideas and momentous happenings" (234). But, in essence, he agrees with Twenge's (2006, 8) assertion that the "accelerated pace of recent technological and cultural change makes it more important than ever to keep up with generation trends. A profound shift in generational dynamics is occurring right now in the 2000s."

## New Millennial Impact

Interest in and perceived relevance of significant events can contribute to a lasting worldview (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Zukin et al. 2006) and provide a critical pathway for a generation. It is all about why and when Millennials are paying attention to politics and what political events grab their attention. I contend that recognizable salient events emerging in these young lives contribute to their political knowledge, interest, policy reasoning, and engagement.

In generational terms, the swirl of events occurring in a short time frame brings to mind the cascade of crises from the Great Depression into World War II, an era forever linked with its generation of the same name. Although new millennial events are hardly of the magnitude of the 1930s–1940s, outside of the Vietnam War/Watergate nexus it is hard to imagine in the post–World War II era a period in which so many significant political events were visited upon one particular US generation.

Reflecting on the 2005 survey of US college freshmen, Director Sylvia Hurtado of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) noted the impact of "period effects, societal or world events that impact

students during an impressionable time of their lives," and the lasting impact on the affected group (HERI 2005a). The Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) concluded after a review of its 2007 national survey findings that, like the generation schooled by Vietnam and civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s, today's college students also have come together in a time of significant political events of historical importance (IOP 2007). And Cliff Zukin and his coauthors (2006, 209) pondered, "Perhaps the chain of events beginning on 9/11 and including the 2004 election will yet mark a watershed, drawing more Americans more consistently into political life, and even serving as a 'defining moment' for the political identity of Nets [the authors' name for the Millennial Generation]. Only time will tell."

Such reports and related studies have acknowledged the importance of such events to a generation's perspective and engagement. However, they have not examined how critical new millennial events trigger related knowledge and connect to related interests, policy choices, media sources, and aspects of engagement. In short, they do not examine how new Millennial connections can translate their attentiveness to these significant events into connected learning and engagement, and particularly how introduction to US politics courses can strengthen these vital connections.

## Salient Connections

As Niemi and Junn (1998, 51) note about the pre-collegiate level, "If high school classes do little to generate political learning and interest it may be because they are dealing sparsely with contemporary events, problems or controversies. Students retained knowledge on aspects of civic information that were already familiar to them from other contexts or somehow meaningful in a more direct way." Niemi and Junn's findings are not bound to the high school environment and are just as relevant to the collegiate experience, particularly for students in introduction to US politics courses making that initial transition. Introducing current events and issues that are relevant to students' lives has been found to boost civic learning (Hess 2009; Lopez and Kirby 2007). While studies connect current events with student learning (Beaumont et al. 2006; Galston 2007; Youniss and Levine 2009), none have examined the course integration of new millennial salient events over a decade.

As Bauerlein laments (2008, 156), "Young people have too much choice, too much discretion for educators and mentors to guide their

usage. . . . Inside the classroom, they learn a little about the historical past and civic affairs, but once the lesson ends they swerve back to the youth-full, peer bound present" (200). If one accepts such a perspective, it would seem more important than ever to connect significant and visible political events with the learning process. Working with Millennials' identified areas of interest in politics is critical. There is the need to integrate the political events that our Millennial-age students find to be most relevant.

Events are more likely to resonate when they are highly visible and accessible to the group because they are paying a great deal of attention to an event, crisis, process, and/or issue for some length of time. In other words, there is salience. We would typically associate salience with the most high-profile events, but it can also be matters of particular significance and thus attentiveness by a particular group, in this case Millennials. To introduce a salient event is to introduce relevance, which arguably enhances related learning, interest, and engagement. Thus, I argue that the integration of salient political events as part of an introduction to US politics can generate, reinforce, and/or help to illuminate related learning and interest.

