A Political and Sociological Examination of the Voting Participation of Generation X

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A Political and Sociological
Examination of the Voting Participation
of Generation X

A thesis submitted to the Carroll College Department of Political Science
in candidacy for graduation with honors.

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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of POLITICAL SCIENCE.

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Abstract

For the past decade more and more Americans in the age cohort labeled Generation X have been criticized for displaying an unwillingness to vote in national and local elections. According to the research done on this topic, it is true that more than half the people in this age group do not participate in their civil duty of casting a ballot during elections.¹ This cohort, made up of nearly fifty million Americans between the ages of 21 to 37, has developed this pattern as a result of many factors. The manner in which Generation X was socialized by society and the social changes of the seventies and eighties could be the reason over half of Generation X is unwilling to vote. The influence of a skyrocketing divorce rate, along with the influence of technology led Generation X to hold a unique view of the way the world works. The second factor is the process of political socialization that Generation X experienced was tainted by the time in which it happened; during the post-Watergate and Vietnam era. The third factor is that the design of the political system in America, has turned Generation X away from participating within the system. All of these factors may have led to a decrease in voter turnout by Generation X.

¹ Halstead, 1999, p.2
Chapter 1

Generation X: A Complicated Cohort

"There is no difficulty in showing that the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty is vested in the entire aggregate of the community, every citizen not only having a voice, but being called on to take an actual part in the government by the personal discharge of some public function."

- John Stuart Mill

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2 Mill, 1861, p.1
For centuries political scientists and philosophers have discussed the positive and negative aspects of democracy as a way to govern a society. However, all would agree that the key for a democracy to achieve success is that it must have the full participation of its citizens. Following the aforementioned quote, Mill suggests that the most important of these “personal discharges” is the individual act of voting. He proposes that open discussion is the most important part of a democracy and that majority-rule voting is the backbone of that discussion.\(^3\) Today, our democracy, while functioning at a high success rate, still does not include all the people it intends to govern. There are many groups within our democracy, which do not participate in some or all government functions. These are groups that do not believe in the America credo, like the Amish communities (who do not pay taxes). There are also those who wish to overhaul the entire system (sometimes violently), like the neo-nazis or white supremacists, or even radical earth-first groups. The non-participation of the groups mentioned above are, however, rather small in number compared to the largest non-participating group in the United States. This group consists of roughly 50 million Americans who, in recent years, have had low rates of voter turnout.\(^4\) This group is known as "Generation X."

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3 Mill, 1861, p.1
4 Bennet and Craig, p.2
The term "Generation X" is not a definition set in stone. It is defined in various ways by authors, all of whom have different reasons for using their definition. Some authors, such as Bennet and Rademacher define Gen-X as "those Americans born between 1965 and 1978." Other authors say that the cohort known as Gen-X is larger and extends it to include those born up to 1981. Another author, Edwin Diamond in his article "Panting After the Youth Vote" uses the years 1962 to 1978 to mark Gen-Xers.

The design of this thesis is to concentrate on Gen-Xers who were coming of age and going through the socialization process in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, in order to define the term for what it means in the year 2002, the term "Generation X" will define those American adults born between the years of 1965 to 1981. This means in the year 2002, if someone is a member of Gen-X then they are between the ages of 21 and 37.

**Why Examine Gen-X**

This generation is unique in many ways. It is the first in a long time, if ever, to not have faced some kind of devastating conflict such as a depression or war while growing up. Also, this generation was raised at a time when the economy and our society have been more stable than it has ever been due to the fact that there have been few global conflicts. This generation is also unique.

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5 Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.21
6 Colorado, 1996, p.1
7 Diamond, 1996, p.1
in that never before has a single generation been so attacked for the way it does not participate in regard to voting.

"Slackers, busters, grungers. Today’s twenty-somethings and early thirty-somethings have certainly had their share of unflattering monikers to contend with." 8 This is the view that many authors believe that America has about its cohort known as Gen-X. In Bennett and Craig’s article, we see how *Time Magazine* described Generation X as being “indecisive, having few heroes, no anthem, and no style of their own.” 9 In fact, many of the articles and books about Generation X and the way it acts in politics and government leads one to the conclusion that all Gen-Xers want is to avoid voting at all costs. As Jonathan Cowan states in the *National Civic Review*, “the common perception is that Gen-Xers have checked out of politics and community involvement, preferring to disengage completely from America’s civic life.” 10 As seen in news magazines and journals, the media has turned Generation X into materialistic and cynical robots committed only to their desire to avoid the polls. It does not take into account the reasons why Gen-xers behave the way they do or the reasons they may be disinterested in voting. In fact, Bennett and Craig suggest that no one has figured out what Generation X wants “either politically, socially, or culturally.” 11

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8 Phillips, 1998, p.1
9 Bennett and Craig, 1997, p.9
10 Cowan, 1997, p.1
11 Bennett and Craig, 1997, p.3
This thesis is going to try to answer the question: What factors in the socialization process, including the political socialization, of children in the late 1970s and 1980s have led to more than half the generation being politically apathetic as a whole? To answer this question this paper will examine the hypothesis that it is a combination of social and political factors that explain Gen-X's behavior when it comes to voting.

