Democratic Apathy: Exploring the Roots of Millennial Democratic Fatigue

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Democratic Apathy:
Exploring the Roots of Millennial Democratic Fatigue

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Abstract

Democratic fatigue is the extent to which citizens of a democracy are disconnecting or disengaging from democratic participation or practice. The Pew Research Center currently defines millennials (also known as Generation Y or Gen Y) as anyone born between 1981 and 1996. This paper seeks to establish the fact of, and then explore the potential causes of, millennial democratic fatigue in the United States of America. Additionally, this paper highlights a gap in the academic literature connecting theories of democratization and democratic deconsolidation. The literature on democratization is vast and has theoretical roots that date back to the first decades of the nineteenth century. A multitude of subsequent scholars have built upon this foundation. The literature on democratic deconsolidation is nascent and less well-developed. This paper seeks to bridge the gap between these two bodies of work by deriving testable hypotheses from the literature on democratization and then employing process tracing in order to ascertain the potential causes of millennial democratic fatigue in the United States.

I find that there is some evidence to suggest that economic stagnation as a result of the Great Recession, increased political dysfunction as characterized by polarization and rising rates of lack of trust in government, and significant generational changes in cultural norms are all playing a role in explaining the existence of millennial democratic fatigue. This paper finds that further research in each of these areas is warranted in order to ascertain the degree to which millennials are disengaging with traditional forms of
democratic participation and the degree to which they are growing increasingly open to regime types other than democracy.
Frontispiece
Wesley Chaput is currently in his ninth year as a faculty member at Tabor Academy in Marion, Massachusetts. He teaches and coordinates both Modern World History and Advanced Topics in World History. He coaches soccer, ice hockey, and golf and lives on campus with his wife Mackenzie. His academic interests include democratization, Stoic philosophy, and Viking history.
Dedication

To my family for all their love and support and to Tabor Academy for making this project possible.
Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Professor George Soroka for introducing me to the study of democracy. My fascination with this subject began in his classes and his support, insight, and expertise have been invaluable to this project.
Table of Contents

Frontispiece ................................................................................................................................. v
Author’s Biographical Sketch ...................................................................................................... vi
Dedication ..................................................................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... viii
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................... x
Chapter I. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1
Chapter II. Literature Review ...................................................................................................... 6
Chapter III. Democratic Recession: The Great Recession’s Effect on Millennials’ Democratic Fatigue ..................................................................................................................... 17
Chapter IV. Political Disfunction, Partisanship, and Democratic Fatigue ................................. 29
Chapter V. Millennials and Culture: Less Religious, Less Political .............................................. 52
Chapter VI. Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 63
References ..................................................................................................................................... 68
List of Figures

Figure 3.1. Unemployment Rate, Ages 20-24 vs. National Average Unemployment Rates

Figure 3.2. Unemployment by Age, 2007-2010

Figure 3.3a. Employed Full Time: Median Usual Weekly Earnings, 20-24

Figure 3.3b. Average Inflation Rate, 2006-2018

Figure 3.4. Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers

Figure 3.5. Home Ownership Rate for the United States

Figure 3.6. Rental Vacancy Rate for the United States

Figure 3.7. Percent Home Owners by Generation

Figure 3.8. Rents in Urban Centers, 1996-2019

Figure 3.9. Student Loans Owned and Securitized, Outstanding, Billions of Dollars

Figure 4.1. Average Millennial Percent Reported Voting, 2000-2016

Figure 4.2. Average Percent Voting Baby Boomers, Presidential Elections, 1964-1972

Figure 4.3. Average Percent Voting Generation X, Presidential Elections, 1988-2016

Figure 4.4. First Election, Percent Reported Voted

Figure 4.5. Average Percent Voting by Generation, 2016 Presidential Election

Figure 4.6. Percent Voter Not – Registered, Presidential Election, 2000-2016

Figure 4.7. Trust in Government, 2001-2016
Figure 4.8. Trust the Federal Government, 2000-2012 .............................................. 39
Figure 4.9. External Political Efficacy Index ............................................................... 40
Figure 4.10. Trust in Government, Millennials ............................................................ 41
Figure 4.11. Democracy “Absolutely Important” .......................................................... 44
Figure 4.12. Democracy Least Important for American Millennials ............................... 45
Figure 4.13. Having A Democratic Political System “Very Good,” 1995-1999 .............. 46
Figure 4.14. “Very Good” to Have Democratic Political System by Age, 2000-2014 .......... 47
Figure 4.15. The Army Takes over When Government is Incompetent .......................... 48
Figure 5.1. Belief in God “Absolutely Certain” by Generation ...................................... 53
Figure 5.2. Importance of Religion in One’s Life ......................................................... 53
Figure 5.3. Decline of Christianity and the Rise of the “Nones” in the United States, 1948-2016 .................................................................................................................. 54
Figure 5.4. “Percent Who Are Religiously Unaffiliated” by Generation ........................... 55
Figure 5.5. Church Attendance, 1970-2016 .................................................................. 56
Figure 5.6. Frequency of Prayer by Generation Group .................................................. 57
Figure 5.7. Religion a Source of Moral Guidance by Generation .................................... 58
Figure 5.8. Percent that Supports Societal Issues by Generation .................................... 59
Chapter I.

Introduction

In January 2017, the National Intelligence Community (NIC) published its most recent forecast of the short-term political and economic future. *Global Trends – A Paradox of Progress* describes an increasingly chaotic world characterized simultaneously by accelerating rates of interstate conflict and opportunities for multilateral cooperation in the long term (2017, p. ix). Central to averting the worst predictions of the report is the ability of states, groups, and individuals to redefine their relationships and work together to solve a myriad of problems ranging from economic inequality, slow rates of global economic growth, and, in some cases, the rise of populism in previously democratic states (*Global Trends*, 2017, p. ix).

Additionally, the NIC claims that democracy itself will be increasingly challenged as a regime type. Even now, young people in North America and Western Europe are less likely to promote freedom of speech than older cohorts (*Global Trends*, 2017, p. 19) and according to Freedom House, in 2018 democracy declined globally for the twelfth year in a row (Abramowitz, 2018). The United States is not immune from these trends and has suffered rising populism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019, p. 2) and declines in both political rights and civil liberties, all while simultaneously appearing to abandon its position as democracy’s champion on the global stage (Abramowitz, 2018).

The global retreat of democracy begs several important questions. First, to what extent is American democracy actually in decline? Second, are citizens of the United
States growing increasingly open to regime types other than democracy and, if so, which Americans? Recent survey data suggest that millennials living in the United States are the cohort most likely feeling democratic fatigue (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2018).

Consequently, this thesis attempts to ascertain the degree to which millennials in the United States are or are not disengaging from traditional forms of democratic participation. Specifically, this paper will test three hypotheses derived from a theoretical analysis of the existing literature on both democratization and democratic deconsolidation in order to provide an empirical justification for a more robust study of these causes. In other words, this paper seeks to understand whether American citizens from Generation Y are experiencing democratic fatigue and, if so, begin to ascertain what is causing this potentially troubling increase in democratic malaise amongst America’s millennial generation.

Democracy is a regime type in which power is contested regularly in fair and free elections, adult citizens possess robust civil liberties, including the right to free speech and free association, and all adult citizens have the right to vote (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019, p. 6). Additionally, I define a consolidated democracy as one in which, in the minds of a majority of citizens, democracy is “the only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 5). In contrast, a democracy that is deconsolidating is one in which “a sizable minority of citizens loses its belief in democratic values, becomes attracted to authoritarian alternatives, and starts voting for ‘antisystem’ parties, candidates, or movements that flout the or oppose constitutive elements of liberal democracy” (Foa & Mounk, 2017, p. 9). Democratic apathy differs slightly from this definition because it refers explicitly to the first half of the process of deconsolidation described above.
Democratic apathy represents the degree to which citizens are open to regime types other than democracy, and democratic fatigue is the extent to which citizens are disconnecting or disengaging from democratic participation or practice. In this sense, these theories are potentially nested within one another. Theoretically it may be possible for citizens experiencing democratic fatigue to turn away from democracy (democratic apathy), which in turn may cause actual democratic deconsolidation. This is not to imply that democratic fatigue always causes democratic deconsolidation, or that every case of deconsolidation necessarily rests upon a foundation of democratic fatigue. Democracy, of course, is complex and certainly context dependent, but in an attempt to simplify the relationship between democratic deconsolidation, democratic apathy, and democratic fatigue it is helpful to present them as nested within each other.

