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National Poll Shows Major Shift in Values Between Older and Younger Americans

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The last 21 years have seen major changes in how Americans of different generations prioritize personal values. Members of younger generations (i.e., “Generation Z,” born in the late 1990s and early 2000s and “Millennials” born between 1981 to 1996) rate patriotism, religion, and having children as less important to them than did young people between the ages of 18 and 38 two decades ago, a new *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News survey finds.



When a similar *Journal*/NBC News survey conducted 21 years ago asked Americans to state which values were most important to them, large majorities selected hard work, patriotism, commitment to religion, and having children.

The only one of those values that remains high on the list in the latest survey is hard work. The percentage of Americans listing the other three values has fallen substantially, with most of the changes attributable to people under the age of 50.

Sixty-one percent of those surveyed in the recent poll cited patriotism as very important to them, down nine percentage points from 1998. Fifty percent cited religion, down 12 points since 1998, and forty-three percent named having children as an important priority, down 16 points from 1998.

However, the results varied widely according to the age of those polled. Nearly 80 percent of those aged 55 or older said patriotism was very important, while only 42 percent of those ages 18-38 (“Generation Z” and “Millennials”) selected patriotism as an important value. Two-thirds of the older group cited religion as very important, compared with less than one-third of the younger group, reported those conducting the *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll.

Interestingly those who recall the “generation gap” back in the 1960s thought that the major cultural divide in this country was between the “Greatest generation” who had fought in World War II and their children, the Baby Boomers. But this latest survey lumped the Baby Boomers and their parents (those 55 and older) into one category and those under 55 (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z) were placed in another. This may indicate that as people of each generation mature, their values come to mirror those of their parents.

In addition to hard work, other values that those polled of all generations held in high regard were “community involvement” and “tolerance for others.”



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The survey was conducted by Republican pollster Bill McInturff and Democratic pollster Jeff Horwitt. *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News quoted the pollsters as saying: "There's an emerging America where issues like children, religion, and patriotism are far less important. And in America, it's the emerging generation that calls the shots about where the country is headed."

If there is any truth to what these pollsters said, the change is likely due to the influence of institutions to which parents have surrendered the formation of their children such as schools, the entertainment industry, and the media. If parents had taken a more proactive role in developing their children's values, one would expect the differences from one generation to the next to have been less.

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Warren Mass has served The New American since its launch in 1985 in several capacities, including marketing, editing, and writing. Since retiring from the staff several years ago, he has been a regular contributor to the magazine. Warren writes from Texas and can be reached at wmass@thenewamerican.com.



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