**Attitude of Gen-Xers**

Many authors have an opinion of what may have led to Generation X's apparent lack of patriotic duty when it comes to political participation. The first of these opinions is from authors who studied the work of the German sociologist Karl Mannheim. Mannheim argued that it is the events in a person's life that shape him/her.\(^{12}\) For the "greatest generation," it was WWII and the cold war, both of which were life altering political events.\(^{13}\) For the baby-boomers, it has been Vietnam, the attitudes toward drugs and sex in the sixties, and Watergate.\(^{14}\) For the adults of Generation X, the only real political upheavals they are old enough to understand have been the Iran-Contra Scandal, the Gulf War, and the Lewinsky scandal. The unique things about Generation X is that, while all other generations are defined by their political bombshells, it is the lack of drastic events which makes Generation X different.\(^{15}\) This lack of drastic

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\(^{12}\) Bennett and Craig, 1997, p.4
\(^{13}\) Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.24
\(^{14}\) Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.25
\(^{15}\) Dunne, 1997, p.1
events, along with the way they were raised in the culture of the seventies and eighties together have formed them into Americans who are disinterested in voting.

The Process of Socialization

There are two processes of human development that play a role in the theory behind this thesis. The first is the process of socialization and the second is the process of political socialization or "politicization". Before we can examine Gen-X we have to examine these processes.

Sociologists know that the process of socialization is what creates a person's sense of self and that this process is a continual one in a child's life.\(^{16}\) The positive and negative features of this process are internalized by the child and teach the child its values.\(^{17}\) It also affects the way they act in the world when they are adults.\(^{18}\) By examining the trends and social changes in the 1970s and 1980s in the next chapter an explanation for Gen-X's voting behavior could be found.

The Process of Politicization

It is hard to determine when a person comes of age politically in America. However, although citizens are given the right to vote when they are eighteen years of age, many are aware of politics long before they turn eighteen.

\(^{16}\) Macionis, 2000, p.61
\(^{17}\) Macionis, 2000, p.61
Authors, such as Craig and Bennet, along with Dawson and Prewitt, agree that the effect of generational experiences plays a large part in the process of politicization.\(^{19}\)

Authors are extremely confident that the process of political socialization begins in childhood and that in this time children learn a lot about politics. Dawson and Prewitt, in their text, *Political Socialization*, state "the experiences and developments that contribute most to the acquisition of political orientations are concentrated in the early years."\(^{20}\) They continue to say, "this is especially true of basic political loyalties, identifications and values."\(^{21}\)

However, there is no set way in which to measure when kids become cognizant of political issues; there are only guidelines that political scientists follow. The most commonly used stages of development is the model by Jean Piaget.\(^{22}\) Piaget's model explains that children and young adults go through stages as they grow, learning more and more as they age. In the first three stages children are unaware of politics for the most part because these three stages revolve around the perspective of the child. In the fourth stage however, known as "formal operational stage," which begins around age 12, the child's thinking becomes "abstract, formal and logical."\(^{23}\) In this stage children have a rough understanding of politics and start to put things like political parties and public figures into positive and negative categories based on what they see and

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\(^{18}\) Macionis, 2000, p.61  
\(^{19}\) Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.49. Dawson and Prewitt, 1969, p.42  
\(^{20}\) Dawson and Prewitt, 1969, p.43  
\(^{21}\) Dawson and Prewitt, 1969, p.43
hear from their parents and the news media. The point here is that while Gen-Xers were coming of age politically, around the late 1970s and early 1980s the children of that time witnessed an increasingly negative view about the effectiveness of politics from their parents and the media. The negative view of politics Gen-Xers acquired in their “concrete operational stage” is a value they have internalized and made a part of their distrust in politics.

*Combination of Theories*

We must remember that looking at the processes of socialization or politicization separately will not give a clear picture of what makes up Gen-X’s voting pattern. In all honesty there could be other factors that this paper does not consider (simply because it is impossible to do so) which could account for Gen-X’s poor voter-turnout. However, this thesis is designed to examine certain key aspects of Generation X’s socialization and politicization process in an effort to explain their observed behavior.

In the next chapter we are going to examine the socialization process of Gen-X by taking a look at the social changes that occurred in the seventies and early eighties. These social changes include the changes in morals and values, which make this time period unique. The closer we examine Generation X and their socialization process, the more we see that their value of independence is a key to why they act the way they do.

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22 Kodat, 2001, p.2
23 Kodat, 2001, p.2
In chapter three I am going to examine the political factors, which have led to the current state of affairs that faces Generation X. These topics will range from the way they were taught about politics and voting to the way they are treated today as the "black sheep" of the American political family.

Lastly, in chapter four, I am going to further examine the processes Gen-X has been through and apply the hypothesis of a combination of theories in an attempt to explain their behavior.

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Chapter 2

A Sociological Examination of Generation X

"As older generations are replaced by younger ones, the latter’s members may bring with them a different mix of attitudes, beliefs, lifestyles, and values. Actions taken by individuals on behalf of distinct, sometimes conflicting, generational perspectives thus have the potential to alter the social and political landscape in dramatic ways."

-Stephen Earl Bennett and Eric W. Rademacher

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25 Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.21
Examining the Socialization of Gen-X

In many circles, the voting pattern of Generation X is considered pathetic. True, there are young adults who do vote, but for the most part, adults in their early twenties are not interested in voting.26 It is essential, after seeing the information presented in the last chapter, to look for the causes between not casting a ballot and being a member of the Gen-X cohort.

The following information in this chapter comes from a number of historical works, essays, and interviews of those who were growing up and those who were growing old in the 1970s and early 1980s. This glimpse helps explain “how the ‘radical’ ideas of the 60’s gained wider acceptance in the new decade” and how that affected what values children learned in this period.27

The children who grew up in this time learned very different values from their parents and their grandparents, respectively.28 With the social changes that were happening at this time, Gen-Xers, who were then impressionable children, found many things such as sex and violence more and more the norm and thus accepted it as part of their reality. In their article, Craig and Halfacre look at the sociologist, Karl Mannheim and his theories on our ever-changing society.29 The authors want to establish, through Mannheim’s work, the effect of everyday society on children as the perceive it. Children’s “early impressions

26 Cowan, 1997, p.2
27 Gillis, 1998, p.1
29 Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.64
tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world."\textsuperscript{30} Craig and Halfacre continue with Mannheim's conclusions from the 1950s that "youth are susceptible to the changing environment and the resultant learning is likely to persist and structure later experiences." \textsuperscript{31} One could hypothesize that the children of the 1970s and 1980s, today's Generation X, learned that the natural way in which the world works is that taking care of oneself comes first. They learned this by witnessing widespread divorce and by becoming more and more dependent on technology as it advanced. Their sense of independence and their reliance on technology is a part of the reason they do not participate at the polls.