Close examination of millennials is important for three reasons. First, Generation Y will account for 27 percent of the electorate in the 2020 election which makes them the largest voting cohort after the Baby Boomers (28%) (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019, p. 5). Millennials are also entering their fifth election cycle and appear to be demonstrating unique political, economic, and cultural characteristics (Fisher, 2018, p. 35). Lastly, young people, both globally and in the United States, appear to be exhibiting the highest rates of democratic apathy. Thus, focusing on millennials in the United States makes sense because they represent a significant percentage of the United States electorate and are the group the current literature suggests are most likely to be disengaging with traditional forms of democracy.

In this paper millennials are defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019, p. 2). This paper compares millennials to previous generations of United
States citizens, and these are defined as follows: the Silent Generation consists of anyone born between 1928 and 1945; the Baby Boomers constitute people born between the years 1945 and 1964; and Generation X directly precedes the millennial generation and is comprised of people born between 1965 and 1980 (Dimock, 2019, p. 4).

This paper tests three related hypothesis in order to ascertain their potential contribution to millennial democratic fatigue in the United States. These hypotheses are derived from the literature centered on democratization and they are presented below.

\[ H_1 \text{- Millennial democratic fatigue is caused in part by economic insecurity.} \]

\[ H_2 \text{- Millennial democratic fatigue is caused in part by political dysfunction.} \]

\[ H_3 \text{- Millennial democratic fatigue is caused in part by changing cultural norms, specifically decreasing rates of traditional religious participation.} \]

This remainder of this paper is divided into five parts. First, I review the literature on democratization and democratic deconsolidation and attempt to articulate areas of congruence and connection while simultaneously highlighting the gaps between the respective bodies of knowledge. My purpose here is to establish the theoretical foundation upon which the theory of democratic apathy, i.e., the degree to which citizens are open to regime types other than democracy, rests. Additionally, the hypotheses presented above are derived from the intersection of the respective literatures of democratization and democratic deconsolidation. Anchoring the potential causal explanations of democratic fatigue exhibited by modern American millennials in sound democratic theory is important as it potentially imbues them with more scientific validity. Having concluded the literature review, I then present a brief description and justification of the methodology of this paper before testing the above hypotheses and discussing the
results. Finally, in my conclusion I speculate on potential consequences of Millennial democratic fatigue in both the short and long term.
Chapter II.

Literature Review

Democracy is an historically stable form of government. Once consolidated democracies tend to remain “the only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 5; Przeworski & Limongi 1997; see also Mounk et al., 2018, p. 1). However, over the last decade, this assumption has faced increasing scrutiny. Mature democracies around the globe appear to be simultaneously weakening or even “deconsolidating” (Abramowitz, 2018). Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa argue that not only is it possible for mature democracies to erode and collapse, they are currently doing so in both the United States and Western Europe (2017, p. 10). They also suggest that it is primarily younger citizens who are turning away from democracy (Foa & Mounk 2017, p. 6).

While the most recent NIC report does not address civic disengagement explicitly, it does confirm Foa and Mounk’s initial predictions with regard to democratic decline both in the United States and around the globe. In short, in the wake of Huntington’s Third Wave, global democracy seems to be experiencing another global recession (Global Trends, 2017, p. 19).¹ Foa and Mounk have named this phenomenon “democratic deconsolidation” (2017, p. 9).

Foa and Mounk’s work has stirred significant debate. Several scholars disagree with their analysis and conclusions, particularly with regard to their claims about the vitality of democracy in Western Europe. Two papers, the first published by Erik Voeten in 2016 and the second by Jan Levitsky in 2019, contend that millennial citizens living in consolidated Western European democracies are not turning their backs on democracy (Zilinksy, 2019, p. 1; Voeten, 2016, p. 1).

¹ The “Third Wave” refers to a global wave of democratization in the wake of the Cold War described by political scientist Samuel Huntington in 1991.
Voeten does, however, find evidence that millennials living in the United States are growing increasingly disengaged with traditional forms of political participation. Like Foa and Mounk, Voeten’s analysis provides evidence that young Americans are “somewhat more favorably inclined towards non-democratic ways of ruling their countries even after we account for age.” (2016, p. 1). Jan Levitsky’s analysis, meanwhile, could not replicate Foa and Mounk’s findings, but the survey was limited only to Western European democracies. While this is good news for proponents of democracy, especially those living in Western Europe, the geographic scope of the study is not useful in analyzing democratic fatigue in the American electorate and thus, in the American context at least, Foa and Mounk’s data is still viable.

Additionally, two other critiques of Foa and Mounk’s work also substantiate their original claim that millennials in the United States are growing increasingly disaffected with democracy. Paul Howe argues that although support for democracy remains relatively high among the consolidated democracies surveyed by Foa and Mounk, younger citizens may be disconnecting from their democratic roots. “Disconcertingly, it is the younger citizens who are mostly likely to express a weaker sense of attachment to democracy” (2017, p. 15). Interestingly, Howe also attributes this observation, at least in part, to a “rise in anti-social dispositions” and increasing generationally driven “social malaise” (Howe, 2017, pp. 24, 28). This is an interesting observation that not only substantiates Foa and Mounk’s findings but also raises social and cultural explanations for democratic fatigue. I also find evidence that supports the claim that shifting cultural norms and decreasing levels of societal trust may be partially responsible for Millennial democratic fatigue, as will be discussed below.

Another prominent critique of Fao and Mounk was published by Amy Alexander and Christian Welzel in 2017. Their work challenges Foa and Mounk’s arguments on the grounds
that the latter’s claims with regard to democratic decline and the generational support for
democracy are overstated (2017, p. 1). However, despite their reservations, Alexander and
Welzel tentatively confirm Foa and Mounk’s findings that young people appear to be distancing
themselves from democracy as a regime type. “Replicating their analyses for our seven
democracies, we find a pattern that seems to provide an impressive confirmation of the major
point: over time and across birth cohorts, support for democracy is in decline” (Alexander &
Welzel, 2017, p. 2). This is an interesting insight for the study of millennial democratic fatigue as
it suggests that although it is too soon to declare that the United States is deconsolidating, even
critiques of Foa and Mounk’s theory admit American millennials are less committed to
democracy than their forbearers.

Another prominent critique of Foa and Mounk (by Ronald Inglehart) also confirms this
trend. Inglehart urges caution with regard to Foa and Mounk’s theory of democratic
deconsolidation. However, like the critiques mentioned previously, Inglehart also confirms that
American millennials are growing increasingly disenchanted with democracy. The effect is
modest, but it is real. “Although I [Inglehart] agree that mass support for democracy is currently
weakening, Foa and Mounk’s data suggest that this phenomenon is, in large part, a specifically
American period effect, as the age-linked differences found in the United States are much greater
than those found in other countries” (Inglehart, 2016, p. 15). What is also interesting about
Inglehart’s article is that he provides three potential causes of American millennials’ democratic
fatigue. These are political dysfunction, economic inequality, and the political power amassed by
wealthy individuals (Inglehart, 2016, pp. 18-19). The first two of these explanations help inform
the theoretical foundation of the hypotheses tested in this paper. Inglehart’s work also confirms
Foa and Mounk’s findings that young Americans are questioning how “essential” it is to live in a liberal democracy (2016, p. 15).

The fact that the critics of democratic deconsolidation support the theory’s central premise is telling. However, there is still much work to be done as the theory is in its infancy. Foa and Mounk agree, describing democratic deconsolidation as a “unexplored area of the conceptual map that has long seemed so barren that cartographers have not seen the need to color it in” (Foa & Mounk, 2017, p. 10). Adding a dash of color to the theory is the purpose of this paper, and the gap in the theory of deconsolidation provides a logical place to start.

