

CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER

No. 21/06

November 2021

GENERATION Z

“LOST” OR EMERGING GENERATION?

LAURIE L. RICE and KENNETH W. MOFFETT

Professors of Political Science

Southern Illinois University, IL,

USA

Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 21/06

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Generation Z

“Lost” or Emerging Generation?

Laurie L. Rice and Kenneth W. Moffett

Some have recently referred to members of Generation Z (Gen Z) as a lost generation. Those who do cite factors ranging from the opportunities and experiences this generation lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its smaller size relative to Millennials in the United States and Europe, its economic vulnerability, and the anxiety produced by its experiences with a range of societal woes that disproportionately threaten this generation (see, e.g., Betz 2020 and Milotay 2020).

While we do not dispute these facts about this generation, an overemphasis on the struggles of Gen Z distracts from one of the most significant features of this generation – its readiness to advocate and work for social and political change. This feature distinguishes it markedly from many in the two prior generations, Millennials and Generation X.

In our book, *The Political Voices of Generation Z* we investigate how young adults express themselves politically, how this expression shapes their participation, and the consequences that their political engagement has on representing their views and implementing their preferred policies. We find that young adults in the United States engaged in significant levels of activism and civic engagement on a wide range of issues including social movements like the MeToo Movement, Black Lives Matter, the March for Our Lives movement against gun violence, Supreme Court nominations, and immigration. This level of activism has not been seen in several generations.

We examine civic and political activity among young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 in 2018 and 2020. By civic activity, we mean an array of political and civic actions that range from paying attention to political campaigns, talking to people and explaining to them why they should vote against or for one of the political parties or candidates, making purchasing decisions based on a company's conduct or values, among others.

While this age range captures both members of Gen Z who have reached voting age in the United States (18) and younger Millennials, we argue that they should be studied together because of their similar experience of the sorts of defining events that Mannheim (1952) argues shapes a generation's world view. Young adults face a disproportionate risk of sexual assault and sexual harassment (RAINN 2020; Kears 2018), being killed with a firearm (Kochanek et al. 2019), experiencing a school shooting, or being killed by police (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019). Members of this age group are also more likely to have friends whose future in the country is uncertain due to their immigration status (Lopez and Krogstad 2017) and they can expect to be affected by the decisions of political institutions for a longer period.

While these issues can result in anxiety among members of this generation, these problems instead propel Gen Z toward activism, speaking up, and pressing for change. As digital natives, Gen Z quickly takes to social media to express its political voice but their political expression does not end there. We find links between both posting and protesting about issues and contacting elected officials about those issues. This bodes well for this generation's ability to successfully bring about the changes they seek.

Gen Z also favors protests as a mechanism for pushing for change (Hatzipanagos 2021). We discover links between both posting about issues and movements and engaging in protests related to them and civic engagement. Thus, posting and protesting are starting, not ending places for their civic and political activity.

While our analysis focuses on GenZers in the United States, ample anecdotal evidence suggests that many trends that we uncover in this context hold elsewhere. After all, young adults in cities like London, Paris, and Berlin also took to the streets in Black Lives Matter and antiracism

protests (Mohdin and Campbell 2020; Francois 2020; Walsh 2020). And, the climate strike movement emerged among members of Generation Z in Europe and has diffused worldwide (Abnett 2021).

For several decades, young adults were routinely criticized for their low levels of interest in politics and their lack of participation in the electoral process (see, e.g., Wattenberg 2016). Not so for Generation Z. In the 2018 midterm elections and the 2020 presidential elections in the United States, members of Generation Z old enough to vote did so at significantly higher rates than either Generation X or Millennials did when they were the same age. In particular, college students' voting rates in 2020 rose to record levels, rivaling that of Americans as a whole, with 18- to 21-year-old college students voting at even higher rates than older college students (Thomas, Gismond, Gautam, and Brinker 2021). Similarly, the 2019 European elections saw record turnout rates fueled in large part by significant gains in turnout by those under the age of 25 (Zalc, Becuwe, and Buruian 2019).

This leads us toward a different case to be made for calling this emerging generation a lost generation than the ones mentioned in this essay's opening. The label Lost Generation echoes that used to refer to those who came of age during World War I. This generation, along with their children and grandchildren - the Greatest and Silent Generations - all faced significant challenges in their formative years. While their outlooks varied, they shared in common high voter turnout rates (Miller 1992). The Lost Generation and the Silent Generation also share in common a misleading label. Despite these names, they are known for their high levels of civic engagement, voting at higher rates than the three generations following them and contacting elected officials at higher rates, too, a pattern that persisted throughout their lifetimes (Miller and Shanks 1996; Zukin et al 2006). Thus, when it came to the ballot box or the mail box, they were neither lost nor silent. Gen Z shares these characteristics but also values protesting like Baby Boomers did decades before Gen Z took to the streets. These characteristics combine to suggest that Gen Z will be a powerful force for change for years to come.

ON THE AUTHORS:

Laurie L. Rice and Kenneth W. Moffett are both Professors of Political Science at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. They are the authors of [*The Political Voices of Generation Z*](#), which examines the political participation patterns of young people that are presented in this essay more fully.

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Hondertmarck 45D

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

The Netherlands

Tel. +31 43 32 60 828

Email: cicerofoundation@gmail.com

Website: www.cicerofoundation.org

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