## The (Surveillance) Learning Equation

Scholars do question whether citizens need a large store of information to fulfill basic roles as citizens in American democracy (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). What may be most essential to functioning in the contemporary political environment is more of a monitorial obligation (Schudson 1998; Zaller 2003). In this view, citizens should be knowledgeable about acute and pressing problems in the news, perhaps only intermittently surveying political news (Graber 2001; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). When exposed to them, people appear to handle certain surveillance facts more readily than they do textbook facts, and surveillance facts tend to be those that are picked up from and reinforced by the media (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991).

Because awareness of contemporary political figures and facts presumably depends on a relative surveillance or at least basic grasp of related current events, such understanding is often referred to as surveillance knowledge (e.g., identifying a US senator). On the other hand, there are facts, processes, and institutions in US politics and government that are unchanging, unaffected by political changes and events (e.g., identifying the length of a US Senate term). Commonly referred to

as textbook knowledge, such understanding is a foundation of civics curricula in the pre-college experience, and is addressed in the introductory textbooks in a college course on US politics.

We have ongoing debates about what our youth should know when it comes to US politics (e.g., Bauerlein 2008; Wattenberg 2008), with reports continuing to filter in about the dismal state of the younger generation's civic knowledge (e.g., Galston 2004, 2007; NAEP 1998, 2006). But what exactly are Millennial-age college students likely to know and why, and how can we build on the type of knowledge most significantly connected to political attentiveness, interest, policy reasoning, and engagement?

We hope that our students are gaining some basic foundation of textbook knowledge in an introductory US politics course. While these figures can certainly improve, Millennials tend to fare no worse than their older age cohorts on textbook knowledge items, such as the veto override procedure (Zukin et al. 2006, 83). Where Millennials fall increasingly behind their elders is in surveillance knowledge, such as identification of political leaders and partisan control of Congress (Wattenberg 2008, 77–79). Yet despite identifying such gaps, little scholarly attention has been paid to what stimulates surveillance knowledge and learning, particularly in the classroom, and how it connects to political interest and engagement. This book explores how attentiveness to salient political events is particularly connected with our students' surveillance political knowledge, which I contend provides a critical connection to interest, policy reasoning, and engagement.

This book shows how Millennials absorb and utilize political knowledge, particularly surveillance knowledge, gained through the salient events of the times. It explores the influence of introductory levels of political learning on new Millennial interest and engagement. What elements of political learning are important? And how does political knowledge facilitate reasoned policy choices and political participation for our Millennial-age college students?

## Informing Millennial Judgment

This book provides access into the minds of Millennials, what type of political information they retain, reinforce, and utilize in reasoning about important policy decisions. What our Millennial students know and learn also impacts how they understand the policy choices in front of them, namely on the most salient political events and processes that

capture their interest. In a mediated political environment, our students are often bombarded with emotive political cues and images that trigger their own long-standing affective attitudes and predispositions to reach judgment in lieu of related political information. Political reasoning and sound policy judgments depend on access to and coherent processing of related information (Downs 1957; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000). Without related information, there is greater reliance on emotions, political cues, broad images, and what are called symbolic predispositions (Kuklinski 2001; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Westen 2007). While such cognitive shortcuts provide predictable and even stable responses in an oft-changing political environment (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), they also raise concern as to the basis of such attitudinal formation and the prospects for misguidance or even manipulation through misunderstanding (Redlawsk 2006).

Most books on Millennials examine their level and trends in knowledge and behavior, but pay little attention to the interplay between emotion and cognition that is particularly pronounced when information is introduced in a political learning environment. This book explores the important symbolic components of processing that citizens utilize when they are lacking significant information, and it demonstrates how our Millennial students also utilize such predispositions. Furthermore, it provides findings on how learning impacts that relationship. I explore countervailing forces of emotion and reason and look at how Millennials have exhibited both in light of emerging and seminal events, and how this relates to policy concerns. Indeed, these are the debates where students may need the most guidance as they sort through unfamiliar terrain, trying to utilize related information to formulate conclusions rather than rely on the host of emotional cues emanating from the mediated political environment.

