Millennials: Changing the Face of Political Participation in Germany?

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Millennials are often criticized for being self-serving and little interested in politics. The Time Magazine even called them the “Me Me Me Generation”. Over the recent years, however, Millennials, born between 1985 and 2000, have proven the opposite. Not only digital politics, but also climate protection brings numerous young people every week to the streets under the motto “Fridays for Future”, and this despite criticism from older people. The last European elections have also shown a considerable gap between the political preferences of younger and older age groups, especially in Germany. These developments have sparked a new interest – in academia and in the wider public alike – for the political participation of young citizens.

But how exactly Millennials are engaging in politics and whether they are participating more or less in comparison to older generations? We compare here the political participation of Millennials with those of Baby boomers (born between 1955 and 1969) and the Generation X (*Xers*, born between 1970 and 1984) in Germany while taking into account the methodological difficulties associated with this type of research.

# Changing Political Participation in Western Europe

Looking at the dynamics of political participation *a decline in voter turnout* since the Second World War can be recognized. The decline is affecting all age groups, but even more so the youngest ones. In Germany, voter turnout for federal elections reached its peak in 1972, at 91.1% (in West Germany), and its lowest point in 2009, at 70.8%. Additionally there has been *a rise in non-electoral forms of participation* since the 1970s. These forms of participation include activities such as signing petitions, joining in boycotts, or taking part in demonstrations. In comparison to voting, these actions are more spontaneous and less dependent on organizations like parties or labor unions.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to distinguish whether these trends can be attributed to period or generational effects, or simply the age. To give an example: Do Millennials for instance engage more in product boycotts, because of a greater institutionalization of social movements organizations who stimulate such actions? That would point to a period effect. Or is it a generational effect that Millennials use boycotts, because they have developed during their political socialization distinct values and attitudes (like e.g. environmental awareness) different from previous generations? Or, as a third possible explanation, do Millennials, who are today between 19 and 34 years old, engage more in product boycott because they are young and will give up this behavior when they get older?

Indeed, separating age, period, and generational effects (APG) poses a statistical problem: age is perfectly explained by cohort and period. But by constraining one of the three terms of the APG equation, informed estimations about the nature of social change can still be made.

Despite the inherent challenges associated with generational analysis, it is surprising that so few studies have examined the political participation of Millennials. Most studies that have looked at the decline in voter turnout and the expansion of non-electoral participation were conducted in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Citizens of Generation X, not the Millennials, were the “young” at that time. How are Millennials participating in politics? Are they simply pursuing the same old trends observed before; voting less, but getting involved in non-electoral forms of political participation?

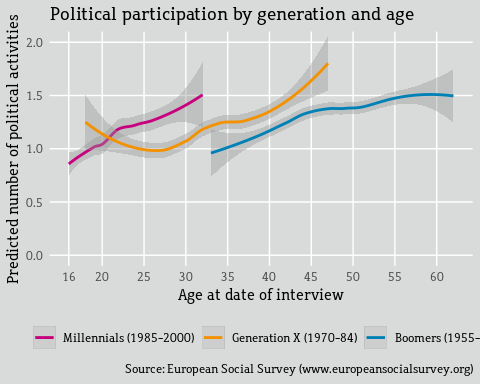
# We look here at the volume and modes of participation of Millennials compared to Baby boomers and the Generation X in Germany. We begin by exploring trends in voter turnout by age groups using data from the Bundeswahlleiter. We then examine the three generations’ involvement in other forms of electoral and non-electoral political participation using data from eight biennial rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) conducted between 2002 and 2017.The ESS asked respondents whether they had engaged in various forms of political participation in the 12 months preceding each of the survey rounds. We compare how Boomers, Xers, and Millennials participate in two electoral activities – contacting a politician or a government official and working in a political – and four non-electoral activities – working in another organization or association, signing a petition, taking part in a lawful demonstration, and boycotting certain products.

