



Is Bernie Sanders Pushing Millennials Left?

Tyler O'Neil

April 28, 2016

Bernie Sanders may have just lost four key primaries this Tuesday, but he is winning the hearts and minds of young people, according to voting patterns and recent polling. More millennials now favor big-government policies -- or at least seem to -- because of their shining septuagenarian senator.

Nevertheless, there is good reason for skepticism. Larger numbers of young people may say that everyone has a right to healthcare or shelter, but when it comes to choosing between a free economy and a government-managed one, they prove surprisingly conservative. Is the support for Sanders' "socialist revolution" more a distraction from a shiny new object, or a deep-seated belief in the need for a complete overhaul of "the system"?

A [recent Harvard poll](#) points to the latter. In the words of Harvard's polling director, John Della Volpe, Sanders "is not moving a party to the left. He's moving a generation to the left." This sounds like hyperbole, but Della Volpe has the numbers to back it up.

In 2014, 42 percent of millennials (18- to 29-year-old Americans) agreed that "basic health insurance is a right for all people." Last year, that number rose to 45 percent, and it rose again to 48 percent this year. The number of young people who believe that "basic necessities, such as food and shelter, are a right that government should provide to those unable to afford them" also increased, from 43 percent last year to 47 percent this year. More millennials (45 percent this year, 40 percent last year) also expressed support for the idea that "the government should spend more to reduce poverty."

This also extended to the issue of climate change. In 2013, 29 percent agreed that "government should do more to curb climate change, even at the expense of jobs." While this number dropped to 27 percent in 2014, it increased to 32 percent last year, and 37 percent this year.

More Millennials are also identifying as Democrats. For the first time in the past five years, significantly more young people identified themselves as Democrats (40 percent) than as Independents (36 percent). A mere 22 percent were Republicans.

Finally, a majority of young people even reject capitalism.

Della Volpe told the [Washington Post](#) that it is rare for young people's attitudes to change much from year to year, and even more remarkable for so many of their attitudes to shift in the same

direction at once. He argued that "a lack of trust that young Americans have" extends "to the very premise of how our country's organized."

But this narrative also masks important truths about the millennial generation. Young people are very diverse, and while liberalism seems to be making some big gains, they may not be as significant as some Democrats wish to believe.

"There does appear to be some leftward movement among millennials regarding government providing social services, but the shifts are not dramatic," Emily Eakins, research fellow and director of polling at the Cato Institute, told PJ Media in an email statement. She emphasized the Harvard poll's 2.4 percent margin of error, but acknowledged that "Sanders probably has something to do with this slight shift given that he's winning 60-80% of the under 30 vote according to exit polls and national surveys."

Eakins also noted that, while the Harvard poll only found 42 percent of young Americans support capitalism, even fewer (33 percent) support socialism. Indeed, the breakdown in the poll makes good sense: Socialism is more supported by 18- to 20-year-olds (41 percent), Democrats (50 percent), Clinton voters (54 percent), Hispanics (38 percent), and blacks (39 percent). Capitalism finds adherents among *those who have graduated from college* (56 percent), whites (43 percent), men (49 percent), those who live in the South (46 percent) and West (45 percent), and Republicans (54 percent).

Race doesn't explain the capitalist-socialist breakdown nearly as much as experience does. David Barnes, policy director at Generation Opportunity, emphasized the economic possibilities associated with smaller government -- issues that college students tend to face only after graduation. "Washington should stop creating barriers to opportunity and focus on policies that allow us to pursue the American Dream," Barnes declared.

"Get rid of government regulations that stifle innovation and entrepreneurship in the sharing economy and through occupational licensing," the Generation Opportunity spokesman suggested, in an email statement to PJ Media. He also encouraged reform for "insolvent programs like Social Security that we involuntarily pay into but will never benefit from." When millennials graduate college and enter the workforce, they find it hard to get a good job, and even when they do, a large chunk of their paycheck goes to support programs that they don't expect to ever receive benefits from.

