



The Racial Views of White Americans – Including Millennials – Depend on the Questions Asked

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Millennials – Americans born between 1981 and 2000 – have been touted as the most tolerant U.S. generation because they espouse high levels of support for interracial marriage, immigration, and marriage equality. But our research reveals that this generation’s racial attitudes are more complex than suggested by shorthand indicators of racial liberalism.

The millennial generation is the largest, recently overtaking boomers as the largest U.S. generation. Millennials are the most educated cohort, and they recently became the largest portion of the American workforce. This group is also the most racially and ethnically diverse adult generation. Nevertheless, as is true for other American generations, there are racial differences in partisanship and political attitudes. In 2008, millennials turned out in record numbers for Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate. In that election, 54% of young whites gave their votes to Obama. But that was a high water mark. By 2012 young whites gave a majority of their votes to Republican candidate Mitt Romney; and in the 2016 presidential election, according to exit polls, young whites aged 18 to 29 voted for Republican Donald Trump over Democrat Hillary Clinton by a margin of 48% to 45%. In contrast, 83% of blacks and 70% of Latinos of the same age voted for Clinton in 2016. Clearly, young people of color and young whites have different perspectives on politics and divergent ideas about how power and resources should be distributed. This pattern dovetails with decades of research showing that racial attitudes are a part of the political calculus for all Americans.

Given the persistent link between racial attitudes and politics in the United States, how racially liberal are white American millennials after all?

Racial Animus Has Not Declined

When researchers take a closer look at whites, both millennials and their predecessors, a troubling trend emerges. When we analyze American National Election Studies between the mid-1980s through 2014, we find no observable change in levels of white racial resentment, not even when the first members of the millennial generation are included in tallies. For over a quarter of a century, in short, there was no uptick in racial liberalism among white Americans. Indeed, from 2008 to 2014, racial resentment among whites actually increased overall – although measures of resentment among younger millennials are lower compared with older whites.

New Measures, Complex Attitudes

Racial resentment scores are not the only way to measure racial animus. Our data show that white millennials do not answer the questions in the racial resentment battery *in the same way* as older whites, because they are not actually thinking of the same things. To fully understand the complex process by which politically consequential racial attitudes are formed, we must include questions about racial fear, empathy, and the awareness and recognition of institutionalized racism and racial privilege. If voters are fearful of other racial groups, are not willing or able to recognize systemic racial inequalities, and do not have empathy for racial minorities, one cannot expect them to reject candidates who use hostile racial rhetoric or support policies that aim to close racial disparities.

Nevertheless, using data from the 2014 *Cooperative Congressional Election Study*, we record contrasting aspects of white millennial racial attitudes:

- White millennials readily acknowledge racial inequalities, and few report feeling fearful about members of other racial groups. The overwhelming majority report feeling angry about the existence of racism and say they feel sad when they think about racial injustice. Additionally, 69% of white Millennials in our sample believed that “racism is a major problem in this country.”
- On the other hand, when we ask about institutionalized racism and racial privilege, seven in ten young whites believe that hard work is all it takes to be wealthy. This group is no more likely than older whites to acknowledge that their racial identity is associated with certain advantages – even though factual research shows that whites enjoy greater wealth, better health outcomes, and greater employment opportunities, and better treatment in the criminal justice system. Our respondents did not seem to notice these markers of systemic white privilege.

Our research, in short, suggests that white Americans, including millennials, have an incomplete understanding of racism. By focusing on overt animus, researchers have missed key limits to people’s understanding of the more insidious ways that U.S. society is racially structured.

Implications and Ways Forward

Media portrayals tend to reinforce current beliefs about racism in American society. By highlighting episodes such as a Ku Klux Klan rally against the removal of Confederate Statues or graffiti spray painted outside of LeBron James’ home, the media often misses opportunities to instruct the public about larger patterns of racial inequality – such as biases in U.S. voting laws, unfairness in the criminal justice system, employment biases, and racial segregation in schools.

Scholars, think tanks and polling agencies alike should think more carefully and creatively about how to measure racial attitudes. Rather than focusing on attitudes about interracial marriage and social distance, they might instead ask questions that provide a more holistic account -- including questions about whites’ fear of other groups; anxiety about changes in the size of racial groups, awareness of institutional racism; acknowledgement of racial privilege; and empathy or apathy about the existence of racial disparities. If the United States is to make further progress in closing racial gaps, Americans must become more able and willing to perceive racism in all forms – including overt and covert, subtle and systemic, attitudinal and institutional.

Read more in Candis Watts Smith and Christopher DeSante. *Beyond Ideology and Resentment: The Dimensions of Whites' Racial Attitudes*, Midwest Political Science Association, 2017.