In an early twenty-first century filled with profound change, crisis, symbolic, and, at times, threatening imagery, this book investigates how political knowledge and learning can provide Millennials with a reasoned counter to the often emotion-laden symbolic banter about politics and government swirling around them. Millennials' trust in government, confidence in the president, and conceptions of national identity can provide a symbolic connection to our nation, its leadership, and institutions, and can assist them in formulating related policy choices on issues of concern. Yet it is important to understand how political knowledge gains, as part of an introduction to US politics course, contribute to Millennials' policy reasoning and how such information is accessed.

## Mediated Challenges and Possibilities

To more fully sort out the role of an introduction to US politics course in this learning equation, it is critical that we understand to what extent Millennials rely (or don't rely) on the diverse media sources now available in a 24/7 cable news environment and across extensive Internet resources when it comes to political information. Wattenberg (2008, 76) surmises, "Without reading a daily newspaper, watching the TV news, or otherwise following current events, even the best educated people will probably not pick up much knowledge about the political world. . . . Given their relative lack of exposure to political news and current events, young people should be falling more and more behind their elders in terms of political knowledge despite their relatively high levels of educational achievement." Bauerlein (2008) argues that young adults now have the choice to avoid current events and civic knowledge, which puts even more onus on educators to reach these developing minds when the opportunity is available and before bad habits are set.

While I explore how a variety of media sources relate to our students' political knowledge, I proceed with the assumption that media sources do not construct but, instead, work to integrate the salient political events that connect to the interests of our Millennial-age students. If Millennials simply choose to avoid certain political topics in the media because they have no inherent interest in them, we cannot impose interest simply by introducing media coverage. Media resources work most effectively for Millennials when they are combined with identified salient political events to build interest.

Surveillance knowledge, in particular, lags behind that of older age demographics because Millennials are less likely to pay as much attention to news media. However, once properly exposed to information, people learn about politics (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). But with so many media choices and distractions, the classroom is arguably one of the few enduring places in which the younger generation and thus future citizens may collectively experience and consistently consider significant political events. And the introduction to US politics course is one of the logical places to consider related newsworthy events in a way that presumably aims to work with and stimulate political learning habits and related connections.

While this book explores how our Millennial-age students can still make use of more traditional media sources such as TV news, it also examines the emerging importance of Internet use and even soft news/entertainment media to focus Millennial attention on salient events,

surveillance learning, and political interest. There is an ongoing debate over the positive and negative aspects of the Internet (Anderson 2004; Loader 2007; Tapscott 2008) and the distractions and possibilities of entertainment media (Baum 2002; Mindich 2005; Prior 2005). When it comes to Millennials' political knowledge and engagement, I argue that it is not the media technology but the accessible and relevant use of media sources that enhances related learning and engagement. This book explores how the integrated use of multimedia sources in introduction to US politics courses significantly relates to and connects with attentiveness to political events, surveillance knowledge, and interest. Relevance and accessibility are key factors for these students as they seek media resources for related knowledge and engagement connected to their own attentiveness and interest.

Little attention has been paid to understanding how to connect related political knowledge, interest, and media resources for this generation. Rather, many bemoan the fact that these young adults do not possess the requisite knowledge, and the idea that information acquisition has changed so dramatically that we must adapt to this new method of learning and reasoning is lacking. This book explores how knowledge and interest relate to political knowledge and how both long-standing and new technologies can also work in support of this dynamic rather than against it.

## Connecting Political Interests and Engagement

There are important implications in understanding how our Millennial-age students learn to think about and access related political information about US politics and government. More knowledgeable and informed citizens are more likely to actively engage in politics and community (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Yates and Youniss 1998). Political participation also enhances political knowledge, so the two are mutually reinforcing (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In this book, I also explore how attentiveness to salient political events, media sources, and political knowledge—namely surveillance knowledge—significantly relate to our students' political participation.

