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## Millennials Move Socialist

*Walter McLaughlin, who manages a small-business lending department for a regional bank, is the father of two Millennials.*

*"Freedom is never more than one generation from extinction."*

— Ronald Reagan

This past February, the *Washington Post* published an article exploring why Millennials — young people born between 1982 and 2002 — were flocking in droves to support Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. Although many considered him retro-cool with his wild hair and cranky demeanor (reminiscent of Doc Brown from the *Back to the Future* trilogy), along with his incessant railing against real or perceived economic and social injustice, one young entrepreneur summed up the appeal of his message in a manner oddly similar to how many Donald Trump supporters feel. "It isn't working," asserted Tyler Mackie, "and if it isn't working, you try something else."



On the surface, the embrace of the self-proclaimed "democratic socialist" by a generation of younger voters may seem surprising, but those on the front lines of the battle for the hearts and minds of America's youth saw this phenomenon coming. In the view of freedom-loving educators, America has been in a state of decline for decades, with the root causes as close as the public school down the street. The popular conceptions that the current situation "isn't working" manifests itself in large part from an educational system designed to ensure dependence upon a government that paradoxically no longer represents the will of the people.

To understand how the United States is at a generational crossroads, it is important to examine the facts and fallacies behind the issues younger voters have been rallying around this election cycle. The following are four key factors that underscore the perception that America is in a state of decline — and what can be done about it.

## Government

On the stump, Senator Sanders makes income inequality his signature issue. By the math, there *is* income disparity in the United States. How bad is it?

According to a 2015 report issued by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the top 10 percent of Americans earn roughly 28 percent of the nation's overall personal



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income. While the numbers show a clear divide, they are roughly in line with the majority of rich countries around the world. Wealth distribution, on the other hand, is considerably more skewed: The top 10 percent possess nearly 77 percent of the country's overall wealth.

The single biggest reason wealth is concentrated within a relatively small percentage is the rise of the stock market. In the wake of the Great Recession, the Federal Reserve fired up the printing presses to reduce interest rates and artificially inflate the economy. With interest rates driven down to historic lows, investment capital shifted from cash and bonds (neither paying significant returns) to the equities markets. The resulting flood of cash doubled stock prices over the past seven years.

The top 20 percent own more than 80 percent of available financial assets. As stock values have risen, so has the wealth gap, a statistic made even more glaring by the fact that more than half of Americans own no stocks whatsoever. In a very real way, the Federal Reserve's manipulations directly led to the rise of Bernie Sanders.

*Where Millennials stand:* The word "socialism" does not evoke the type of negative imagery in young adults as with previous generations. A YouGov survey in January concluded that among respondents under the age of 30, socialism beat out capitalism, 43 percent to 32 percent.

Steve Byas, a history professor at Hilsdale Free Will Baptist College in Moore, Oklahoma, considers the preference of socialism by Millennials to be reactionary — not revolutionary — and blames the public school system. "It [capitalism] hasn't really been taught," he said. "Concepts of the free market aren't being properly explained. Millennials just haven't heard much about it."

Dr. Steve Bonta of Penn State University at Altoona agrees, stating that governmental control is at the root of the issue. "The public school system is a big part of the problem," he said. "Since schools are funded by the Department of Education, they repeat the government line, which encourages dependence, not freedom. It may be implicit, but it's there."

*Where there's hope for the future:* Dr. Bonta cites the abandonment of limited government, traditional American values, and laissez-faire economics as the reasons behind America's downward cycle, one that has ultimately caused dominant societies throughout history to implode. "My hope is that Millennials will figure it out with their brains, not just their hearts," he said. "If we succeed in reversing trends and going back to less government and more personal responsibility, that will be a historic first."

## Education

Another key plank of the Bernie Sanders platform is tuition-free college, a social benefit offered in European countries such as Germany, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway. Sanders repeatedly praises northern Europe for providing free college to its citizenry. "I think we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway," Sanders said, "and learn what they have accomplished for their working people."

But as the saying goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch. PolitiFact National reported that in 2013, the five countries with the highest percentage of gross domestic product from tax revenues were Denmark, France, Belgium, Finland, and Sweden, with Germany ranking 12th. The United States was a distant 61st at 26.9 percent, slightly above half the taxation of Denmark. It's abundantly clear that college educations are *not* free — they are simply paid for by everyone.



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Does such a system lead to a more educated populace? Per the OECD, the answer is a resounding no. The United States ranks fifth in the world, with 43.1 percent of its population holding college degrees. No European country does better, and many are considerably further down the list.

*Where Millennials stand:* With the explosion of college tuition costs, it's little wonder why Millennials are excited by the promise of a "free" education, especially with student-loan debt mushrooming out of control. Calls for free college as a social benefit are a knee-jerk response that fails to address the twin issues of bloated school administrations and a diminishing sense of personal responsibility. Pivoting the battle to those two fronts would do far more to solve the problem than increased taxation and income redistribution.