Foa and Mounk do not explicitly articulate causal pathways of deconsolidation, but the work of Yasmin Dawood is helpful in identifying a place to start studying the erosion of democracy in the United States. For Dawood, United States citizens need to recommit to democracy’s core values of civility and reign in hyper-partisanship and polarization or else risk the survival of democracy in the United States (2017, p. 192). Dawood’s theoretical pathways are closely related to the five arenas of democratic consolidation laid out by Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz, and more distantly to the emphasis placed on civil society by Alexis de Tocqueville. It is therefore fitting that the theoretical foundation of the hypotheses tested by this thesis are grounded in de Tocqueville’s foundational work.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, democracy in the United States rests upon a robust civil society. In Tocqueville’s words, this “association in civil life” imbued republican life in the 19th century with its characteristic vitality and enabled citizens to work together to establish and perpetuate effective self-government (2004, p. 599). The ability to work together allowed a relatively diverse populace to reach across social divides and unify as a people and a society. Tocqueville writes,
When Americans have a feeling or idea they wish to bring to the world’s attention, they will immediately seek out others who share that feeling or idea and, if successful in finding them, join forces. From that point on, they cease to be isolated individuals and become a power to be reckoned with, whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which people listen. (2004, p. 599)

The implication is that democracy functions effectively when citizens build faith in one another through repeated interactions with one another. Robert Putnam’s work on social capital builds on this idea. Connectedness, according to Putnam, is comprised primarily of two types of interaction. The first he calls “bridging” and the second “bonding.” For Putnam, bonding interactions work as a kind of glue which serves to unite like-minded citizens with one another, whereas bridging interactions act more like a societal lubricant which enables different social groups to work together and or coexist within civil society (Putnam, 2007, p. 23). In this sense, Putnam’s work is closely related to the framework of “cross cutting cleavages” described by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan and Seymour Martin Lipsett in his seminal 1959 article on democratization.

The work of Stepan and Linz is important in two ways. First, it is their definition of democracy that Foa and Mounk base their theory on (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 15). According to Linz and Stepan, a democracy is consolidated when it becomes the “only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 5); according the Foa and Monk, democratic consolidation has long been considered a “one-way street” by political scientists (2017, p. 8). Second, three of the five arenas essential for consolidated democracy to exist provide a theoretical foundation for the hypotheses tested in this paper.

The first arena upon which all consolidated democracies rest is “the development of a free and lively civil society” (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 7). Civil society in this case refers to a series of cross-cutting cleavages that serve to provide the foundations of an engaged democratic
citizenship. The authors suggest that in some historical contexts civil society can insulate the citizenry from the abuses of the regime, as was the case in both Latin America and Eastern Europe in the wake of the Cold War (1998, p. 7). Thus, civil society potentially plays an important role in establishing, consolidating, and perpetuating democracy (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 7).

It is important to note that possessing a robust civil society is not a guarantee of democratization or democratic consolidation. Several critiques highlight the importance of historical context in determining the role civil society plays. In other words, even the most robust civil society may succumb to anti-democratic political developments given the right (or wrong) historical context (Foley & Edwards, 1997, p. 48; Berman, 1997, p. 402). This is an important point for two reasons. First, it adds weight to the central claim of this thesis that despite the fact that the United States possesses a robust civil society, it is not immune to deconsolidation. Second, historical context does matter, and this paper argues that the political, economic, and cultural experiences of millennials in the United States during their adult lives may be causing them to exhibit signs of democratic fatigue. Civil society is simultaneously distinct from but also linked with the second arena: political society (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 8).

In short, political society organizes itself to legislatively compete for and wield political power. It is in this arena that the norms of democratic governance are established, perpetuated, and maintained, and without which a nascent democratic regime cannot consolidate. Interestingly, it is millennials’ lack of trust in the United States in the institutions of American political society that may be a potential explanation for the democratic fatigue they are experiencing. Government dysfunction as a potential causal pathway is explored later in this
paper. The next arena, economic society, is also central to this paper as it may also be an important potential cause of Millennial democratic fatigue.

Economic society performs a complex but also straightforward function in the Stepan and Linz’s theory of democratic consolidation, providing the monetary and material gains needed to for a democracy to flourish. Without this economic “surplus,” it becomes increasingly difficult for the citizenry to embrace the norms articulated above and for the state to function. Thus, without a robust economic system respected by civil society and protected and enhanced by political society, a young democracy will likely founder before it can consolidate (Linz & Stepan, 1998, p. 8). Ironically, it may be the erosion of these three arenas that is potentially causing citizens in the United States to disengage with democracy.

Robert Putnam argues that this is at least partially the case. According to Putnam, the social, economic, and political bonds so central to American democracy began to fray in the decades following World War II. Putnam’s work thoroughly describes the malaise that resulted from the atrophy of civil society in the United States throughout the twentieth century (2007, p. 412). According to Putnam, Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are engaging in fewer intrapersonal interactions and are thus growing increasingly distant from one another and suffering decreasing levels of social capital, all to their political detriment. “Nowhere is the need to restore connectedness, trust, and civic engagement clearer than in the now often empty public forums of our democracy” (Putnam, 2007, p. 412). In order to rebuild their democracy, Americans need to rebuild the connections that once fostered the social capital necessary to exist in a diverse society (Putnam, 2007, p. 411).

Foa and Mounk’s findings suggest that citizens in a number of consolidated democracies in both the United States and Europe are growing increasingly frustrated with their political
leaders and with the seeming impotence of democratic regimes. While Foa and Mounk do not explicitly address the specific areas in which democracy is failing, their work suggests citizens are becoming increasingly open to alternative and perhaps more authoritarian regime types (Foa & Mounk, 2016, p. 7). The work of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way is potentially helpful here. The authors propose a novel and potentially stable regime type they call competitive authoritarianism, in which the institutions are superficially democratic, but the electoral playing field is unfair (Levitsky & Way, 2013, 5). Examples of competitive authoritarianism abound (Russia, Armenia, and Tanzania), and thus may provide potential stable alternatives to fully democratic regimes.

Additionally, the recent work of Levitsky and Ziblatt argues that American democracy is increasingly at risk. More importantly they claim that many citizens may not even be aware of the dangers posed by authoritarian and populist political leaders. “Because there is no single moment – no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution – in which the regime ‘obviously crosses the line’ into dictatorship, nothing may set off the society’s alarm bells…Democracy’s erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019, p. 6). This last point is important. Millennial citizens may not even be aware that the pillars of their democracy are eroding. Ironically, at the moment they are needed most Millennials may be growing increasingly disengaged from democracy. This paper employs process tracing to find out why.

Process tracing is an important and well-established method of qualitative analysis (Collier, 2011, p. 823). Although closely related to historical analysis (Benett & Checkel, p. 4), process tracing is a distinct methodology because it involves the logical testing of hypotheses. In the words of David Collier, “it is the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and
analyzed in light of research questions and hypothesis posed by the investigator” (2011, p. 823). Additionally, process tracing tests can be also used to establish causality between an event or process, and an observed outcome (Mahoney, 2012, p. 570). It can also be used to evaluate a causal hypothesis in a specific case or small number of cases (Mahoney, 2012, p. 571; Hall, 2006, p. 24).

In this study process tracing was used not to determine causality, but instead to identify potential causal pathways for further study and investigation. Rather than asking the question “Was X a cause of Y in case Z?” (Mahoney, 2012, p. 571), I propose to ask the question, “Is X a reasonable potential cause of Y in case Z?” The difference is subtle but significant. Because this paper seeks to lay down a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for future research, it was important that the hypotheses be rooted in the established literature on democracy.

Thus, the existing literature was canvased both for evidence that American millennials were experiencing democratic fatigue and also for potential factors that establish and maintain democracies. Once these factors were identified, they were then rewritten as hypotheses and processed traced within the specific context of the American millennial experience. The purpose was to ascertain potential causal pathways of American millennials’ democratic fatigue for further study.

Having canvased the literature, three factors, all with well-established theoretical roots, were identified as potential causes of democratic fatigue among American millennials. These included: adverse economic conditions, political disfunction as a result of increasing polarization, and changing cultural norms. I believe shifting cultural norms to be an important potential pathway; however, it is potentially less important than the other two. Thus, it is included in the study but is tested less robustly. Having selected and established the theoretical
roots of the variables, they were then subjected to a series of “tests” in order to ascertain their viability as potential casual pathways.