\textit{A Look at the Seventies}

The 1970s and 1980s were a confusing time in American history. First of all, the real consequences of the free love and peace attitude known in the 60's was realized as the number of unmarried women having children rose and the amount of divorce increased rapidly.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, Gen-X "children were three times more likely to see their parents divorce [compared to baby-boomers]."\textsuperscript{33} Also, drug abuse became rampant in America as the use of marijuana and more serious drugs like cocaine were starting to be used more heavily than ever before.\textsuperscript{34} The young adults of the 1970's raised their children (Gen-Xers) in an

\textsuperscript{30} Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.65
\textsuperscript{31} Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.65
\textsuperscript{32} Dunne, 1997, p.1
\textsuperscript{33} Dunne, 1997, p.1
\textsuperscript{34} DEA, 2002, p.3
environment where the societal norms were changing from the values the baby-boomer’s parents held in the fifties and sixties.\textsuperscript{35}

For the average American the changes brought by the seventies were more shocking than what people had seen in the sixties.\textsuperscript{36} Most of this was through the view society had about family. The social view of the family was changed by divorce and the percentage of working mothers rose 27\% in the years between 1960 and 1980.\textsuperscript{37} This means that more and more Gen-Xers were left alone as kids while their one parent worked. In order to provide for their children, the parents of Gen-X often left their children on their own for extended periods of time.\textsuperscript{38} As Matt Dunne, points out in his article "the number of latch-key children under the age of fourteen roughly doubled in the 1970s."\textsuperscript{39} The newly formed attitude toward family life was a major factor in the formation of the values of Gen-X.

\textit{Effects of Divorce}

The rate of divorce in the early 1970s and into the 1980s increased drastically. The children of this time learned about divorce first-hand, witnessing their own parents and their friends' parents go through it. The rates of divorce in the sixties were high nationally. Statistics reveal that 8.5 out of every 1000 marriages ended in divorce and this trend continued up through the seventies

\textsuperscript{35} 70’s Story, 1998, p.1-3
\textsuperscript{36} 70’s Story, 1998, p.1
\textsuperscript{37} Dunne, 1997, p.1
\textsuperscript{38} Dunne, 1997, p.1
and eighties leveling off at about 10.6 nationally in 1980.\textsuperscript{40} The divorce rate was so drastic in some counties in San Diego that for every one hundred marriages, there were one hundred and one divorces.\textsuperscript{41} Compared to where the divorce rate is currently in 2002 (3.5 for every 1000 marriages) the amount of divorce in the seventies and eighties is a definite sociological feature that had an impact on the children of that time period.\textsuperscript{42} In respect to these statistics, one can hypothesize that the impact of witnessing so many cases of divorce instilled values into the children of Gen-X and could be a contributing factor to the way they act today. The effects of divorce eventually led to them desiring independence from others as a way of surviving without any emotional or mental anguish.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Effects of Television}

The kids of this generation entertained themselves in various ways, mostly by watching television. Television had been non-controversial in the fifties and sixties with shows like "Leave it to Beaver" and "The Lone Ranger."\textsuperscript{44} Television did not demonstrate graphic violence like they do in today's media, where shows like "NYPD Blue" or "Law and Order" show people being brutalized. The attitude society has today about violence on television began in the 1970's. In the essay "The 70's Story", the author writes, "the 70's gave us 'Godfather', 'Dirty

\textsuperscript{39} Dunne, 1997, p.2
\textsuperscript{40} Marriage and Divorce Rate, 2001, p.1
\textsuperscript{41} Lowney, 2001, p.59
\textsuperscript{42} Divorce Rates, 2001, p.2
Harry’...and ‘Deep Throat’. Death, blood and guts, and sex was right out there for all to see. Nothing was left to the imagination . . . there was no discretion.”

Nationally, children who watched TV as their source of entertainment spent way too much time doing it and it may have changed the way they interpret the world.

A study completed on the amount of time Xers’ spent with the television concluded, “the average Xer watched 5,000 hours of television by the time they were five years old. A fourteen year old spent 3 hours a day watching television.” This amount of television viewing could be a major factor in why the children of the 1970s and 1980s are so independent. The fact that they were more likely to be alone and tuned into the television could have been what so strongly enhanced their sense of independence. That strong sense of independence is in my opinion one of the factors that has led to the decrease in voter turnout.

Then Came the 1980s

In the 1980s, the drug problem in America grew worse as did the divorce rate and the number of children born out of wedlock. In 1979, one in ten Americans used drugs on a regular basis. In the 1960’s the percentage of children born outside of wedlock was around 5%. In the 1970’s that percentage

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43 Dunne, 1997, p.2
44 70’s Story, 1998, p.1
45 70’s Story, 2000, p.4
46 Brown, et al., 1996, p.1 (#2)
jumped to 25%, and in the 1980's that percentage jumped even higher to 33%. Women in this period became more likely to be monetarily independent and joined the work force of America in full swing, allowing even more kids than ever before to stay home alone.

