

September 2020

# country report

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Office USA, Washington, D.C



## Young and Diverse

---

### The U.S. Electorate in 2020 and the Rise of the Millennial and Minority Vote

*Syreta Haggray*

Signs are growing that the 2020 voter turnout could be record breaking high with a surge of new voters potentially producing the most diverse electorate in American history. Millennials and minorities are projected to equal or even surpass the share of eligible voters composed of Baby Boomers and the Silent and Greatest Generations. Noteworthy is the cause of this: demographic change. The 2020 election will mark the first time that women are a voting majority; and Hispanic people will be the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the electorate. These groups each represent strong voting blocks and have the potential to tip the balance of this historic election in favor of their choice issues and candidate – especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and movements for social and racial justice, and equality which are likely to toss up previously expected voting behaviors.

### A Look at the U.S. Electorate in 2020

The U.S electorate is the most diverse it has ever been; there are several demographic groups that are essential for Democrats and Republicans (to gain support from) if they want to win the general election. The non-white and foreign-born share of the electorate is growing, and as white deaths now outnumber white births, nonwhite citizens account for a third of eligible voters – their largest share being Latinx. The overall age of the electorate is also becoming younger. This is also evident among the now largest voting block: Millennials (born between 1981 – 1996) and Gen Z (under 25 years of age). Only roughly half of them are white and a majority is female. This demographic shift has significant political consequences. Both major political parties have recognized these trends and have launched massive outreach campaigns to all of these groups in the past several election cycles. Democrats and Republican alike need to capture at least a decent share of each of these demographic groups' votes to carry a win. To do so, they must acknowledge and work on the issues these groups care most about.

### Women – the political shapers

Gender realignment of American politics is the biggest change in party affiliation and has gained momentum since 2016. Women make up the largest share of eligible voters, and as such are a key demographic target group for both Democrats and Republicans.

Among white women, party identification differs widely between college educated and non-college educated women. Women without a college education tend to lean more conservative than women with degrees. The same applies to women living in rural vs. urban areas. Women of color are the exception. The overwhelming majority of them lean liberal, regardless of age, education level or location. According to a recent Harvard online survey, over 64% of women lean democratic. Issues women care about have become key strategic

campaign issues for both parties in 2020. For example, during the coronavirus pandemic, women have been disproportionately affected by unemployment and childcare issues compared to males. An analysis by the Institute for Women's Policy Research suggests the woman most impacted by COVID-19 is a single, urban, working class mother of color. Inadvertently, this woman would also be most affected by issues of race, ethnic, economic, and health inequities, inner-city violence and gun control. Although the female electorate is also becoming younger and more diverse, the average female voter is still white, middle aged, and suburban; and U.S. politics predominantly addresses her policy objectives.

Women are also challenging the dominance of men in our political elections and institutions. More women than ever are running for office in 2020 – especially young women. And there will be more all-woman congressional contests on the ballot in November 2020 than ever before. Women have already secured both Democratic and Republican major-party nominations in 51 contests for the U.S. House and Senate. That number will rise before Election Day.

## People of Color – The Political Clients

Numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that about one-in-ten people eligible to vote in this year's U.S. presidential election are naturalized citizens. And most (61%) of these 23 million eligible voters live in just five states: California, New York, Florida, Texas and New Jersey. According to Pew Research, most of these eligible voters are either Hispanic or Asian, though they hail from varied countries across the globe. Immigrants from Mexico make up the single largest group, at 16% of foreign-born voters. Two-thirds have lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years. This group, in itself, is an important voter block. However, what gives them more momentum is the number of their U.S. born descendants who in second, third or subsequent generations are fully American, yet identify with their ethnic heritage. Another emerging strong voter bloc are Asian Americans, specifically Desi Americans (South Asian Americans born or raised in the United States). Still much smaller in size than other communities, what sets them apart, is that they are the highest educated racial or ethnic group in the U.S. and have the highest median household income of these groups. As such, their influence and voting power have been noted by both Democrats and Republicans who are actively wooing this electorate.

For U.S. voters overall, issues surrounding immigration policy have steadily gained in importance. For the U.S. public, immigration has also become a priority they feel Congress and the President should address. This is especially true for Latinx under the current administration. Numerous proposed policy changes by the administration, such as the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall Expansion and limitations to legal immigration, have engendered strong polarized public reactions. Undeniably, these affect how immigrants see their place in the U.S.