"My students are enamored by Bernie Sanders," said Dr. Bonta. "They believe he will forgive their student loans; that's a huge part of his appeal." As to the soaring costs of a college education, he said, "The costs are being driven through the roof because of inflated administrative expenses. There are more administrators than ever before, and the first thing they do is promulgate new rules that require even more administration and compliance."

*Where there's hope for the future:* According to Alan Scholl, executive director of the online school FreedomProject Academy, private schools — primary, secondary, and tertiary, along with homeschooling — represent the best hope for America's educational system, pointing out that just the number of students taught at home has grown from 300,000 students 30 years ago to as many as 3.8 million today. "We are being pushed in a direction that nobody ever talks about or even recognizes," said Scholl. "I believe somewhere between 80 and 85 percent of our lost freedoms have come as a result of our public education system."

## Religion

A 2014 Pew Research study indicated that Millennials are the most religiously disaffected generation in American history. At 35 percent, the ratio of unaffiliated, agnostic, and/or atheist young adults is more than twice that of Baby Boomers (17 percent).

Over a third reject the grounding religion offers with respect to morals and values, a fact that many believe damages the fabric of society. "This is the 'none' generation," explained Scholl. "When asked their religious beliefs, their answer is 'none.' They don't have the anchor of religion to balance their thinking."

The concept of absolute truth has also diminished. Millennials often reject the idea that certain questions have predetermined answers. "If you're talking about absolute moral truths," said Dr. Bonta, "comparatively few believe in those things. In order to believe in absolute truth and given the pervasiveness of secularism, you would have to be buttressed by strong religious faith."

*Where Millennials stand:* By the numbers, organized religion doesn't have the same appeal to young adults it once did. However, most are still open to the concept of spirituality.

*Where there's hope for the future:* The openness of the current generation is perhaps the church's best hope to adapt to a changing spiritual landscape. "The evangelical churches have failed to present the intellectual case for Christianity," explained Byas. "There is certainly hope the church will tackle this issue before long."



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As Minister Natasha Patterson, chaplain resident at Emory University Hospital, wrote,

Many Millennials consider the church a place that tells you what you can or cannot do, not a place where they can effect change. No matter its form, my hope for the future is that the church remains a place where you can go to be rejuvenated and restored, where you can be a part of a community that embraces and loves you. In order to do that, we must negotiate and balance the role of the church with tradition and innovation, not either/or.

## Freedom

The advent of social networks has broken down traditional barriers and expanded boundaries, particularly for young adults. As a result, they are more accepting of ethnic or lifestyle differences, viewing the world through a prism much more diverse than previous generations.

Millennials have similarly become keenly attuned to social injustice, a characterization that cuts both ways. “If you look at college campuses, free speech areas have morphed into don’t-talk-to-me-about-anything-I-don’t-want-to-hear zones,” said Scholl. Dr. Bonta pointed out that the same attitude has reached the classroom. “Teachers at universities are aware of the need to measure our speech very carefully, making note of students that have the potential to be troublemakers,” he said. “One hears of faculty members getting called out on the carpet for using words that cause ‘micro-aggression.’”

A Pew Research Center survey showed that 40 percent of Millennials believe the government should prevent people from publicly making statements offensive to minorities, a viewpoint mirroring the type of political correctness railed against by Donald Trump. Instead of solutions based upon personal responsibility, Scholl said Millennials go the other direction. “When there’s a problem, the first thing many Millennials think of is government.”

*Where Millennials stand:* On balance, they are the most connected and diverse generation, but often take aggressive positions on perceived social inequity. In addition to college campus matters, “Social Justice Warriors” patrol social media, pouncing on comments — real or implied — they find objectionable.

*Where there’s hope for the future:* The metaphorical seesaw between tolerance and overreaction likely comes from the convergence of multiple influences, including social media, the state of public education and the decline of traditional conventions and values. “They are obviously highly skilled at computers and technology,” said Byas, “but as a group they have not yet been exposed to the concepts of liberty. The hope is they could grasp it if it were presented to them.”

Scholl believes the growth in homeschooling and private education is key toward re-establishing balance. “Schools like ours return the control of education to parents and reforms it to what education is supposed to be: restoring liberty,” he said. “Homeschooling provides reasons for hope for freedom, logic, and the reversal of what’s going on today.”

## Summing It All Up

Voters on both the Right and Left are generally dissatisfied with the status quo in the United States, leading to the rise of candidates such as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Although surprising on its face, the erosion of the public school system and the increasing secularism of society have weakened the traditional moorings that anchored American ideals and values for generations.



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As a result, America is generally considered in decline, and is perceived by many to be at the crossroads of a critical juncture in its history. Will the country bounce back, or will the slide toward irrelevancy continue unabated?

Nobody knows the answer to that question. Bonta was optimistic that the young generation would be able to fit the puzzle pieces together in time. "If anyone can do it," he said with hope, "Millennials are up to the task."



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