*How the Kids Learned*

In the 1980s schools started to track every student's progress, moving ahead the quick learners and leaving behind the slower ones. This process reinforced those who were successful to continue to be so. As Bruce Tulgan put it, "Xer's went to school to be tracked – to excel or to be left in the dust." This mentality emphasized individual achievement and reinforced their sense of individualism. Xers came of age in a time that was focused on "atomizing the individual." The key here is that the main aspects of a child's socialization, namely parents, teachers, and peers taught Gen-X the value of independence.

*The Computer Age*

For most all of the Gen-X cohort as children, one product (arguably more than any other) changed the social life of the American family in the nineteen-eighties. This was the rapid advancement of the home computer. In 1974, with the appearance of the MITS Altair 8800 in *Popular Electronics Magazine*, there

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47 DEA Museum, 2000, p.3
48 Chicowitz, 1998, p.5
49 Dunne, 1997, p.2
50 Tulgan, 1996, p.7
was an explosion in home computer popularity.\textsuperscript{53} Starting in the 80s and continuing on through the 90s computers became more and more the norm, instead of the exception. According to the \textit{Computer Industry Almanac}, the number of personal computers worldwide was 98 million in 1990, the first year they started counting.\textsuperscript{54} As we can deduce, if there were no home computers in 1973 and more than 98 million at the end of the 1980's, then there was quite a drastic change in how many people had access to them. With so many families owning a computer Gen-X as kids had access to technology at their fingertips. As Tulgan points out, Gen-X has the “ability to adjust with technological change” and “cope with information quickly and efficiently because of the sheer volume of information fired at us since we were beginning to learn how to think.”\textsuperscript{55} The constant bombardment of technology and information taught Gen-Xers to become more self-reliant.\textsuperscript{56} The use of the computer in everyday life - while being probably the greatest technological advance in the decade - led to a whole generation of kids being taught that their reliance on technology was very important.

Some authors, like Robert Putnam, in his book \textit{Bowling Alone}, argue that the advance of technology has not only led to a sense of independence, but to the idea that it is okay to ignore one’s civic duty.\textsuperscript{57} Putnam calls it “civic

\textsuperscript{51} Tulgan, 1996, p.7  
\textsuperscript{52} Tulgan, 1996, p.7  
\textsuperscript{53} Computer Museum of America, 2002, p.1  
\textsuperscript{54} CIA, 1999, p.1  
\textsuperscript{55} Tulgan, 1996, p.5  
\textsuperscript{56} Smith, 2000, p.1  
\textsuperscript{57} Putnam, 2000, p.217
disengagement” and blames the rapid advance of technology as the cause. However, it is not fair to blame technology alone as Putnam does. It could be that technology did have a vast affect on Gen-X’s disengagement from voting, but in my opinion it is more likely that the value of independence coupled with technology is the cause of Gen-X’s low voter-turnout. While the use of the computer is important to survival in the everyday life of the business world, the relationship children of the eighties formed with computers led to an even stronger reinforcement of their independence. By being socialized in a period where computer use was increasing exponentially, the kids of Gen-X formed a relationship with technology that no other generation before it had ever done.58

This acceptance and intricate understanding of technology taught Gen-X another important value. They learned that technology is something they could use and manipulate, the evidence of this we see today with the daily use of cell phones, laptops, email, voicemail, and faxes.59 While understanding technology is a good skill to posses, Gen-X has become dependent on technology to solve problems.60 The second thing they learned from watching the pace of technology with their computers is that everything needs to be, or always is, improving rapidly.61 This dependence on technology leads to another theory we will examine more in the next chapter. The argument that America’s political system works too slowly and the process is frustrating to Gen-Xers.

58 Smith, 2000, p.1
59 Tulgan, 1996, p.5
60 Tulgan, 1996, p. 10
61 Tulgan, 1996, p. 2
Conclusion

In the next chapter we will see how the socialization of Gen-X has led them to have a unique outlook on politics and has alienated them from the process of voting. Their views and values are different from that of the baby-boomers and this is part of the reason they are criticized for not voting.62 Through the process of socialization they experienced as children, Generation X acquired the traits of "civic disengagement" and in the year 2002 continues to exhibit these traits. All of these social factors will be explored more in the next chapter as we look at the politicization of Generation X and how the attitudes they learned from being raised in the 1970s and 1980s affects the decisions they make in the year 2002.

62 Bennett and Craig, 1997, p.10
Chapter 3

The Consequences of Gen-X’s Socialization on Politics

"Most young people in their twenties and thirties, known in the culture as Generation X, grew up in a world of broken promises. They were the first to experience widespread divorce and to stay home alone while their boomer parents were out finding themselves. They are highly individualistic, don’t have heroes, and don’t trust government."

- Jane Buckingham\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} quoted in Edwards, 2000, p.1
The quote above, from the president of a major youth marketing company, reinforces what I have shown in the last chapter. In this chapter, the values of Generation X will be further examined from their political perspective to search out the underlying causes for their lack of turnout at the polls.

Buckingham continues her explanation of Gen-X behavior by writing "as a result, this election season [November 2000] they [Gen Xers] are staying home, or at the office or gym, which is more likely." Buckingham's prediction was correct for the 2000 election because many of Generation X did stay away from the polls. Generation X does make some contributions to voting, but not in the numbers that would be possible if they were properly motivated to vote. "Only 28% of Gen Xers are likely to vote, compared to 68% of those in the older generation." This means that, of the 50 million Gen-Xer's only one in four vote. We also know from polling data that four out of five people in this cohort are calling themselves independent, having no affiliation with either the Democrat or Republican parties. That is a huge number of potential voters who are not connected strongly to a political party. Realizing that the number of non-voting Gen-Xers is so large we must look to find the reason why Gen-X is so unlikely to vote.