Henry Brady and David Collier describe the four tests used to determine causation while process tracing. The first is called a “straw in the wind test.” The weakest of the four tests, passing a straw in the wind test merely affirms the relevance of the hypothesis but is not strong enough to prove causality. As such, a straw in the wind test is not sufficient on its own to establish a causal link. Bennet also points out that passing a straw in the wind test is also not necessary for a hypothesis to establish causation so long as other more stringent tests are passed, and failing a straw in the wind test does not necessarily eliminate a hypothesis but does call its relevance into question (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 210).

The second test described by Bennet and Collier is the “hoop test.” Hoop tests are important because a hypothesis must pass in order to be a valid. However, while passing a hoop tests does suggest the hypothesis is relevant, it is not sufficient to establish causation. Thus, a hypothesis is eliminated by failing a hoop test but more evidence and/or tests are needed in order to confirm a causal relationship (Brady & Collier, 2010, p. 210).

In order to establish potential casual pathways for millennials’ democratic fatigue in the United States, it was not necessary for the hypotheses presented in this paper to pass either a “smoking gun test” or a “doubly decisive test.” Rather, I sought to layer several hoop tests in order to establish potential causality between the variables and millennials’ democratic fatigue.

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2 “Smoking gun tests” provide sufficient but not necessary evidence of causality. Passing a smoking gun test provides significant support for a hypothesis but failing it does not eliminate the explanation completely. “Doubly decisive tests” confirm one hypothesis and eliminate others as causal explanations (Collier, 2011, p. 210).
In this way, process tracing was used to build a case for further study rather than for explicit causal inference.
Chapter III.

Democratic Recession: The Great Recession’s Effect on Millennials’ Democratic Fatigue

Millennials are struggling economically. They are saddled by stagnating wages, rising costs of living, increasing levels of student debt, increasing levels of economic inequality, and stubbornly high unemployment rates. The first millennials became adults around the year 2000. In the subsequent two decades they have endured two recessions; the most recent, the Great Recession, was the worst downturn in United States history since the Great Depression of the 1930s. While the American economy has largely recovered, the return of prosperity has proven elusive for many young adults who are struggling to establish themselves financially. As a result, millennials are prioritizing financial stability and focusing on their careers (U.S. Department, 2017, p. 9), which may be contributing to decreasing rates of political engagement (Shah & Wichowsky, 2019, p. 1101).

Economic stagnation constitutes a “hoop test” for hypothesis H₁, because if Millennials were prospering under the current democratic regime then economic insecurity could be eliminated as a potential cause of democratic fatigue. But the fact of the matter is that Generation Y is struggling economically, and thus sluggish economic conditions may be a significant factor in explaining their democratic fatigue. The first sign of economic malaise experienced by millennials are lingering rates of high unemployment (Ross & Rouse, 2015, p. 1363).

Many young people do not work because they are either part-time or full-time students. Thus, it is logical that the unemployment rate for millennials should be higher than that of the general population (see Figure 3.1).
That being said, Figure 3.1 clearly demonstrates that millennials have fared worse than their fellow citizens during the Great Recession. Additionally, there is some evidence in the literature that argues millennials continued to suffer the effects of the recession after the recovery had begun (Atherwood & Sparks, 2019, p. 1). Figure 3.1 supports this claim as well, given that unemployment rates continue to mirror the national trend but remain elevated. Figure 3.2 further parses this data by age, and it again seems the Great Recession was harder on millennials than on older cohorts. Thus, as a result of the Great Recession, millennials appear to have endured higher
rates of unemployment (on average) than their fellow citizens. However, there is one additional caveat that needs to be discussed before discussing wage stagnation.

Figure 3.2


Continuing education is not controlled for in the above graphs. In other words, perhaps the unemployment rate for millennials spiked after the Great Recession not because young people could not find work but because they stayed in school. This is an important point and it almost certainly contains more than a grain of truth. However, I do not control for it here because there is significant evidence (presented below) that the economic advantages of advanced education are decreasing for white millennials and potentially non-existent for young people of color (Emmons, Kent, & Ricketts, 2019, p. 301). Additionally, rising tuition costs and high levels of student debt also burden millennials. Thus, although it is perhaps likely that some of the rise in unemployment may be attributed to millennials continuing their education, it does not
imply that the disparity between the national unemployment rate and that of millennials can be dismissed or ignored.

Earnings for millennials (Figure 3.3a) have experienced moderate growth in the last year but have remained largely stagnant since the financial crisis in 2008. From 2006 to 2015 average earnings oscillated between 423 and 501 dollars per week. Thus, during the nine years in which the majority of millennials entered the work force (a millennial born in 1980 was 26 in 2006, if born in 1998, they were 18) weekly earnings increased only 18 percent.

![Employed Full Time: Median Usual Weekly Earnings, 20 - 24](image)

Figure 3.3a

At first glance these data give the appearance of significant growth, but the figures are misleading. First of all, the modest gains in the chart represent a two percent annual increase in weekly earnings from 2006 to 2015. When this graph is compared with the average inflation rates for this time (Figure 3.3b), it becomes clear that millennials were at best standing still during this period. Any gains in their weekly earnings were almost completely offset by inflation, which averaged just under two percent from 2006 - 2018. When the growing cost of living and rising rents are added to the picture, the economic outlook for millennials appears bleaker still.

![Average Inflation Rate, 2006 - 2018](image)

**Figure 3.3b**


As if high rates of unemployment and stagnant earnings were not enough to cause significant economic stress for millennials, the cost of living has skyrocketed over the last two decades (Figure 3.4). The consumer price index, which measures the weighted average of a
basket of consumer goods, has climbed from 154.7 in 1996 for urban consumers, when the oldest millennials began their professional lives, to 256.4 in 2019, when the youngest millennials reached adulthood. The rising costs of urban living is surely putting further economic pressure on millennials, especially since many of them prefer to live in urban areas (ironically because that is where the jobs are) (Lee, Lee, & Shubho, 2019, p. 555) Thus, while millennials’ earnings are roughly consistent with prior generations at this point in their development, the increasing cost of living has further disadvantaged Gen Y economically. Moreover, millennials are coping with high rents at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to enter the housing market.

Figure 3.4


Generally speaking, rates of home ownership in the United States have declined since the Great Recession. Simultaneously, the rate of Americans of all ages who rent is increasing (Figure
The decreasing rental vacancy rate (Figure 3.6) suggests that more Americans are renting their homes than during previous decades. Although these graphs do not reflect millennial home ownership specifically, millennials are included in the data. It is highly improbable, especially in light of millennials’ economic woes presented previously in the chapter, that rates of home ownership for millennials would be increasing at the same time that home ownership overall is in decline (Fry, 2017).

Figure 3.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Homeownership Rate for the United States [USHOWN], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/USHOWN, December 9, 2019.

Figure 3.7 confirms that millennials are indeed struggling to enter the housing market. In their first six years of adulthood, millennials owned homes at similar rates as previous generations. However, for previous generations, home ownership rose robustly during the next decade of their lives. While it is true that millennials’ home ownership has also increased over
the same time period, the growth is less robust. In fact, despite the recovery of home values in the wake of the Great Recession, millennials’ rates of home ownership have declined, and even older Americans report that owning a home is not affordable for young adults today (Fry & Brown, 2016). Additionally, studies also confirm that limited access to the housing market, due to economic constraints of unemployment, high costs of living, and student debt loads, are likely to continue retarding millennials’ economic fortunes and may even prevent millennials from accumulating wealth in the long term (Clark, 2019, p. 210, Frey, 2018, p. 40, Munnell & Hou, 2018, p. 1).

Figure 3.6

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Rental Vacancy Rate for the United States [RRVRUSQ156N], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/RRVRUSQ156N, November 13, 2019.*
Rent in urban areas has increased significantly over the last decade, adding yet another economic hurdle for millennials to cope with. Figure 3.8 portrays the consumer price index for rent for five major urban centers in the United States. These include New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago, along with surrounding neighborhoods and the United States average. Since millennials have entered adulthood, the rent indexes for all of these major cities have increased nearly every year up until the financial crisis of 2007. At this point some of the lines briefly flatten out or dip slightly, but they quickly resume their rapid climb (within two or three years). It is also important to recall that during this same period, weekly earnings for millennials barely kept pace with inflation, and that unemployment rates for young people remained stubbornly high. Thus, millennials emerged from young adulthood only to face increasing costs of living and increasing urban rents. More generally, millennials stepped out into an economic
landscape that was slow to recover from the Great Recession (Munnell & Hou, 2018, p. 3).