Studies and recent polls have found that the coronavirus pandemic has dealt a disproportionately strong blow to the Latinx communities. Next to Blacks, Latinx have shouldered the crisis as essential workers who have kept the economy afloat. But Latinx have experienced despairingly higher infection and mortality rates, along with higher unemployment and evictions than white people. Issues that are important to them in this election are healthcare, the economy and social inequity. According to 2018 U.S. Census Data, Latinx have the third highest poverty rate by race next to Native Americans with 25.4% and Black voters (20.8%). However, one cannot assume Latinx votes will go to Democrats across the board. Some polls suggest a sizable amount of Latinx (nationally between a

quarter and a third) back Trump — similar to 2016. And like in 2016, a sizable block of Latinx in Arizona, Florida and Texas — three important swing states that have large Latinx electorates — are likely to support the conservative party.

A report by the Poor People's Campaign, found that poverty affects more than 38 million people in America and new research suggests they represent a vast reservoir of votes. Their findings concluded that between the Democratic nominee Joe Biden and incumbent Republican Donald Trump, the candidate who addresses issues of poverty likely could take advantage of untapped votes in key swing and battleground states. Furthermore, the study suggests that attracting the votes of low-income individuals and mobilizing them to go to the polls could prove decisive in the 2020 election. Over half of the country's 63 million registered low-income voters did not cast a ballot in the 2016 presidential election. This fact simultaneously presents untapped potential as well as a major danger for both parties and has long been a contentious topic of debate. Low income individuals have also been strongly affected by the COVID-19 crises and will likely vote for the candidate promising job growth.

The balance of partisanship is strongest held among the second largest ethnic group in the U.S – African Americans who make up 12.5% of eligible voters. Black GOP support has been in the single digits (hovering around 8%) since conservatives opposed the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s. Democrats hope to capitalize on this during this election cycle by addressing and campaigning on issues of race and justice – which many conservatives have failed to incorporate in their platform. Racial issues will likely define the 2020 presidential election. The Black community, although perhaps not inherently enamored with Joe Biden (many Black voters have felt let down by Democrats since the Obama administration), has taken note of this and will predictably align themselves with Democrats as they have in the past. Nearly 89% intend to vote for Democrats in this election according to a Pew Research Study.

In the midst of a pandemic, many Black voters have been disillusioned with the president's response to racial inequality and nationwide have taken to protesting after the deaths of Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and most recently the near-fatal shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, WI. Surveys suggest that Black voters in America do not feel heard or understood by President Trump and feel he is further polarizing society with statements which some regard as disparaging and racially divisive. This is added to the disappointment Black voters already experienced with the president's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Systemic health and social inequities have put people of color at an increased risk to contract COVID-19. Racial disparities have played an apparent role in infection and mortality rates with rates three times higher than their white counterparts. Next to Latinx, African Americans have been affected hardest by the pandemic in a widespread manner that spans the country, throughout hundreds of counties in urban, suburban and rural areas, and across all age groups. Circumstances that have made Black (and Latinx) people more likely than white people to be exposed to the virus: they have front-line jobs that keep them from being able to work from home; they rely heavily on public transportation for jobs; and often live in multigenerational homes and inner cities where socially distancing or isolating often isn't possible. Although there are many policies that influence the African American Community in the U.S. such as healthcare and the economy, how they cast their vote in this general election will be determined by COVID-19 and race.

There is a widespread effort and campaigns led by prominent personalities such as Michelle Obama to mobilize the Black vote in November; however, Black voters face greater barriers in many places to registering to vote, staying on the voter rolls, and having their mail-in

ballots counted. These mostly democrat led campaigns point to factors impeding Black Americans from voting, which they believe is a direct result of decisions made by Republican legislators in the past decade. A new study from the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research found that voter registration rates are currently not up to the same level they were compared to the same period in 2016. This will likely concern both major political parties– albeit perhaps the Democrats more.