Theories of Political Factors

64 quoted in Edwards, 2000, p.1
65 Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.1
66 Diamond et al., 1996, p.1
Just as there were sociological factors that may influence why Gen-X does not vote, there could also be political factors. The political reasons for Generation X’s lack of voting participation vary from text to text. Some authors blame the issues Gen-Xers are currently facing, such as what to do about education, social security, and the environment.\textsuperscript{67} The argument is that since these issues are so overwhelming Generation X has given up on them, focusing instead on their own lives.\textsuperscript{68} Another theory is that America’s political system is so complex, negative, and scandalous that it turns off many Americans, including the ones who are in their twenties, who might want to get involved.\textsuperscript{69}

One of the more likely explanations for Gen-X’s disinterest is the time in which the Xers came of age politically. This theory contends that since Gen-X came of age on the heels of Watergate and formed an understanding of government during the Reagan years, where government bashing was the norm, this attitude toward politics was internalized and plays a part in Generation X’s poor voting participation.\textsuperscript{70} Bennet and Rademacher, advocates of this theory, explain ”the oldest of Gen-Xers came of age during the early years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, the youngest during the final days of George Bush and the initial stages of the Clinton Administration.”\textsuperscript{71} Coming of age at this time can be linked to voter apathy among Gen-Xers, especially when we examine the comparison of apathy of other birth cohorts as Bennet and Rademacher do.

\textsuperscript{67} Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.1, Halstead, 1999, p.2
\textsuperscript{68} Halstead, 1999, p.2
\textsuperscript{69} Halstead, 1999, p.2
\textsuperscript{70} Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.25, Halstead, 1999, p.2
\textsuperscript{71}
They show that voter apathy among Gen-Xers is higher than it is for baby-boomers and the greatest generation.\textsuperscript{72}

\textit{How Issues are Ignored in the Minds of Gen-Xers}

Generation X is similar to all other age cohorts in that they have political issues that are important to them, namely the economy, environment, and education.\textsuperscript{73} If we compare Generation X to their parents, the baby-boomers, we find they grew up in a period of wages stagnated by inflation and shrinking benefits.\textsuperscript{74} The fact is that the median weekly earnings for men aged twenty to thirty-four fell by almost a third in 1973, the time in which the earliest Gen-Xers were starting to get an idea of what was going on around them.\textsuperscript{75} The economy for Gen-Xers, however, did not improve and still today Gen-Xers are having to save more money than their parents did in order to service their debts.\textsuperscript{76} It is altogether likely that Xer's lifetime earnings will be less than that of their parents', setting a historical record.\textsuperscript{77} This issue of what their money is worth is a major concern for Gen-Xers and they do not seem to think it can or will be resolved.

The economic problems that Xers face do not end with how much they are earning and the value of their money. Another major part of their economic

\textsuperscript{71} Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.25
\textsuperscript{72} Bennett and Rademacher, 1997, p.27
\textsuperscript{74} Halstead, 1999, p.2
\textsuperscript{75} Halstead, 1999, p.3
\textsuperscript{76} Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.1-2
\textsuperscript{77} Halstead, 1999, p.3
concern is the debt they are going to inherit as the baby-boomers start to get older.\textsuperscript{78} According to The Futurist, “the U.S. population over age 70 is projected to double by 2030, placing a heavy burden on the younger people supporting them.”\textsuperscript{79} Gen-Xers are realizing that they are going to be stuck taking care of an older generation whose numbers are continually growing. As one Gen-Xer writes “the fact is that my generation is asking for nothing that hasn’t been given to other generations, that our tax money be spent on our needs, not on servicing our parents’ debts.”\textsuperscript{80} As Halstead puts it “when they envision their future, Xers don’t just see a government drifting toward Chapter 11; they also see a crippled social structure . . . and a dwindling middle class.”\textsuperscript{81} That is why in 1998 “81% of those age 17-29 feel that requiring a balanced budget would be good for the country.”\textsuperscript{82} This strong representation of Gen-X in polling data shows their concern over this issue. The needs for a balanced budget and the responses presented from Gen-Xers about inheriting the debt show that Gen-Xers are concerned about this issue and are worried about the stability of America’s future.

Not only do Xer’s have strong feelings and concerns regarding our economy, they are also concerned with our environment. The fact is eighty-two percent of Gen-Xer’s feel that stronger environmental protection laws would be

\textsuperscript{78} Wildstrom, 1993, p.1
\textsuperscript{79} Futurist, 1998, p.1
\textsuperscript{80} Futurist, 1998, p.1
\textsuperscript{81} Halstead, 1999, p.3
\textsuperscript{82} Ebenkamp, 1996, p.2
good for the country. Gen-Xers grew up in a time when politics embraced protecting the environment as a real political issue. The concerns over the environment has been put on America’s political agenda and having a politician talk about stronger environmental protection goes a long way to getting them elected. Yet, most politicians favor more federal regulation on the environment, which does not sit well in the minds of Gen-Xers, 69% of whom think that local and state governments would do a better job of protecting the environment.

All Gen-Xers want in regard to the environment, as well as their other issues, is some sense of things being accomplished. Instead they are seeing the constant depletion of resources, such as fish hatcheries and wildlife habitats, along with over a million of acres of farmland being lost every year. Along with these losses, the lack of action by those in power has turned away the adults of Generation X, who are more likely to take a more individualistic response toward environmental concerns. As Fitzpatrick claims, “environmentalism [to the Gen-Xer] means stressing personal responsibilities rather than political action.” This could, in part, help to explain why Gen-Xers who are concerned about the environment still do not participate at the polls.