Although it is true that some millennials remained in school during this time and emerged with advanced degrees, these students were often also mired in student debt and had to repay their loans in a less than ideal economic environment.

Figure 3.8

The amount of student debt owed by American students has tripled since 2006 (Figure 3.9). As the most educated generation in United States history, millennials are particularly hard-hit by high levels of student debt. Young adults who possess high levels of student debt are also significantly more likely to hold car loans or credit card debt (Fry & Caumont, 2014). Current research also suggests that while earning a college degree is still a worthwhile investment, the long-term economic benefits are decreasing and for some demographic groups, black men for example, the benefit is statistically zero (Emmons, Kent, & Ricketts, 2019, p. 297). As a result, it appears millennials are taking out loans to pay for an educational degree that is growing increasingly unaffordable and less valuable (Abad, 2018, p. 1). It is small wonder politicians who
promised to forgive students loans were so popular with young adults in the United States during the 2016 presidential election.

Millennials headed more households living in poverty in 2016 than any other recent generation. Pew Research Center reports that in general, the number of households headed by young adults is rising, while those headed by adults 65 and older is declining. The estimated 5.3 million U.S. households headed by a millennial are more racially and ethnically diverse, include a greater share of minorities, and generally tend toward higher poverty rates. In comparison, 4.2 million Gen Xers head households in poverty, as well as 5.0 million headed by a Baby Boomer. More millennial heads of households are likely to be unmarried which is also associated with higher poverty levels (Fry, 2017).

Many previous generations have come of age in difficult economic and tumultuous times. The present economic circumstances millennials face are, however, unique. Millennials are prioritizing economic stability, and I have found significant evidence that they are justified in doing so. Millennials are facing significant economic hardship stemming primarily from the lingering and deleterious aftereffects of the Great Recession. This may very well be hindering or altering the ways in which they engage with their communities. Indeed, millennials appear to be focusing on their economic security, and thus potentially less on traditional forms of political participation.
Considerable evidence suggests that millennials in the United States are less engaged politically than previous generations. Traditional measures of political commitment, such as voter registration rates and voter participation rates, reveal that millennials are lagging behind both Generation X and the Baby Boomers. This trend persists despite the presence of a well-established generational effect on voter turnout rates. Historically, younger citizens do not vote at the same rate as their older compatriots and as a result any generational study of voter turnout rates must control for this effect. Millennials are also demonstrating increasing rates of political engagement as they age, but their initial levels of participation were lower than previous generations and they have remained proportionally so as millennials have matured. There is also evidence to suggest millennials are less committed to living in a democracy, are questioning whether or not it is a “good” form of government and may be growing increasingly open to alternative regime types such as military rule.

Figure 4.1 portrays the average percentage of eligible millennials who voted in U.S. Presidential elections from 2000 to 2016. Reported voting increased substantially over the first two election cycles but has since leveled off, with participation yet to break fifty percent through 2016.

The percent reported voting for each election was calculated by averaging the individual voting percentage for each year of millennials who voted in the election. For example, in the most recent election, millennials included people aged eighteen to thirty-six. To obtain the overall millennial voting percentage for the 2016 election the individual reported voting
percentages for each year of millennials aged eighteen to thirty-six were averaged. This process was repeated for each presidential election in which millennials participated. An interesting result is evident: although the percentage that reported voting does increase over time as the generational effect suggests it should, it has not broken fifty percent, something the Baby Boomers accomplished in their third election cycle (Figure 4.2) and something Generation X achieved in their sixth election cycle (Figure 4.3).

![Average Millennial Percent Reported Voting, 2000-2016](image)

**Figure 4.1**


Also, the percentage of millennials who reported voting in the first election in which they were eligible to vote is lower than the initial average percentage who reported voting among both Generation X and Baby Boomers (Figure 4.4). This suggests that millennials initially
participated at lower rates than previous generations and have been slower to increase their rates of engagement. The reason why I present three columns for Baby Boomers and only one Gen Xers and millennials has to do with changes in the way voting and registration were recorded as a result of the ratification of 26th amendment in 1971. The 26th amendment officially lowered the voting age in the United States to 18 years old. As a result, some Baby Boomers were not able to vote in their election until they were 21 years old at which point they voted at higher rates than their younger contemporaries. To account for this difference, I averaged the voter turnout rates for both age groups of Baby Boomers.

![Average Percent Voting Baby Boomers Presidential Elections 1964 - 1972](image)

**Figure 4.2**


Author’s calculations.

Figure 4.3


Author’s calculations.
The first presidential election in which the youngest Baby Boomers could vote was 1968. Although the 26th Amendment was not approved by Congress until 1971, several states had lowered the voting age to 18 before the 1968 election. Thus, a small number of Baby Boomers, aged 18 to 20, voted in the 1968 election. The inclusion of this group of Baby Boomers, which literally number in the hundreds (432 to be exact), significantly skews the percent reported voting of the Baby Boomers in their initial Presidential election because only 191 registered to vote and only 145 actually voted.

Despite this downward skew, Baby Boomers still out voted Gen Xers and millennials in their first election by a significant margin (51.1 to 44.7 and 41.9 percent, respectively). If the number of Baby Boomers who were 18 years old and who voted in 1968 are eliminated, the gap between initial participation rates for Baby Boomers and successive generations widens still further. Thus, it appears that young people who were voting for the first time in the wake of the Second World War voted at significantly higher rates than the subsequent two generations. Fast-forward 71 years to 2016 and the picture remains largely the same. Millennials are still voting less than Generation X, and Gen Xers are still voting less than the Baby Boomers (Figure 4.5).
Figure 4.4


https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html

Author’s calculations.
It is important to note that five election cycles may not provide sufficient data to reach any firm conclusions with regard to millennial political disengagement. As I argued earlier, it took Generation X six election cycles to surpass 50 percent reported voting, and thus perhaps 2020 will be the cycle in which millennials suddenly discover their political identity and surge to the polls. That being said, the fact that the Baby Boomers managed this feat in the third election cycle and have consistently out-voted both Gen X and Gen Y makes it more likely that millennials will not reach the participation levels achieved by previous generations any time soon (Figure 4.5). It is also important to proceed with caution because data presented above may potentially be incomplete or incorrect. For example, it is possible that people reported voting when they did not. That being said, this seems unlikely to be a widespread issue. Moreover, all of the above data stems from the same source, the U.S. Census, further decreasing the likelihood
of inconsistency. Thus, although reported differences in average percent voting are not significant enough to claim absolutely that millennials are politically disengaged, when it is combined with data on voter registration rates, the argument that they are disengaging becomes more robust.

Millennials also appear to be registering to vote at lower rates than Baby Boomers. This is further evidence to support the hypothesis that millennials are less engaged politically than preceding generations. Figure 4.6 displays the percentage of eligible voters from among the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y cohorts who did not register to vote in the past five presidential elections. The results are interesting and mirror the findings on percentage of reported voting described above. All three generations report decreasing percentages of unregistered voters over time. This finding is in line with the expected generational effect, but millennials once again start with higher rates of unregistered voters and then maintain these comparatively elevated rates overtime. Unfortunately, I was unable to access data on the percentage of unregistered voters of Baby Boomers and Generation Xers during their first five presidential election cycles. While this is an issue worth noting, it does not represent a flaw in the argument as it is highly unlikely, in light of the trends discussed above, that Baby Boomers or Generation Xers would start with higher percentages of unregistered voters than millennials.
Figure 4.6


What is most striking about the data presented in Figure 4.6 is that while the percentage of unregistered millennials has declined significantly over the last five presidential election cycles, nearly 21 percent of eligible millennial voters remain unregistered. The fact that a fifth of the largest generational cohort of eligible voters is not registered to vote is further evidence that millennials are potentially disengaging from democracy. It is also worth considering whether or not failing to register to vote suggests a higher level of political disengagement than registering to vote and then failing to do so. Thus, there is chance that high levels of unregistered voters may not represent higher levels of political disengagement, although this seems unlikely.
To sum up, I have found that percentages of reported voting and percentages of unregistered voters suggest that millennials are disengaging from traditional pathways of democratic participation. This finding is strengthened further by the fact that millennials are increasingly identifying as political independents and reporting record low levels of trust in government and their fellow citizens.