Importantly, I examine how our students' attentiveness to salient political events is also connected to interest in politics, which, in turn, leads to greater participation in political life, such as we've seen in recent presidential elections. However, despite heightened interest in national politics, Millennials continue to demonstrate much higher lev-

els of community volunteerism than engagement in the very national-level issues that appear to captivate their attention, presenting a potential disconnect between community involvement and active political participation. I contend that it is thus important to account for multiple dimensions of our students' political interest in order to more effectively connect Millennials' relevant interests, related knowledge, and attentiveness with opportunities for participation at the local and national levels, and even in the expressive dimensions of politics, including political film, music, and protest. Throughout this book, we explore how engaging our Millennial-age students in US politics involves identifying and integrating the emerging political events that have their utmost attention. This attentiveness connects to a Millennial construction of interests, attitudes, and perspectives, which can facilitate political learning within and beyond the classroom. Many studies have contended that the younger generation cares less and less about US politics, learning about it, or being involved in it. I take the approach that it is not so much that they don't care as it is about facilitating connections with the events that capture their attention. It is about connecting with their interests, identifying the most accessible media sources, and utilizing the learning environment to help them effectively process policy issues and debates of perceived importance.

It is critical to recognize how to link an introduction to US politics with the political world Millennials inhabit. Zukin et al. (2006, 93) note that for the Millennial-age group, "lack of involvement seems to be more due to a lack of relevancy than rejection." This book demonstrates that Millennials are far from politically disengaged while adding that introduction to US politics courses can play a significant role in facilitating critical "new Millennial" political connections.

## Political Higher Learning

How, what, and where Millennials learn about and apply their knowledge in US politics is a concern that is directly relevant to the educational environment. Millennials have been entering our nation's campuses in increasing numbers, with encouraging trends in political interest and participation during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and there is continuing concern regarding their pre-college level of civic knowledge (NAEP 1998, 2006, 2010). Serving as a de facto nation's report card across multiple subjects, including civics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) findings continue to show

well over one-third of high school seniors testing below what William Galston (2004, 264) has claimed is "the working knowledge that most citizens need," "indicating near total civic ignorance," and "without any discernible payoff in increased civic knowledge." NAEP civic reports have put about one-quarter of twelfth graders at or above the basic level of civic proficiency, with the ability to do things like "identify a leadership position in Congress" or "identify and explain a constitutional principle." Importantly, Niemi and Junn (1998, 29) conclude from the NAEP results, "It is when matters are outside a student's experience, they are less aware and unable to apply lessons learned in the classroom."

Scholars from John Dewey (1916) in *Democracy and Education* to Harry Boyte (2005) in *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens with Public Life* have discussed the vital relationship among public education, civic life, and American democracy. For some time, however, questions have been raised over just how effective civics education is in civic learning (Corbett 1991; Erickson and Tedin 1995; Jennings and Niemi 1974; Ravitch and Viteritti 2001), while others argue that civics education can be connected to a wide range of political learning (Levine 2007a; Milner 2002; Reeher and Cammarano 1997; Torney-Purta 2002). Whatever the pre-college civic learning impact, Macedo and others note in *Democracy in Risk* (2005, 1), "citizens need public information, but the number of civics courses taken in public schools has declined by two thirds since 1960."

With increasing concern over civic learning and engagement at the pre-college level, attention has also turned to higher education. For example, in 1999 the *President's Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* orchestrated by Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than one thousand colleges and universities, called on higher education to take seriously its commitment to civic learning and democratic renewal (Longo 2007, 9). In 2006, *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education's Failure to Teach America's History and Institutions* by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) reported on a survey of fourteen thousand freshmen *and* seniors at fifty colleges and universities conducted by the University of Connecticut Department of Public Policy. The average college senior failed in all four subjects of America's history, government, international relations, and market economy, and did little better than the freshmen, in which certain types of civic knowledge would stick and slightly increase while others would not.

Despite the increasing demand for college education, there has not been a corresponding rise in overall civic knowledge, though it is not

worse overall (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Pew 2007). However, Macedo et al. (2005, 30) conclude, "the fact that political knowledge has held steady in the wake of a massive increase in education is really a net loss." It balances out since college graduates are about as knowledgeable as high school graduates were about fifty years ago, and high school graduates are at about the level of high school dropouts of that period (Galston 2007, 630). Our nation's universities are enrolling more students, but questions remain as to just how much our undergraduates are learning about US politics, what we can do to improve this learning curve, and how this relates to sustained political interest and engagement.