Lastly, education is a major concern for Generation X as more and more of them become parents. They believe that more money is needed for

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83 Ebenkamp, 1996, p.2
84 Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.2
85 Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.2
86 Halstead, 1999, p.4
education, and that the money currently in educational budgets is wasted.\textsuperscript{88}

“When asked what should be done with any future budget surplus, nearly half favor increases in education spending.” \textsuperscript{89} Tulgan writes, “[Gen-Xers] seem to understand that knowledge will be the key to success in the information and service based economy of the twenty-first century.” \textsuperscript{90} This can lead one to see why Xers favor improving public education for their own children.

These three issues are important to the adults of Gen-X, but in their eyes the results so far are not doing any good. This may lead to the fact that 61\% of Gen-Xers agree with the statement “politicians and political leaders have failed my generation.” \textsuperscript{91} After examining Gen-X’s issues in some depth, one could agree with Halstead that it is possible the problems Gen-Xers face in the future, and those they are already struggling with could be so overwhelming that it leads them to not participate.\textsuperscript{92}

\textit{How America’s Political System and Parties turn away Generation X}

America has one of the most advanced and complicated political systems in the world. It is made up of millions of people, yet there are only so many positions, such as the president, members of congress, and state and local delegates that carry with them a lot of political clout. It is considered a two-party system, yet there are many other parties vying for attention from the mass

\textsuperscript{87} Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.2
\textsuperscript{88} Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.2
\textsuperscript{89} Halstead, 1999, p.6
\textsuperscript{90} Halstead, 1999, p.6
electorate. Lastly, it is overrun with issues, all of which have their own group trying to get them onto the national agenda. With all of this to consider and reconsider every two, four, or six years, it is hard to believe that anyone would want to try and make sense of it all in order to make a decision of who should be elected to what office.

Some political scientists believe that in this mass of elections and issues, Gen-X feels as if it has been turned away. One proponent of this argument, Mark Ferraro, believes that Gen-Xers feel that they do not have a place in politics because it has been left to the “professionals.” The proof for this theory can be substantiated by the way Gen-Xers have recently participated at the polls. In fact, only 50% of Gen-Xers are even registered to vote, leaving about 25 million adults who are not. It is entirely likely that because of a poor process of political socialization Gen-X feels displaced by America’s political system and therefore refuses to participate. If we couple this theory with that of their need for independence, then this argument starts to make even more sense.

Along the same lines is the theory that America’s political parties have something to do with Gen-X’s lack of voting. For the most part, America’s overall affiliation with a political party is declining. In 1920, 80% of those in the mass electorate identified with a party. In 1990 the number of those Americans who considered themselves a party member had dropped to a little less than fifty

91 May, 2000, p.1
92 Halstead, 1999, p.2-3
93 Ferraro, 1996, p.1
94 Ferraro, 1996, p.1
percent. For Generation X the numbers are even lower, with only 30% of them claiming to identify with one party or another. One possible reason that Gen-X is not inclined to join a political party, and thus be likely to not vote, is that they are disillusioned with the party process. This theory about Generation X’s decline in party affiliation relates to how the nation as a whole feels about political parties. Dennis and Owen, in their article, explain that one reason affiliation may be down is that every generation from the silent generation forward has lost interest in political parties and has started to doubt their effectiveness. In polling data, we can see that in fact baby-boomers and Gen-xers both feel as if the party system has too many faults and that America could solve more of its problems if the system were changed. In fact only 36% of Gen-Xers agreed that parties are needed at all.

Some interesting research about the values of Gen-X shows that they are not easily labeled either liberal or conservative. Their values and the issues they see as important lead them to neither party. Economically, Gen-Xers are more likely to hold the same attitude as Republicans. Also, Gen-Xers, like many conservatives, feel that too much government is detrimental to getting things accomplished for the future. On the other hand, Gen-Xers hold strong values

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95 Edwards, 2000, p.1
96 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.48
97 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.48
98 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.46
99 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.55
100 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.58
101 Dennis and Owen, 1997, p.58
102 Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.74
103 Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.81
that align them with Democratic Party. Gen-X’s view on education and the environment, along with the idea that the government should be able to give jobs to those that need it and care for the poor, reflect very liberal feelings. All of this adds up to a new synthesis of American politics, a voter that is not fully Republican and not fully Democrat. The voters of Gen-X are looking for a group that can fill both their liberal and conservative values. This explains why 45% of voters under the age of 30 have no clear party identification.  

In one article by Stephen Craig and Angela Halfacre, the idea that Xers are pragmatic more than anything else is key to understanding their view on parties. The article displaying the perspective of Gen-Xers shows that “America’s greatest need is to clear out the underbrush of name-calling and ideology so that simple things can work again.” It is possible that the frustration of Xers at the political process leads them to a disinterest in voting and results in an apparent disinterest in trying to solve the issues they view as important to them. Gen-Xers are inheriting more than their share of problems, but they think there is nothing they can do about it. This could be why so many parties feel they cannot predict what Xers want and thus have decided to avoid them. It could also be why so many Xers feel left out by parties and politicians seeking to be elected.

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104 Fitzpatrick, 1996, p.1
105 Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.67
106 Howe and Strauss, quoted in Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.67
107 Craig and Halfacre, 1997, p.81
Government Bashing during Gen-X’s Politicization

When one considers the amount of media exposure Gen-X had during their political socialization process, one can hypothesize that they were more likely not to have been exposed to the full explanations of what political parties are used for, but to the political bashing that goes on in the media during election time. Overall, the presentation of political parties and candidates in the media is very negative. The news media tend to think that only “fights” within politics are interesting and are less likely to report anything that is not adversarial. The constant depiction of politicians and politics as negative could lead us to understand how Gen-X was socialized into American politics. That is, they were taught from the beginning that there is nothing but adversarial relationships in politics because this is most likely all they witnessed in the media.