Barnes addressed the student debt issue on the supply side. "Make college more affordable by increasing choice, competition, and transparency," he suggested, rather than by subsidizing a corrupt system. This reform would address the incentive structure which perpetuates expensive degrees and sub-par preparation for the workforce. Ironically, Bernie Sanders' "free college" plan would merely prop up the bad system, rather than reforming it.

Eakins presented data that shows young people do approach economic issues from such a free-market perspective. "In a survey I conducted in 2014 among 18-29 year olds, we asked which is the better system capitalism or socialism and capitalism came out on top," 52 percent to 42 percent, she recalled. "When we moved away from vague terms such as capitalism and socialism, and instead asked which is a better system: a free market economy or an economy

managed by the government, millennials came out squarely in the free market camp," favoring markets (64 percent) over government management (32 percent).

This preference for free markets does not explain why many young people say that "basic necessities" like food, shelter, and healthcare should be considered "rights." How can you support free markets and want government to provide for you?

The language of "rights" has become rather confusing. Ever since Franklin Delano Roosevelt proposed a new "workers' bill of rights," the term has been used less to describe the basic things owed to all human beings and more to describe what a certain group wants the government to give them. America's Founders warned about this tendency in government, but the Progressive movement largely decided that their system was outdated, so here we are.

Many young people grew up in relative comfort, with easy access to food, shelter, and healthcare. They want those goods to be available to everyone -- don't we all? -- and so they consider them basic "rights." But a government which is able to guarantee these goods to everyone would be totalitarian by definition. It would have to exercise power over the economy in ways that lead to poverty, not to prosperity. Once millennials understand this, they tend to shy away from such demands.

Millennials want options, and nothing rubs them the wrong way more than Sanders's comment that "you don't necessarily need a choice of 23 underarm spray deodorants or 18 different pairs of sneakers when children are hungry in this country." You might as well say you don't need different options for cell phones, tablets, and laptops, but everyone knows that variety enriches life. No one knows this more than millennials.

Furthermore, the bustling market which provides multiple options also provides more jobs and more access to goods and services. Imagine if only one company made deodorant. Sure, it could be a big company, but it wouldn't be able to offer as many jobs as Old Spice, Suave, Axe, Degree, Arm & Hammer, et cetera. And that company would have a monopoly on the price of deodorant, so poor people would have to pay more. You wouldn't get to choose an expensive premium brand or a cheaper knock-off -- and deodorant would be less available. The discussion seems less important when focused on deodorant, but when you apply it to restaurants and supermarkets, the same logic applies.

The funny thing is, while Sanders pushes things that millennials don't really want, he also brings up serious problems in the way our country is currently run.

"The Cato Institute is a libertarian organization, and we appreciate the attention Sanders has drawn to crony capitalism among young people," Eakins declared. This appreciation also drove the Koch-backed group Freedom Partners to support Sanders in a video which tripped up the candidates in a Democratic debate in March. Conservatives often agree with liberals that crony capitalism detracts from free markets, creating a system of economic winners and losers that is largely dependent on which businesses can afford to cozy up to big government.

The key difference lies in how small-government conservatives try to solve the problem. As Eakins declared, "Aggrandizing the power and scope of government, which is what Sanders

proposes, is often what perpetuates crony capitalism (and inequality!) because it creates more for politicians, regulators, and outside groups to manipulate in favor of the politically connected."

Barnes, the Generation Opportunity spokesman, agreed. "Sanders has struck a cord with millennials, but his proposals are unrealistic, misleading, and would accelerate the debt burden both parties are piling on the backs of younger generations," he declared. "Studies showing a shift in opinion towards socialism are ironic because they generally also show young people favor free-markets even more. That's why Generation Opportunity is educating Americans on why expanding the government is not the solution and encouraging them to get involved."

Winning the hearts and minds of millennials is not an easy thing. Studies show that my generation largely rejects traditional sources of ideas and authority, media foremost among them. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss these issues and explain why the options and opportunities that young people love would not be available in a socialist system, and why you should support free markets if you want everyone to have more access to basic goods. Nothing is guaranteed, but more value is produced, and progress is much more widespread, under free markets.