According to data from the American National Election Survey (ANES), “trust in government” has declined steadily since 9/11 (Figure 4.7). The number of Americans who trust that the government will “do what is right most of the time” dropped to 20 percent in 2012. The percentage who believe the government “does the right thing” only “some of the time” simultaneously reached a post-9/11 high of 66 percent in 2012 (Figure 4.8). Over the same time period, the percentage of extreme optimists and pessimists remained stable, although these two groups combined represent less than ten percent of the population and are therefore not included in Figure 4.8.

![Trust in Government 2001 - 2016](image)

Figure 4.7
It is also interesting that political efficacy has declined in the two decades since 9/11. Figure 4.9 clearly demonstrates that Americans increasingly feel that they are losing the ability to shape or influence their government. Put simply, Americans are losing faith in their government. This is not to say that Americans are losing faith in democracy, nor does it say anything specific about millennials’ political engagement, although I have already established that they are not engaging at the same level as previous generations. It seems likely that millennials are contributing to the trends described above and additional data from the Pew Research Center supports this conclusion.

As it turns out, millennials are less trusting than previous generations of their fellow citizens. In 2014, just 19 percent of millennials expressed they could trust other people “most of
the time.” This number is significantly lower than both Baby Boomers (40 percent) and Generation X (31 percent) (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, Millennials’ trust in government is also at an historic low (Figure 4.10).

![External Political Efficacy Index](image)

**Figure 4.9**

*Source: VCF0648 in the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, weighted with VCF0009z.*

Millennials are markedly more pessimistic than previous generations with regard to the future of the United States. The percentage of citizens aged 18 to 29 who are optimistic about the future of the country declined eight percentage points (38 – 30 percent) from October 2015 to April 2017 (Doherty, 2017, p. 8). Although millennials appear to be exhibiting the lowest levels of trust in government, both Baby Boomers and Generation X also exhibit low levels of trust in government (“Public Trust,” 2019). Low levels of trust in government may not be unique to millennials but the fact remains that Generation Y is the least trusting generation.
When it comes to party identification, millennials diverge again from Baby Boomers and Generation X. In 2014, half of millennials in the United States considered themselves as political Independents. Only 39 percent of Generation X and 37 percent of Baby Boomers likewise identify as Independents. This is a fascinating finding because although it does not necessarily mean that millennials are disengaging politically, as one can be an Independent and still fully participate in democracy, it does suggest that for many millennials the traditional two-party system is growing less appealing. This finding also supports the hypothesis that millennials may be disengaging from traditional forms of political participation because Independents may be harder to organize and mobilize on election day. Independents also vote less than their partisan
counterparts (Laloggia, 2019, p. 5). As more Millennials identify as Independents the percentage of them who vote or register to vote will likely continue to fall.

A few words of caution are warranted here. Identifying as a political Independent is different from being nonpartisan. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that just seven percent of citizens who identify as Independents do not lean towards one party or the other (Laloggia, 2019, p. 2). Approximately 50 percent of millennials lean democratic and 34 percent lean Republican (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 21). It is possible therefore that despite the fact millennials are identifying as Independents, they are maintaining some connections with traditional political parties, even if these reported “leanings” are not official. That being said, I cannot rule out the possibility that as millennials increasingly identify as politically Independent, they will continue to vote and participate at lower rates than their fellow citizens and thus they may in fact be growing increasingly disconnected from democracy.

However, there is limited evidence to suggest that millennials are not disengaging with democracy but merely engaging in different ways (Novak, 2016, p. 141). For example, in some cases, volunteering led to higher rates of long-term civic involvement (Putnam, 2007, p. 122). Volunteerism has been argued as a potentially viable alternative to political involvement. Young people may not vote, but because they volunteer, they are still engaged. I am skeptical because the link between volunteering and caring about democracy is questionable. It is not safe to assume that because people volunteer, they care about their government. More recently, certain studies have argued that higher rates of young adult volunteerism represent a different but less robust connection between millennial citizens and their democracy, and some have even gone so far as to describe millennials as “actively disengaged” (Novak, 2016, p. 12).
While it is certainly true that millennials do volunteer at high rates, there is evidence that suggests that volunteering rates may be weakening. In 2013, only 22 percent of millennials reported volunteering compared to 30 percent of Gen X and 28 percent of Baby Boomers (Matto, 2017, p. 3). Millennials may also be volunteering not because they are politically engaged but because they are striving to get into college (Morimoto & Friedland, 2013, p. 524). Although the argument that millennials are engaging differently than previous generations may be valid to a degree, it is not robust enough to overcome the evidence presented above.

Having established that millennials are growing increasingly disengaged with democracy, the next question is, if young people in the United States are turning away from democracy, what alternatives (if any) are they considering? Survey data from the World Values Survey not only confirms that American millennials are disengaging from democracy, but that they are also potentially growing increasingly open to military rule.

The percentage of Americans in general who report that democracy is “absolutely important” has declined slightly since 2005 (Figure 4.11). The fact that less than half of American citizens report that it is absolutely essential to live in a democracy is interesting (and potentially troubling) in itself. When this data is parsed by age, the trend intensifies.
Of all the age cohorts surveyed, American millennials reported the lowest affinity for democracy. Only 29 percent of citizens up to the age of 29 (which only includes millennials during the years surveyed) reported that it was essential that they live in a democracy (Figure 4.12). When this data is cross-referenced with another question evaluating the extent to which citizens believe having a democratic political system is “good,” the results add substantial weight to the hypothesis that American millennials are in fact disengaging with democracy.
Figures 4.13 and 4.14 suggest that young Americans are souring on democracy as a political system. The data is displayed in two graphs because the age categories changed after Wave 3 of the survey. There are three trends worth highlighting. First, although older citizens place a higher premium on democracy, support for democracy is decreasing across all age cohorts. Second, millennials, which make up the entirety of respondents up to age 29 (in Wave
Six), report the lowest percent of any age group in any wave. This is further evidence that U.S. millennials are growing increasingly apathetic towards democracy as a regime type. Worse yet, Figure 4.15 suggests that millennials are also growing increasingly open to military rule should democracy become ineffective.

![Having a Democratic Political System "Very Good," 1995-1999](image)

Figure 4.13


Figure 4.14


Figure 4.15 demonstrates that only fifteen percent (approximately) of millennials reject a military take over as an essential characteristic of democracy. This number is significantly lower than that of other generational groups. This means that nearly 85 percent of millennials surveyed were receptive to the idea of military rule in the case of incompetent government. Perhaps most striking is that a quarter of millennials were fifty-fifty for this proposition. Of course, what constitutes “military rule” and “government incompetence” remains open to interpretation. In
In conclusion, American millennials are not participating in politics in traditional ways and these changes may be a symptom of democratic fatigue. Millennials are registering and voting at lower rates than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. This trend continues after controlling for an established generational effect. Like their fellow citizens, millennials exhibit low and
declining levels of trust in the government and its ability to act in accordance with the interests of its citizens. Millennials also demonstrate a conspicuous lack of trust in their fellow citizens. Lastly, millennials are increasingly identifying as political independents which, although noteworthy in its own right, may also be another sign of their increasing democratic fatigue. A myriad of factors is potentially causing these changes in millennial political behavior, but increasing rates of political polarization seems to be a likely culprit.

The politics of a generation are shaped by the historical context in which they come of age (Ghitza & Gelman, 2014, p. 24; Fisher, 2018, p. 36). The oldest millennials matured politically in the final election of the twentieth century. The political climate in 1994, characterized by Congressman Pat Buchanan’s culture war speech in 1992 and President Clinton’s subsequent impeachment in 1998, was divisive and turned many citizens away from politics (Desilver, 2019). In this sense, the political context experienced by the millennial generation is an important “hoop test.” In order for political dysfunction to be a viable explanation of the democratic fatigue described above, then millennials would need to have come of age in era of political turmoil. As it turns out, they have. The formative political years for the next wave of millennials was characterized by the deeply unpopular presidency of George Walker Bush and then deeply polarized presidency of Barrack Obama (Drake, 2014).