## Young Voters – the political consumers

Minority identities are represented in the largest voting bloc in 2020: Young voters (Millennials & Gen Z). Generation Z is said to be the most diverse generation and has the smallest number of white members of any generation. Together Millennials and Gen Z outnumber the other two significant age groups: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980). The Millennial and by extension the Gen Z is “the American Voter” in 2020 and the single most important target voter for any political party or candidate. Essentially, the young voter is both the median and average voter in the 2020 general election; and they overwhelmingly lean democrat (70%).

Sir Winston Churchill is famously credited with saying that “If you’re not a liberal when you’re 25, you have no heart. If you’re not a conservative by the time you’re 35, you have no brain”. This seems to no longer hold true. Millennials seem to be holding on to their liberal leaning behaviors beyond their thirties. U.S. voters under 40 are more ethnically diverse, live in urban areas, have higher education, are well read, less religious, and remain skeptical of institutions their parents supported.

So far indications are that their political attitudes and voting behavior no longer align with that of their parents. This should give political parties cause to reassess their platforms, especially as, according to Pew Research, roughly 44% of them identify as independents. When asked, nearly 54% of young adults claimed that they support Joe Biden for president for the mere reason that he is not Donald Trump. Only 19% agree with his leadership and an even lesser number subscribe to his policy positions. Furthermore, they do not believe him to be the face of the American values. This should give the Democratic Party serious pause to push for the Party’s reorganization and rejuvenation if they intend to hang on to these voters in a post-Trump future America. To do so, they must revamp and modernize their platform, continuously also be more inclusive and diversify their candidates across the entire party spectrum, and actually run on issues young voters care about. That being said, Republicans will have to do the same. They still have a solid base (roughly 30% of Millennials and Gen Z) of young conservative supporters, who are just as passionate in their activism and view many issues similarly to their more liberal counterparts.

Millennials have a plethora of choices due to how accessible information is throughout the world. This access, enabled through technology; i.e. the internet, allows them to form multiple options that change based on constant new information. Accustomed to choice, it is no surprise that they expect and demand the same from their country’s political framework, parties, and leadership. As a result, young voters do not simply support one political party, they support leaders of movements within the big tent political parties whose platform align with the issues they care most about. Millennial voters tend to have more liberal political attitudes compared to their older counterparts. Additionally, millennial voters place a higher emphasis on challenging existing paradigms and moral behavior, rather than voting according to party lines. Doing “the right thing” is important to them! It is because of the vast variety of options millennials enjoy, that they take on a more aggressive approach to politics.

Millennials and minorities compared to their older counterparts, tend to consumer politics - a market based alternative form of political engagement, rather than subscribing to politics - the belief and support of basic established political principles. Kristen Soltis Anderson makes the point in her book *The Selfie Vote: Where Millennials are Leading America (And How Republicans Can Keep Up)* that because millennials are more "self-absorbed", and brilliant self-promoters, they have become more demanding political consumers. Furthermore, Millennials and Gen Z on both ends of the political spectrum have transformed their activism into careers by founding record numbers of NGO's and political action organizations with a growing political influence.

Brooking's William Frey finds that

*"the COVID-19 pandemic will most negatively impact the economic prospects of younger generations, who are bearing the brunt of outsized job losses, evictions, and—among Gen Z—disruptions in education. For older millennials, this is the second stage of a double economic whammy, as many of them never fully recovered from the 2007 to 2009 Great Recession. As millennials and younger generations find themselves at the center of the pandemic's economic storm, they are poised to fight for a bigger say in how the nation recovers."*

He adds that another reason for the power of young voters is their astute awareness and activism in opposition to systemic racism and who, even in the face of a pandemic rallied to protest racial and social injustice that is prohibiting people of color "from achieving the education, jobs, housing, and wealth that whites have long enjoyed." Additionally, these issues are deeply personal for young people as nearly 40% of Millennials and Gen Z themselves are Black and Brown people of color. They have formed a coalition of all races—including whites—into a socio-political movement by using the leverage, they are aware they have, to bring about fundamental changes in racial & social justice. Frey concludes that: "It is likely that the pandemic and recent activism will further galvanize this generation to promote an array of progressive causes."