Higher civic education efforts cross discipline and department lines, with the recognition that there is no course that can claim to be the ultimate resource for civic learning. Students are found to learn about and engage in civic life in different ways, stimulated by different instructors, topics, methods, and avenues of awareness and participation (Colby et al. 2003; Jacoby et al. 2009; Youniss and Levine 2009). Yet as Anne Colby and others reason in *Educating for Democracy* (2007, 41), "more explicit attention to political learning is necessary if we are to take full advantage of higher education's opportunities to prepare thoughtful, skilled, and active citizens."

While it is useful to compare college freshman and college senior civic knowledge to determine *if* learning has occurred, it does not provide us with *how* and *why* our college students learn and retain certain types of political information. Furthermore, we are left wondering how increases in political learning are related to other political attitudes, interests, and engagement. And what about the influence of unforeseen and evolving political events during the learning experience as new and developing information is inevitably transmitted via diverse media channels to our students? How do our Millennial-age students learn political foundations while incorporating emerging political information into evolving understanding, policy decisionmaking, and engagement in US politics? How do we integrate the most salient millennial events, our students' attentiveness to and knowledge of them, their ability to reason through critical policy choices to facilitate related action, and engagement as part of an introduction to US politics?

## Entering US Politics

Although there is no universal laboratory setting to explore the nature and impact of political learning on Millennial-age students, the intro-

ductory US politics course offered across all college campuses provides one of the more familiar environments in which students are exposed to enduring principles and evolving political information directly relevant to US politics and government. While there may be a stronger interest than average in politics, or at least a curiosity about it, that leads a student to enroll in such a course, a student's presence is more likely the product of a general education requirement that compels students across all majors, diverse levels of political interest, and knowledge to step into this class. Across nearly all US colleges and universities, introduction to US politics is one of the core course choices available as part of a general elective requirement. While it is somewhat self-selecting, it provides about as broad a cross section of the Millennial-age cohort possible in any given learning context.

It also represents for many adults the last time that they think and discuss US politics at such length. Thus in its own way, the introduction to US politics course is a civic clearinghouse for students and future citizens as they make their way through higher education and into the "real world." The rest will be material they learn (or do not learn) on their own as citizens, as news consumers, and as active or inactive participants in the body politic.

Studies have pointed out how introductory courses in politics, namely the introduction to US politics course, can impact student political learning and engagement (Bernstein 2008; Colby et al. 2007; Huerta and Jozwiak 2008). Such studies, however, have tended to focus on one point in time, even on multiple campuses in the same year, which provides for a more static political context. Thus we may be able to consider the recent impact of an election, a crisis, or an event, but we cannot really examine similar or differing information contexts and changing circumstances over time.

In this book, we are able to examine the US politics dynamic over multiple semesters and years, and thus different political contexts for an emerging generation. In this regard, the data collected and examined here allow us to explore how new millennial events and debates outside of the classroom intersect with developing perceptions and knowledge within it. This is not to suggest that students will only learn about US politics within such a course. As we have discussed, there is debate over whether any class or classes can directly enhance overall civic learning. However, a US politics course provides a unique opportunity to examine how and what students can learn and retain about politics and how intervening political events and information contribute to evolving understanding, interest, and engagement.

## Collecting Data at an Introductory Level

On our own college campus at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Fredonia, we set about surveying the hundreds of students each semester enrolled in our introduction to US politics courses to gauge political attentiveness, knowledge, and engagement. We began at the end of the Clinton presidency amid not only the 2000 presidential election but also the historic campaign of First Lady Hillary Clinton for US senator from New York. We continued to survey students entering and completing our US politics courses but couldn't have anticipated many of the dramatic and historic events that would transpire over a relatively short period. Just as a new century was dawning, our students were introduced to US politics with the 2000 recount, 9/11, a war in Iraq, a contentious 2004 reelection, the Obama candidacy and victory, rapid technological change, and a host of other events, issues, and factors.