Gen-X also has problems joining organizations if they think they are going to be burdened by them. In fact, Gen-X wants to belong to an organization that they think is going to benefit them and others in a positive way. Since they have internalized that parties are negative they are unlikely to make a commitment to one. “Xers are also more cautious in choosing [their] connections, and examine institutions for very specific virtues before deciding to make a personal investment.” From the research, we can hypothesize that

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108 Zinser, 2001, p.1
109 Tulgan, 1996, p.2
110 Tulgan, 1996, p.2
111 Tulgan, 1996, p. 2
Gen-X see parties as a major obstacle to getting their goals accomplished. Since parties are such a large part of America's political system, Gen-X is more likely to stay at home than invest in what they see as a waste of time.

*Gen-X’s Politicization*

Many authors agree that the attitude a person has toward politics comes from what they learn as children in their family. This process is known as political socialization or "politicization." Most researchers agree that this process begins early in a child’s life.\(^\text{112}\) It is different from that of socialization because it only allows us to understand how a person attains their political identity. However, in my opinion, the process of political socialization is directly related to the overall socialization because the values and beliefs a person learns from their socialization process will directly affect the process of attaining their political identity.

In concluding this chapter on politics, it is important to realize that there is no one easy solution that will get Gen-X interested in voting. It is altogether feasible that the generation will become more active at the polls as they grow older, as some others have done. However, while this might be true, it could also be true that Gen-Xers, in their old age, will turn even further away from participating in voting.

\(^{112}\) Dawson and Prewitt, 1969, p.42-43
It is possible that the political socialization of Gen-X, which is directly based on the values they have internalized in the process of socialization, has led them to exhibit the trends in voter turnout we currently are seeing. As we saw in chapter 2, Generation X was taught throughout their socialization process to embrace values that possibly disengaged them from voting. They also learned and internalized negative attitudes about politics and the effect of this continues still today.
Chapter 4

Conclusions and Solutions

“As a civilization and as a species, we have come to a moment of truth, with the future of the human spirit and the future of the planet, hanging in the balance. If ever boldness, depth and clarity of vision were called for it is now.”

- Richard Tarnas\textsuperscript{113}

“So much is at stake and so much depends on the psychological constitution of modern man. Does the individual know that he is the makeweight that tips the scales?”

- Carl Jung\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} quoted in Cowan, 1997, p.1
\textsuperscript{114} quoted in Cowan, 1997, p.1
This chapter is designed to examine the facts that have been discovered about Generation X, as well as the conclusions I have reached in looking at the socialization of Generation X. It is time to take the facts about how Generation X was raised and theorize as to why they act the way they do when it comes to voting (or more appropriately when it comes to not voting). This chapter will also look at some of the answers to Generation X’s concerns. It will explain what could be done in order to motivate Gen-X so they may reach their full potential.

**Independence: The Heart of Generation X**

As I demonstrated in chapter 2, the parents who raised Gen-X were vastly different than the generation before them. One of the key factors in understanding Gen-X’s poor participation at the polls is the lack of their parental influence, with divorce being at its highest point in our history. Also, it is possible that the influence of computers and the media had a hand in teaching Gen-Xers to be civically disengaged and thus not very concerned with voting or civic responsibility.

When we examine Gen-X’s sense of independence, coupled with the design of the American political system, we see how independence affects their ability to participate. Simply put, Gen-Xers do not function well within the confines of America’s political system. Tulgan, in his interviews on how Xer’s work, finds that most Gen-Xers feel that being independent and creative in
regard to problem-solving is their best quality.\textsuperscript{115} As one Gen-Xer put it “the more supervision there is, the more room I have to blame someone else, to say that if I had done it my way it would have turned out better. To me that is everything. I respond when given responsibility.”\textsuperscript{116} Generation X wants to be allowed to work independently and create solutions. It is possible then that since they expect their issues and solutions to be tied up in bureaucracy, they have decided not to participate.

America’s political system has been in place for more than two hundred years. In that two hundred years the way in which the government functions has evolved into a process that allows for opinions to be heard and solutions to be found. However, the process of American politics plays a role in turning away Gen-X voters. The reasoning here is simple. For most every issue, there is a pro and con argument. The need for consensus and compromise plays a large part in the effectiveness of politics. However, the process of attaining consensus and compromise takes too long in the mind of a Gen-Xer.

Gen-Xers feel that the political system is antiquated and does not allow for rapid improvement. This attitude leads some Gen-Xers to not participate because the changes and solutions take too long. Gen-X needs to realize that the institution of politics functions better at a slower pace. In the decisions and ideas created in government, it is necessary to take the time with those decisions.

\textsuperscript{115} Tulgan, 1996, p.9
\textsuperscript{116} Tulgan, 1996, p.9
With the invention and implementation of computers, Xers learned a trait unique to their generation. That is the reliance on technology to be manipulated. We can speculate that technology to Gen-Xers is their silver bullet that can explain and solve all problems once the problem is viewed correctly. Their dependence on technology and their need for quick answers has left their interpretation of politics as a process that has outlived its usefulness.

With their use of television and computers the children of Generation X learned to adapt to rapid change and feel comfortable in situations where things are always changing. This is another value that they feel is important to their survival. Their ability to learn, adapt and create makes them in their own minds unique. Gen-X sees American politics as a process that is more likely to create problems than to solve them. This means that they are unlikely to establish any strong ties within it. This attitude is due in part, to the reality that Gen-Xers do not want to commit themselves to something that will go against a value or values they hold.\textsuperscript{117} They are unlikely to trust a system that they did not create and are likely to blame its lack of technology when something goes wrong. All in all, the values that Gen-X feel are important are what leads them away from participating in a basic civic duty.\textsuperscript{118}

Theories

\textsuperscript{117} Tulgan, 1996, p. 2
\textsuperscript{118} Tulgan, 1996, p.11
Generation X, as we have seen, is a complicated cohort that could have many explanations for why it acts the way it does. These explanations range from simple to complicated; however, all the theories examined in this thesis lead back to either one of two positions.