Until surpassed recently by President Trump, President Obama’s approval rating from 2012 to 2016 was the most deeply partisan on record. Currently, 84 percent of Republicans approve of President Trump’s job performance compared to just seven percent of Democrats (Dunn, 2018). Additionally, levels of partisanship seem to be intensifying. In 2019, President Trump became the third U.S. President to be impeached. Majorities of Republicans and Democrats report “very cold” ratings of citizens in the other party, while simultaneously rating
their own party “warmly” (Doherty, 2019, pp. 24-25). About the only thing both Democrats and Republicans can agree on is that they cannot agree on “basic facts” (Doherty, 2019, p. 7).

Millennial voters have experienced increasing rates of partisanship over the course of their political tenures. It is little wonder therefore that millennials may be less than satisfied with the performance of their democracy. In addition to political polarization and the political gridlock it induces, increasing rates of “constitutional hardball” since the mid 1990s have also increased dysfunction in Washington.

Constitutional hardball is defined as political actions that “violates or strains constitutional conventions for partisan ends” (Fishkin & Pozen, 2018, p. 921). Increasing rates of constitutional hardball may also be shaping the political experience of millennials and contributing to millennial democratic fatigue. Since the mid 1990s Republican lawmakers have been more likely to employ political tactics that rise to the level of hardball than their democratic counterparts. The GOP’s decision in 2016 to deny Merrick Garland (President Obama’s nomination to the Supreme Court) a congressional hearing and their determination to block any subsequent nominations from consideration is perhaps the most egregious example (Fishkin & Pozen, 2018, p. 917). Other prominent examples include repeated government shutdowns over the last three decades (Fishkin & Pozen, 2018, p. 917).

Constitutional hardball increases political dysfunction and it has been intensifying since the 1990s. This is precisely the time period millennials started developing their political identities, it is likely contributing to democratic fatigue. While citizens may not be familiar with the theory nor be cognizant of its consequences, they are almost certainly familiar with the highly public and partisan political battles it has resulted in. In the cases of government shutdowns, they lived the consequences alongside their fellow citizens. Thus, while it is not
possible to claim without further research that constitutional hardball is causing millennial
democratic fatigue, enough evidence exists that we cannot eliminate it as a potential contributing
factor.

The hypothesis that political dysfunction is contributing to millennial democratic fatigue
passes the hoop test discussed in this chapter. While more robust analysis is required in order to
confirm causality, the hypothesis is viable and thus political dysfunction remains a potential
explanation of millennial democratic fatigue.
Citizens of the United States, and millennials in particular, appear to be growing less religious over time (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 11). While a majority in each generation still believes in God, and the percentage of each generation that believes in God “to one degree or another” remains high, the number of those who believe in God “absolutely” has declined significantly with each cohort since the Silent Generation (“Religious Landscape,” 2018). Figure 5.1 clearly demonstrates this trend, and these findings are also reported in the ANES data (Figure 5.3). Figure 5.2 exhibits the declining importance of religion across generations, and Figure 5.3 displays the decline of Christianity in the United States and the simultaneous rise of the religiously unaffiliated or “Nones.”

While it is important to note that Figure 5.3 does not distinguish between those who believe in a religion other than Christianity and those who are religiously unaffiliated, the “Nones” are largely responsible for the increase in the “None/Other” category found in the ANES data. Adherents of Non–Christian faiths, such as Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, while accounting for approximately six percent of the United States population, are low and holding steady and do not contribute significantly to the trend portrayed in Figure 5.3 (“Religious Landscape,” 2018)
Figure 5.1


Figure 5.2
More recent survey data show that the percentage of Americans who claim their religion is “nothing in particular” continue to represent an increasing percentage of the United States citizenry (In U.S., 2019, p. 4). Also of note is that young people account for much of this change. Figure 5.4 clearly demonstrates that younger people increasingly identify as “religiously unaffiliated,” with millennials reporting the highest percentage.

![Decline of Christianity and the Rise of the "Nones" in the United States, 1948 - 2016](image)

**Figure 5.3**

*Source: VCF0128 in the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, weighted with VCF0009z.*

In sheer numbers, a majority of Americans still identify as Christian (167 million in 2019), but this figure represents a significant decline from the 178 million who identified as Christian in 2009. Conversely, over the same time period the number of people identifying as religiously
unaffiliated rose from 39 million to 68 million (Smith, 2019, p. 10). The decline of Christianity and the rise of the “Nones” is both significant and generational and is likely connected in some manner to the political disengagement currently exhibited by millennials. Further trends reveal that traditional forms of religious practice are in decline and that it is the millennials who are the most unmoored from religious institutions.

**Figure 5.4**

*Source: Religious Landscape Study (2018).*

Americans appear to be attending church less and praying less frequently. Figure 5.5 demonstrates the decline in church attendance since 1970. Most striking is the increase in the percentage of American citizens who report never attending church. In 1970, this number was 12 percent, but by 2016 had jumped to 42 percent. The trend portrayed in Figure 5.5 is also supported by data from the Pew Research Center which correlates attendance at religious
services with generation. For example, 48 percent of the oldest cohort report they attend church once a week while only 28 percent of people aged 18 – 29 (millennials) report they attend religious services weekly. The inverse relationship is true for the percentage of people who never attend church: 35 percent of millennials report they never attend services while only 28 percent of Baby Boomers and 26 percent of the Silent Generation are absent from the pews (“Religious Landscape,” 2018). The steady decrease in church attendance since the turn of the century is almost certainly due to a variety of factors, but it is yet further evidence that millennials are not participating in civil society in traditional ways.

Figure 5.5

*Source: VCF0130 in the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset, weighted with VCF0009z.*
Figure 5.6 examines declining rates of prayer over time. Once again, millennials lead with only 36 percent reporting that they “pray daily,” the lowest of any generation, and an additional 36 percent report praying “seldom or never,” the highest of any generational cohort.

Millennials also appear to be turning away from religion as a source of moral guidance (Figure 5.7) and are growing increasingly liberal on a myriad of social and political issues, while traditionally more religious generations have adopted a more conservative stance (Figure 5.8). Most interesting is that even religious millennials are moving left on several of the issues mentioned above ("Religious Landscape," 2018).

Figure 5.6

*Source: Religious Landscape Study (2018).*
Generally speaking, millennials report liberal positions on nearly all social issues with the exception of abortion and social security (Figure 5.8). On these two issues millennials find themselves more closely aligned with the beliefs of previous generations. Although the connection between millennials’ religious beliefs and their more liberal political leanings needs further exploration, it is possible that as millennials increasingly express their religiosity outside traditional religious institutions, they may become further disconnected from traditional political institutions as well.
The relationship between religiosity in the United States and political engagement is robust. Although the role of religion in the United States political system has been debated throughout the nation’s history, religion and politics are, and always have been, interconnected (Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2018, pp. 16-18, Fowler, Hertzke, Olson, & Den Dulk, 2014, p. 1). Politics are often preached from the pulpit, with nearly two thirds of current churchgoers reporting receiving political messaging from clergy members and 14 percent claiming that clergy spoke in support of or against a political candidate (Many Americans, 2016, p. 4). Admittedly this number is low, but clearly religion and politics continue to be overlapping arenas in the civil society of the United States.

Figure 5.8

In addition, 40 percent of parishioners report that clergy encouraged them to vote in November elections (Many Americans, 2016, p. 9). The fact that many millennials are not identifying as Christian and are therefore presumably not going to church, may thus relate to Generation Y’s political disengagement.

Religion also plays a role in organizing voters both in and around election time and may even translate to an electoral advantage. As Ralph Reed famously put it, “The advantage we have is that liberals and feminists don’t generally go to church. They don’t gather in one place three days before the election” (quoted in Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2018, p. 191). The idea that more religious voters may be easier to organize is particularly important in the millennial context. Perhaps the reason millennials are not voting in high numbers is because they are more difficult to organize? Perhaps they are not voting because they see too much religion in politics? Further research will be needed to more clearly parse the relationship between millennials’ faith and their politics, but it is quite possible that as millennials increasingly distance themselves from organized religion they may also continue to disengage with traditional forms of democratic and civic participation. In this regard, eschewing political service may be the most pertinent.