In fall 2000, we began collecting anonymous and voluntary surveys with paper-and-pencil administration for students completing our US politics courses. From fall 2001 to fall 2005 and in fall 2008, spring 2009, and spring 2010, we collected questionnaires from students both beginning and completing the course. Students were provided approximately 15 minutes to complete the surveys in class with their instructor present (see Appendix A for question wording and design). Students entering in the fall were surveyed at one point during the first week of the course, late August to early September. Students exiting in the late fall were surveyed at one point during the final two weeks in early to mid-December. Students entering the course in the spring were surveyed at one point during the first week, late January to early February, and students exiting in late spring were surveyed at one point during the final two weeks, early to mid-May.

In all, we collected 2,752 surveys for students entering over sixty different course sections with ten different instructors of the introduction to US politics courses at SUNY Fredonia across the period of the study. We collected a total of 2,664 surveys for students completing the US politics courses at SUNY Fredonia, fall 2000–fall 2005, fall 2008, spring 2009, and spring 2010. Where surveys were collected at the beginning and also the completion of the course, a unique identifying code was utilized to match pre- and post-course surveys of individual respondents. There were 2,019 US politics students at SUNY Fredonia who completed both entering and exiting surveys. Overall, 51 percent of our survey respondents are female students and 49 percent are male.

The university Human Subjects Committee approved the questionnaire for in-class use.

The class enrollment for our US politics sections averages about fifty students, with a few in the one hundred range, an enrollment figure that clearly varies across college campuses. SUNY Fredonia is one of thirteen university colleges in the State University of New York system. The campus enrolls just over five thousand undergraduate students. As the westernmost SUNY campus, Fredonia is close to the shores of Lake Erie and the borders of Pennsylvania and Ontario, Canada. It is about equal distance—about 50 miles—from Buffalo, New York, and Erie, Pennsylvania. The campus draws its enrollment predominantly from New York state, with the heaviest student representation from the surrounding Erie, Monroe, and Chautauqua counties. The student body has a healthy mix of urban, suburban, and rural populations. And state legislative representation from which these students are predominantly drawn closely reflects the national Republican and Democratic balance. Chautauqua County, home to SUNY Fredonia, has been one of the most reliable county barometers nationwide in presidential elections. Since 1980, the county has voted for the presidential winner in every election.

The general region has also served as a valuable resource for classic studies on the US electorate. For example, Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarfeld, and William McPhee's 1954 book, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*, depended on a study of the Elmira, New York, population during the 1948 election. In an influential book published in 1976, *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections*, Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure utilized panel surveys of six hundred respondents in Syracuse, New York, during the 1972 presidential election.

Our region, campus experience, student body, and courses have some unique characteristics. Thus this book relies as well on student surveys we conducted at several other universities and integrates national survey findings on the undergraduate population and on the broader Millennial Generation as a critical lens through which to consider our own survey results. We also extended our survey across the country to 398 students completing introduction to US politics courses at the University of California at Santa Barbara in spring 2003, fall 2004, and summer 2008. A total of 108 students were surveyed at the end of the course in the spring 2001 semester at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls. Across the Atlantic Ocean, we surveyed 369 students entering the introduction to politics course at Northumbria

University in the United Kingdom for the fall 2003, spring 2004, spring 2005, and fall 2005 terms. We also surveyed one hundred students from across the SUNY system participating in the SUNY Washington internship program, fall 2006–summer 2007.

All in all, we collected 6,429 college student questionnaires across the time period, fall 2000–spring 2010. Each questionnaire distributed to students consisted of approximately 75–80 items, including multiple measures of political attitudes, preferences, attentiveness, behavior, and knowledge (see Appendix A for wording). Most questions were based on the National Election Studies and General Social Survey, but others were constructed to measure more specific views of breaking events and critical moments in domestic affairs, foreign affairs, and political leadership.