Conscious of the change they can bring about, young voters are emboldened to make greater demands from their elected officials and expect factual and clearly defined positions, as well as a platform a political party can deliver on. Thus, traditional political principles and values, such as fiscal conservatism or individual liberty are too narrow and too simple for them. When surveyed, the registered voters ranked their issue priorities from high to low as follows: the economy, health care, supreme court appointments, the coronavirus outbreak, violent crime, foreign policy, gun policy, race and ethnic inequality, immigration, economic inequality, climate change, abortion. Oddly, young voters almost have the reverse priority lineup with the addition of LGBTQ rights. Having grown up in the absence of common global enemies (except Islamic terrorism), foreign policy is not a top priority for this post-Cold War generation, who no longer has a personal connection to the alliances nor their meaning. Their activist nature makes them more empathetic towards global humanitarian and human rights causes, however, they lack the appreciation of transatlantic partnerships of yesteryear.

### **Strong generational divides in partisanship**

Social, economic, and political fissures between millennials and older, white generations are well known and, on both the Left and the Right. The main conceptual frameworks have largely shifted in focus from isolated values to group identities. As Amy Chua puts it in *Political Tribes*: "The Left believes that right-wing tribalism—bigotry, racism—is tearing the

country apart. The Right believes that left-wing tribalism—identity politics, political correctness—is tearing the country apart. They are both right.” Young voters find themselves in the middle of this partisanship in addition to conflicts with their elders over differences in ideology. One of these differences is the growing secularization among young people who are religiously unaffiliated and the declining share of Americans who are Christians, as well as shrinking confidence in organized religion. However, young voters are polarized amongst themselves too. Today's “Under 40” are less willing to compromise on the truth they hold compared to their parents and thus, draw a line in the sand that further divides the generations. Clashes are to be expected between parties and generations, however, if the Millennial and Gen Z generations want to stay in the political arena some compromises will be necessary.

In the long run, racial and ethnic diversity will likely increase. However, for now, it contributes to a decline in social trust. Not only in institutions and leaders, but in one another. According to *The American Interest*, young people are subject to a “growing influence of certain ways of thinking about each other”, which is reinforced by factors such as geographical and political party sorting. For many members of this population these views are polarized into good and bad (i.e. demonizing one political figure and praising another). These views are informed by group think and evident within the current political climate. In an effort to overcome this derision, organizations founded by, and catering to Millennials and Gen Z (e.g. Millennial Action Project) are working to identify and bring together young leaders from both sides of the aisle to bridge the partisan divide in American politics.

Why is this so important? Millennials and Gen Z constitute the next generation of leadership and will drive the future course of the United States, as well as its foreign relations. The way in which Americans vote in 2020 and the issues that are endorsed will foreshadow the next several election cycles.

## The Target Voter in 2020

Will any individual demographic group be able to tip the balance of the election in November? The group most capable of doing so are young voters, if their activism translates into political support. Data from Brookings shows that the combined Millennial, Gen Z, and younger generations numbered 166 million as of July 2019, or 50.7% of the nation's population.

Based on U.S. Census data, the average voter in 2020 is moderately liberal, under the age of 35, college educated, and a woman of color who lives in an urban setting. She cares about race and justice, women's rights, health and climate change. She is a consumer of politics and will vote for the party she feels best embodies her values. She will likely cast her ballot in opposition to the presidential candidate she fears will be most divisive and not usher in the changes she expects of her political leadership. She is highly motivated to vote by mail-in ballot due to COVID-19 health concerns, however, some experts predict she could potentially face challenges in doing so. The, already underfunded, U.S. Postal Service fears extensive delays in processing votes by mail before voting deadlines in light of additional pandemic induced shortages.

Both Democrats and Republicans have long misunderstood this and have had a much too simplistic view of the values this emerging black voter holds dear. They have underestimated how diverse and complicated these voters are. According to *The Atlantic*, signs are growing that voter turnout in 2020 could reach the highest levels in decades—if not the “highest in

the past century” due to an influx of new young voters. It is projected that about 156 million people could vote in 2020, an enormous increase from the 139 million who cast ballots in 2016.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

Syreta Haggray  
Project Manager KAS office USA  
European and International Cooperation  
[www.kas.de/usa](http://www.kas.de/usa)

[syreta.haggray@kas.de](mailto:syreta.haggray@kas.de)



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: “Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international” (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>