In order to perpetuate and function, democracy needs citizens willing to serve. Millennials and young people in general, it seems, are not interested. According to the work of Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, nearly 61 percent of young people have never considered running for office, and 29 percent have ruled out the possibility completely. In essence 90 of the four thousand young people they interviewed have not considered or have rejected public office outright (2017, p. 29). A word of caution is in order. Although these findings seem to substantiate the claim that millennials are displaying above average rates of civil disengagement
it is important to point out that Fox and Lawless do not differentiate between millennials and Generation Z. It is possible that some of the people surveyed above may not be millennials. It is also likely that some of them are and therefore the findings are at least partially helpful. There is one more aspect of millennial behavior that may also be attributing to their decline in civic engagement: they move a lot.

According to real estate data from 2017, the percentage of millennials who have lived in their house for less than two years has risen approximately 45 percent. This is a marked increase compared to young adults from previous generations. In 1960, only 34 percent of young people aged 24 to 34 had lived in their homes for less than two years (“Millennials Are Moving,” 2019). Millennials are increasingly moving to major urban areas (Frey, 2018, p. 15). The nomadic nature of millennial life may be having an adverse effect on Generation Y’s ability to put down the roots necessary to establish a robust sense of community and belonging. Granted this connection is tenuous, but when it is viewed in light of the evidence on home ownership presented in the Chapter III, it is yet another example that suggests millennials may be less connected with their communities and civil society.

In conclusion, religiosity represents a potential hoop test for a cultural explanation of millennial democratic fatigue in the United States. If millennials were associating in similar ways as previous generations, or if there were no established relationship between religiosity and politics in the United States, then the hypothesis would fail the hoop test. I have found evidence that suggests in both cases, the hypothesis passes the test. There is some evidence to suggest that more religious people are easier to organize and therefore are more effective politically. Perhaps millennials are participating in nontraditional political avenues because they are growing increasing less religious while still maintaining a relatively robust level of spirituality.
Significant evidence supports the hypothesis that millennials are increasingly disconnected from traditional religious institutions and that this fact may be influencing their political behavior.
Chapter VI.

Conclusion

This thesis fills a gap in the existing literature on the theory of democratic deconsolidation by first establishing that millennials in the United States are experiencing democratic fatigue and, second, by testing potential causes of this fatigue. I hypothesized that deteriorating economic conditions in the wake of the Great Recession, increasing rates of political disfunction, and changing cultural norms (especially with regard to religion), were all potential factors contributing to millennials’ democratic fatigue. I found all three hypothesis passed hoop tests that establishing their validity as potential contributing factors requiring further study. In addition, I found significant evidence that supports that millennials are experiencing democratic fatigue, likely for economic, political, and cultural reasons.

The ways millennials in the United States are participating in democracy is changing. They are voting at lower rates than previous generations, they report low levels of trust in government and their fellow citizens, they are increasingly abandoning traditional political parties and identifying as political Independents. While it is certainly true that most millennials still lean towards one party or another, their unwillingness to declare in favor of Republicans or Democrats is notable. Even more interesting is the fact that a number of millennials no longer find it essential to live in a democracy. The evidence also suggests that millennials increasingly view democracy in a negative light and may even be more open to alternatives such as military rule.

These findings do not confirm that democracy is on the verge of collapse in the United States, nor do they suggest that United States is necessarily deconsolidating. The evidence does
suggest that the relationship between millennials in the United States and democracy is fraying. For some millennials in the United States democracy may no longer be the “only game in town.”

In deriving my hypotheses, I theorized that democracy in the United States rests primarily on three pillars. The first is economic. Modernization theory draws a distinct connection between economic growth and development. They theory argues that “all good things” (including democracy), stem from modernization. Citizens therefore participate in democracy because it delivers prosperity, at least in the long run. It follows that if a subset of a democratic citizenry was struggling economically then this may weaken their belief in democracy as a regime type able to deliver a suitable quality of live. This would be increasingly likely if the other pillars, effective governance and a robust civil society, were also eroding. For millennials in the United States, this is precisely what has happened.

Millennials have indeed struggled economically in the wake of the Great Recession. They have endured stubbornly high levels of unemployment, stagnating wages and earnings, and grappled with high costs of living and rent especially in urban areas to which millennials are attracted in search of jobs necessary to pay off staggering levels of student debt. Additionally, millennials report that their primary focus is attaining economic stability and, in some cases, climbing out of poverty. It is therefore possible that until millennials achieve economic stability, they may continue to report lower levels of political participation. Further research is needed to test the strength and direction of this association. At this point it is not possible to assert a causal link between economic underperformance and democratic fatigue. It is also not possible to claim that the two variables are not related. Perhaps millennials will return to traditional forms of political participation should they finally achieve the financial stability they report striving for. In the short term, millennials remain upbeat about their economic future (Pew Research Center,
2014, p. 41). However, should their economic fortunes not improve perhaps millennials will further disengage from democracy or worse, abandon it completely. If trust in the political system were high, and civil social robust, this possibility would be far-fetched. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Millennials are growing increasingly dissatisfied with American democracy and are potentially turning away from democracy as a regime type. They do not trust Congress or their fellow citizens and they are shunning public office (Lawless & Fox, 2017, p. 139). Some are questioning the necessity of living in a democracy and others are potentially open to military rule in times of extreme government ineptitude.

This is likely due to the fact that millennials have come of age in a time of increasing political dysfunction. Their political psyche has been potentially marred by culture wars, government shutdowns, fierce partisanship, and impeachment (Lawless & Fox, 2017, p. 9). Increasingly vicious cycles of constitutional hardball have furthered government dysfunction. Should the political climate in the United States continue to polarize, and levels of hardball continue to increase, then these too may exacerbate the democratic disconnect currently experienced by millennials in the United States. Perhaps American millennials can rely on the final pillar of democracy, a robust civil society, to keep their connection to democracy. Unfortunately, this bulwark appears to be crumbling as well.

Millennials in the United States are increasingly turning their backs on institutional religion. Some are maintaining their belief in God (i.e. they are spiritual but not religious) and others are not. An increasing number of millennials are turning away from the church. Religion and politics are closely related in the context of the United States and the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, led primarily by Gen Y, is likely to have significant political consequences. For
example, church-going Christians congregate the weekend before election day. Even if politics are not preached from the pulpit, religious services provide opportunities to organize voters. Millennials, who are increasingly shunning organized religion, will potentially be more difficult to organize, which may in turn increase their political disengagement.

How political parties react to the decline of Christianity in the United States will also likely affect the degree to which millennials return to traditional forms of political participation or continue to eschew the political establishment. Perhaps, as secularization theory suggests, religion will continue to decline in political importance until it ceases to exert a significant influence on political behavior. More likely, many millennials will remain spiritual but continue distancing themselves from traditional religious institutions. More research is needed in order to more fully understand the causes of the “rise of the Nones” and the political and societal implications of this development.

Millennials appear reluctant to run for public office. A propensity, which if not reversed will likely have significant long-term consequences for democracy in the United States (Lawless & Fox, 2017, p. 9). Millennials are a generation on the move. They will likely have more careers than previous generations and may move more frequently. This trend may undermine civil society because putting down roots takes time. Perhaps weakened community ties are yet another consequence of the lingering effects of the Great Recession as millennials move to pursue their careers.

Millennials as a generation have reached adulthood and they now form the largest voting cohort in the United States. For the oldest millennials, the upcoming election is the sixth election cycle they have experienced. The 2020 election represents a significant opportunity for political and social scientists studying the long-term vitality of democracy in the United States. Will
millennials overcome the lingering effects of the Great Recession, rising rates of political
dysfunction, and significant cultural change, and participate in the coming election? Or will they
continue to disconnect from democracy?

There is reason to hope and reason to despair. On the positive side, the United States
economy is slowly recovering from the Great Recession, and so long as it continues to do so, I
am optimistic millennials will achieve the economic stability they seek and begin to participate
more frequently in democracy.

As for despairing, Washington remains mired in political gridlock and in a vicious and
escalating cycle of constitutional hardball. I see no evidence of this abating. Millennials’ disdain
for democratic dysfunction may therefore keep the generation on the sideline of politics
permanently. Millennial mobility in search of economic opportunity may further disconnect this
generation from traditional sources of civil society. Rapidly changing social mores may also
make millennials harder to politically organize as they refrain from both traditional political
parties and the pews. It remains to be seen whether millennials will return to the ballot box in
2020 and do their part to fix the challenges that to this point have turned them away to
democracy.


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This source provides useful background information on Millennials and their political leanings.


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