What students bring to the US politics experience is a critical part of how they may in turn process information and engage related material. Students will have different interests and majors that may facilitate certain predispositions to retaining information. But most students are in the same boat as they enter the US politics course. Overwhelmingly they are taking the course as part of a general requirement. For instance, in any given semester, approximately 5 percent of our SUNY Fredonia students in the introduction to US politics course are majoring in political science, about 1 percent have a political science minor, and only about 3 percent are considering a major in political science. Even for those very few students already established as political science majors or considering it as a minor, this is an initial introduction to the subject, and our survey results show they have no inherent differences from, say, music majors when it comes to preexisting levels of political knowledge, interest, attentiveness, and so on.

On average, introduction to US politics course sections at SUNY Fredonia enroll forty to fifty students, but the fall 2000, fall 2004, and fall 2008 terms each had one section with 100–120 students enrolled. With the exception of fall 2003 and spring 2004, three different instructors in each semester would distribute the questionnaires to their US sections. Overall, ten different political science instructors distributed surveys to their respective classes at SUNY Fredonia, fall 2000–spring 2010.

With over sixty course sections and nearly three thousand different students surveyed at SUNY Fredonia alone, the objective was to identify the relationship between and impact of variables independent of individual course differences. Despite some instructional differences, course readings, assignments, and debate and discussion opportunities, expectations were remarkably similar across faculty and courses (see

Appendix B). We were able to measure variables of interest through an extensive student survey in order to assess relative learning impacts and connections for our Millennial-age students across the courses.

Admittedly, our surveys of US politics students do not fully represent Millennials or even the national college population. An introduction to US politics course on select campuses provides only a limited window on fully understanding an emerging generation's voice. It does, however, provide a firsthand look at how salient events *and* related learning impact developing political interests, preferences, and action for cohorts of this age group. It allows us to simultaneously examine the interplay of the instructional and broader information environment over multiple time periods in a relatively familiar setting. We can consider how higher education and the widespread introduction to US politics course, in particular, might play a critical role with regard to political understanding and engagement beyond college and the classroom experience.

To examine our US politics students with a proper recognition of the broader national population, this book considers both our student surveys and national representative surveys (e.g., Graber 2001; Lewis 2001). Our own surveys provide for a detailed and pointed texture drawn from the unique opportunity to survey our students through numerous and even unexpected critical events in a familiar yet evolving environment. At the same time, we include a national survey backdrop to illuminate and confirm observed dynamics and particular trends essential to understanding how the early new millennium has shaped the political mindset of an increasingly impactful generation. National surveys include findings and trends from Harvard University's IOP, UCLA's HERI, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the NAEP, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (Pew), the American National Election Studies, and the General Social Survey (GSS).

## The Organization of the Book

This collection of survey findings provides insight into how Millennials and their respective college populations have learned, responded, reasoned, and participated at a national and at a more local level in an eventful first decade of the twenty-first century. In Chapters 2 through 4 of this book, much of the contextual backdrop is the two terms of the George W. Bush presidency, an eventful period without a doubt in US

politics, regardless of how one assesses it. But what followed is perhaps an even more memorable time for Millennials as they embarked on an understanding of US politics and government as Barack Obama won the 2008 election and was sworn in as the nation's first African American president. In Chapters 5 and 6, I examine how the earlier millennial experience of our students and of this generation ultimately evolved into the levels of youth interest, attentiveness, participation, and impact that stunned many observers during the 2008 presidential campaign. Beyond this historic mobilization around a highly salient political event and process, I consider how Millennials can also connect their attentiveness to other emerging events, related political learning, interests, and unique preferences with other opportunities for sustained political engagement.

In Chapter 2, I examine how significant moments in the new millennium relate to what interests our college students and what they know about US politics. The chapter considers how attentiveness to high-profile events, including recent elections, the 9/11 attacks, and war in Iraq, relate to how and what students learn about US politics and government. Political events and processes outside of the college classroom are important to what is accessible and recognized within it. Surveillance knowledge of foreign and domestic political figures and facts, more than standard textbook knowledge, is connected to interest and attentiveness, which raises questions about the most appropriate ways to best facilitate political learning and engagement.