The first of these positions is that Gen-X suffered negative repercussions because of the absence of their parents in the 1970s and 80s. Furthermore, their socialization process taught them the value of independence and coupled with their reliance on technology led them to have a different interpretation of their civic responsibility. This theory provides a sound basis for some authors, such as Dunne, to explain why Gen-X acts the way it does.119

The second position is that it was not the parents of Generation X that turned them away from politics, but the nature of politics itself in the 1970s, and continuing today that accomplished this. Their understanding of politics, learned mostly through the adversarial way it was presented in the media, affected the values they internalized and thus has led them to not vote. This theory continues by saying that politics today does not include Gen-Xers or their issues when it comes to election time. This theory blames Generation X’s low voter participation on the fact that the time in which most of them were experiencing their political socialization the nature of politics in America was becoming increasingly negative and unresponsive.120

119 Dunne, 1997, p.1
The real question is which of these two theories provides the best explanation for Gen-X’s behavior. Both theories have valid points and both could provide a sound basis for reasons as to why such a large percentage of Generation X does not vote. After considering the research presented the most obvious solution to this problem is that it is a unique combination of socialization and politicization that has formed an unusual perspective for the Generation X cohort. When examining the cohort that is Generation X, it needs to be realized that one explanation cannot be picked over the other. Parents play a large part in the life of a child as does the process and indoctrination of that child into the political world. Neither theory can be solely responsible for the development of their values and neither one can be used to explain the development of their attitudes. The problem Generation X has with voting cannot be attributed to one theory or the other, but both have to be considered equally viable explanations. As with an individual, one cannot expect there to be a catchall theory that would explain complicated and even sometimes puzzling behavior. The same is true for Generation X. The situation and experiences of this cohort make it different from all others.

When trying to explain the problem of voting in this way, it is obvious that there are many factors going on in the minds of Generation X. The most important of these is Gen-X’s sense of independence, which evolved from the influence of their parents and the time in which they learned about politics. The
result being their civic disengagement and their reputation for being a cohort that are unlikely to make an appearance at the polls.

Generations are hard to label as one way or the other, especially when they consist of 50 million people. The best measurements society has regarding Gen-X’s values and attitudes are large data polls, which explain trends, but not the concrete explanations we seek. Also, there are interviews with Gen-Xers, but then again one person’ attitudes or values cannot be magnified to explain how 50 million others think about politics.

The combination of the two theories we have examined is a possible explanation of the problem Generation X has with voting. By combining these two theories an answer can be offered to Craig and Bennett, who claimed that no one fully understands Gen-X “socially, politically, or culturally.” This thesis provides another step in the direction of understanding Gen-Xers as a generational unit and what could be done to help them in their desire to solve the problems facing their generation. In the last section we will look at what can be done to find solutions. The route provided in the next section is not so much a plan for Gen-Xers to find solutions so much as it is speculation as to the new attitudes Gen-X needs to adopt about voting.

*Participation: Is Gen-X up to the task?*

For all the reasons discussed in this thesis, the likelihood of Generation X becoming active in the polls in the future is not that high. Yet, all of the facts
and theories that explain why Generation X does not vote can lead us to hypothesize real solutions about what society needs to do to make them want to participate. The first of these is to teach them that politics does serve a good purpose. Though, it does not always provide help in the best manner, it does work very hard at maintaining American ideals and values. Once Generation X realizes that commitment to such a system, while requiring a certain degree of responsibility, has worth and can help them accomplish their goals, they will hopefully take part in solving their issues.

Generation X is not the only entity that needs to work harder in realizing their full potential. American political parties, from the largest to the smallest, need to realize that there are at least 25 million eligible American voters who have not been motivated to get involved. The parties themselves must make an effort to be available and accept Gen-Xers. Parties do not have to forsake the votes of other cohorts to gain the favor of Gen-X. On the contrary, once parties show themselves to be able to find solutions to suit everyone's needs then Gen-X will be more likely to make an investment in them. Also, there is a greater likelihood that Gen-Xers would get involved politically if they felt that the system was being changed to make it more technologically advanced.

Computerized voting procedures and/or Internet voting would be a good start, but with the creativity of Generation X there are endless possibilities to the changes they could make. Once Gen-Xers realize that the new ideas and changes they make to the system of voting could be used for the next two
hundred years their interest could be peaked. Gen-Xers need to understand the legitimacy and legacy of the American political system, but they also have to be ready to exercise their patience when trying to change things for the better.

With the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Gen-Xers may begin to take a more obvious interest in politics and become active voters. However, even in the event of such things as September 11th, Gen-Xers socialization process and politicization still could keep them from showing up to express their opinion. Realizing the political consequences on all generational cohorts as a result of September 11th will keep political scientists busy for the next few years, but it could possibly have the largest affect on Gen-Xers who needed this event to unite them in a cause.

In all reality, the solutions presented here, which will allow for Generation X to take an interest in voting, is more than a lot of real work. Generation X wants to have their loyalty earned whether it is in business or politics and they want to feel they are an important part of the process and the solution. If that can happen then maybe we will see an upswing in Gen-X’s voting patterns.

As more and more baby-boomers retire, the responsibility of the nation is going to be in the lap of Gen-Xers. When looking toward the future, most Gen-Xers are concerned with themselves and not the betterment of their country. Only through the cooperation of baby-boomers and Gen-Xers will they be ready to accept responsibility for the security of our nation.
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