# In Germany, Millennials became eligible to vote in a federal election for the first time in 2005. By then, the oldest members of this generation were 20 years old. In the subsequent elections, they tended to show up less to the polls than older age groups according to data from the Bundeswahlleiter. This pattern, however, seems to reflect more a life-course than a generational effect. Scholars usually explain this tendency by the fact that young people have a looser connection to their community. They are often still in education and are more mobile. The process of “transitioning to adulthood,” that is, settling in a community, working, cohabiting with a partner, and raising a family, is associated with an increase in electoral participation. An interesting development in Germany has been the recent rise in voter turnout. After reaching its lowest in point in 2009, voter turnout has increased to 71.5% in 2013 and to 76.2% in 2017. Remarkably, the *gap* between the most involved age group (60 to 69 years old) and the least involved one (21 to 24 years old) declined from 20.6% in 2009 to 14% in 2017. The increase in voter turnout among the youngest age groups (18 to 34 years old) was 2% to 3% higher than the overall 5.4% increase since 2009. Millennials, like a rising tide, seem to have partially catched-up with older cohorts.

Turning to the other forms of political participation measured by the ESS from 2002 to 2017, Millennials’ involvement varies depending on the type of activity. They were less likely to contact a politician (11% of them did so compared to 13% for Xers and 18% for Boomers), less likely to sign a petition (30% compared to 35% for Xers and 38% for Boomers), and less likely to boycott certain products (23% compared to 33% for Xers and 37% for Boomers). Millennials, however, were more inclined to work for a party (3.3%) and work for an organization (28%) than Xers (respectively, 2.7% and 24%), but still less inclined to do so than Boomers (respectively, 4% and 28%). Millennials’ participation in demonstrations (14%) exceeded those of the other two generations (11% for Xers and 9% for Boomers). Looking at the results, we cannot conclude that Millennials are particularly focused on non-electoral forms of political participation. Except for demonstrations, their participation is rather moderate and balanced across different political actions.

As for voter turnout, the relatively low levels of participation of Millennials might reflect a life-course rather than a generational effect. Since the ESS covers 16 years, we can use this range to compare the participation of respondents of the three generations as a function of their age at the date of the survey interview (see *Figure*). Here, the level of participation is simply measured as the predicted number of political activities performed by the respondents in the year preceding the survey. Respondents can score up to a maximum of six points when they took part in the two electoral and four non-electoral forms of political participation presented previously.

All three generations tend to participate more as they get older, but each of them appears to follow a distinct trajectory. Interestingly, we find that Millennials’ overall participation is high for their age and even *surpasses* Xers’ participation in their twenties. It is still too early to argue that this trend is caused by a generational effect. Millennials high involvement might simply echo the highly politicized period in which they grew in. The economic crisis, the flow of refugees, climate change, and the rise of the radical right seem to have reactivated the political participation of all cohorts in Germany. We will have to continue tracking Millennials’ participation to see whether they maintain their distinct trajectory in the future. As of now, we can nonetheless safely conclude that, contrary to some common belief, Millennials are not an apathetic generation.



# Our analysis has shown that Millennials are, in general, less active than the older generations, but this lower level of engagement might be an artifact of an age effect: On average, we can say that Millennials participate today more than Xers during their twenties and, if the current trend persists, they will participate more than Boomers did during their thirties. Millennials are in fact more mobilized than Xers were at the same age and do not participate in a radically different way. Therefore, they might actually contribute to an increase in the overall level of participation in Germany. That’s good news for democracy, as political participation is a clear indicator that the input-dimension of the political system is functioning. High levels of participation also improve democratic quality and the legitimacy a democracy can claim for itself.

Two aspects were left open in this contribution: First, how did the invention of the World Wide Web affect the political repertoire of Millennials in comparison to older generations, and is online participation supplementing or substituting other forms of participation? Second, what will happen with Millennials’ political engagement when they transition further into adulthood, settle down in stable jobs, pay taxes, raise families, and interact more with the welfare state. Will they keep on participating at this level?

# [.](https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/dam/jcr/e0d2b01f-32ff-40f0-ba9f-50b5f761bb22/btw17_heft4.pdf)

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# Literature

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Summary

Millennials, born between 1985 and 2000, are often criticized for being self-serving and little interested in politics. We examine the political participation of the Millennial generation in comparison to Generation X and Boomers in Germany. We find that Millennials participate today more than the Generation X at the age of twenty and, if the current trend persists, they will participate more than Boomers did during their thirties. Therefore, Millennials might actually contribute to an increasing level of participation in Germany.