The sudden and dramatic events from 9/11 to the war in Iraq visited upon the younger generation in this new century provoked compelling challenges but also learning opportunities. In Chapter 3, I consider how our students have made sense of a dizzying array of historic events, policy questions, and debates in which we pay particular attention to attitudes, learning, and preferences on the evolving issue of war in Iraq. Studies find that for many of us, confusing decisions about domestic and foreign policy are often simplified through information shortcuts, which include emotive attitudes, symbolic predispositions, and political cues. Attentiveness to critical, if not crisis, events can reinforce information that can stimulate learning and retention. However, dramatic events can also provoke emotional reactions that can bypass citizen scrutiny in favor of more convenient symbolic attachments and accessible cues. Like the general population, many of our students were swept up in the imagery and emotion leading from 9/11 into war in Iraq. But as our surveys of US politics courses uncovered over the dramatic first years of the war, political learning also shaped how these emerging

citizens understood and reasoned about the most important of policy decisions a government can make.

How students receive political information both inside and outside of the classroom is a critical factor in how they will process it. And once we leave the educational setting, the wide-ranging media is the likeliest source of information consumption updating an understanding of politics and policy. Chapter 4 explores how evolving media use among younger adults provides challenges and opportunities for political learning, interest, and engagement. With noticeable changes in media sources just since the start of the new millennium, this chapter examines the debate over consumption patterns and what it means for information dissemination across the younger population as well as more specifically within the US politics instructional environment. Our findings show that higher levels of attention to TV news or Internet news are both related to higher political knowledge, with an emphasis on surveillance knowledge gains. Yet despite the fears that youth are wasting most of their time online with social networking sites, students with higher levels of net use also demonstrate greater political knowledge entering and exiting our US politics courses. As young adults develop new media habits, I also find that students may learn while laughing, as *Daily Show* attentiveness is strongly linked to political knowledge and learning. Moreover, it is the instructional environment providing for the incorporation of the multimedia experience that most successfully appears to generate political interest, attentiveness, and knowledge, three key factors that rely on each other to forge the active citizen.

In Chapter 5, I investigate how political learning and interest translate into participation and engagement for our students and this Millennial cohort as we transition from the Bush to the Obama era. There have been consistently higher levels of volunteerism for young adults at the community level, but whether such involvement will translate into broader and enduring political participation is of concern. How to encourage voting participation is explored, but the chapter examines why it is critical to extend understanding of US politics beyond presidential elections for democratic citizenship to really take hold in developing minds. There is higher interest in national than in local politics but a potential disconnect about how to translate such interest into action. The instructional environment is important in cognitively linking interest, knowledge, and participation, yet colleges can facilitate further opportunities outside of the classroom in public service. The foundation was laid for the Obama presidency by events and attitudes transpiring in

the early new century, but the translation of those views into civic action for the emerging generation is a work in progress.

"Democratic Directions for a New Millennial Generation," Chapter 6, sums up competing attributes of the generation coming of age in the twenty-first century and discusses challenges and opportunities in stimulating higher levels of related Millennial political knowledge, interest, and participation. A recognition and understanding of how this generation demonstrates consumer and civic components, private and public predispositions, distraction, and deeper considerations is just one of the seeming contradictions that actually work together in translating thought into action for many of these developing citizens. Millennial attachment to their cohort, confidence in democracy, and reasoned debate for policy solutions appear to provide important democratic connections that stretch beyond partisan politics and an emphasis on the presidency as channels for political interest and engagement. There is a critical role here for the educational environment, particularly during times of eventful and dramatic transformation, to engage young minds in new democratic debates and possibilities. While educators can assist in identifying how best to interpret and engage the political world, in the end the responsibility rests with each new generation to utilize evolving resources essential to the future of US politics and democracy. As this book unfolds, it demonstrates how the first decade of a new century has already impacted the relationship between a Millennial generation, its student body, and the US body politic.