INSIGHTS REPORT:
Are Millennials Reshaping Politics in the Pacific Northwest?
ABOUT THIS REPORT

In 2013, Quinn Thomas and DHM Research agreed to begin an exploration of topics impacting the Pacific Northwest’s business, political, and community leaders. We’ve dubbed this series Insights. Our goal is to contribute new perspectives and new ideas to help shape emerging conversations about complex issues.

This debut publication on Oregon’s Gen Y population — often referred to as millennials — was selected based on feedback from executives, elected officials, and non-profit groups. Many agreed that understanding the transition in generational leadership is an increasingly important topic. Millennials — their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs — will have an impact on everything from how business is conducted, to elections, to the management of our civic and philanthropic institutions.

It is clear that many of us have strong opinions about millennials. Moreover, researchers tend to vary in their definitions of who belongs in the millennial generation. For clarity, we have followed a widely accepted demographic definition: the more than 90 million young Americans born between 1980 and 2000. This makes millennials the largest generation by population in the U.S. — and places them between the ages of 14 and 34.

Given our specific focus on voter eligibility, we’ve narrowed this slightly to 18–34 years of age.

After starting our exploration of millennials in Oregon, it didn’t take long to recognize the complexities of trying to understand how their attitudes and beliefs are impacting the state. Clearly, this is why many leaders in Oregon are so eager to understand what’s shaping the millennial generation in politics, the workforce, and charitable giving.

If we embrace the reality that millennials are assuming a more influential role in Oregon, the interest in understanding them becomes clear.

We could not have done this work without access to the research provided through the 2013 Oregon Values & Beliefs Survey conducted by DHM Research. As such, we owe recognition to Oregon Health & Science University, The Oregon Community Foundation, Oregon Public Broadcasting, and Oregon State University. Each helped frame critical topics and allowed us to conduct this unique analysis in combination with our own independent research.

Lastly, we hope that this report is not viewed as a declaration of rigid facts. It should be viewed as a contribution to a long-term conversation about a complex topic shaping the debate about Oregon’s future. As we continue these explorations, our intent will be to offer unique perspective and analysis. Our goal is to allow today’s leaders to apply our analysis of critical issues to their own insights.

We hope it sheds new light on what’s happening with Oregon’s politics, our economy, and regional social movements.
Think of the baby boom generation as the why generation. They were motivated by the call to tackle challenges – civil rights, foreign wars, government corruption – through political channels.

Millennials are better described as a how generation. They have a greater interest in innovation and redesigning traditional social change models. They see the why as a given. They instead want to create change by using technology and entrepreneurship to reshape the role of our political system itself.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2013, The Atlantic published an article on the role of politics in the millennial generation. Senior political reporter Ron Fournier offered a hypothesis: millennials’ desire to effect change is leading to a political brain drain. This, Fournier speculates, will lead an entire generation of public servants to abandon Washington, D.C. altogether.

Fournier’s idea was simple: Millennials will dramatically change modern systems of political engagement by designing new channels of influence using technology, entrepreneurship, and social innovation.

It is a compelling argument. After reading Fournier’s analysis, we wondered why this might be occurring. More specifically, we wanted to test if this dynamic was occurring in Oregon.

The debate about the arrival of millennials as political, corporate and community leaders has generated exhaustive study and debate. There is a continuous stream of reports and media coverage offering a circular narrative of conflicting claims. Millennials are either a) the next Greatest Generation of civic-minded change agents, or b) a ruthlessly me first generation and the most disengaged segment of the electorate in history.

Much of this existing research tries to look at millennial behavioral data as an indicator on what the future holds. In truth, we can’t predict how a generation raised by helicopter parents — and coming of age during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression — will turn out.

By accepting that reality, we can begin to look for more meaningful nuance in what is occurring among this generation of Oregon’s emerging influencers.

TOPICS OF STUDY

We’ve organized this report into four categories — Politics, The Economy, Government, and Community Involvement.

In doing so, we’ve attempted to peel back the layers on several questions about millennials: What are the leadership qualities this generation feels make an impact in business and governance? What sociopolitical institutions do they value — and what role does each play in our politics, the economy, and philanthropy? What are their economic priorities — and what are the best pathways to achieving them?

Our research also looks at millennial perceptions of our government. We wanted to help Oregon’s decision-makers understand how millennials view politics as an instrument for setting the course for social and economic progress in our state.
Given the enormous task of analyzing millennial values and beliefs, we had to place parameters around our analysis. We focused on making comparisons between millennials and the baby boomers. The context of millennial vs. boomer behaviors offered a compelling model for assessing Fournier’s hypothesis.

It would be an oversight not to acknowledge the influence of Generation X — the demographic born between the 1960s and 1980s, some of whom are parents of the younger millennial cohort. However, we felt that the true friction of this intergenerational shift gives added weight to the coming retirement of the boomer generation and the rapid rise of millennials behind them.

Our aim is to challenge today’s leaders to think more critically about the inherent biases we all bring to intergenerational change. Doing so requires our research to avoid the traditional silos of what is influencing those changes.

Studying voting behaviors, volunteerism rates, and raw economic data can’t tell a complete story. Those data will consistently lead to a conclusion that can be disproved by yet another study showing a differing behavioral trend. As such, our approach looks at our economic, political, civic, and social institutions as highly interdependent markets.

We’ve stayed focused on the larger picture (and historical context) of transitions between generations. This is what allows us to better understand both the conditions under which millennials are being assessed and the influence they exert in changing institutional norms.

This research design allowed us to focus on a central question that tests Fournier’s theory: Are millennial social and political values shaping and influencing our political systems, businesses, governments, and philanthropy? Or, are existing circumstances in each of these market sectors shaping the millennial generation’s values and behaviors?

**THE IMPACT OF POPULAR PERCEPTION**

Popular critiques of millennials grow out of comparisons with institutional models of behavior among older generations, particularly boomers. We tend to color millennials as being unprepared, uninterested, and incapable of tackling societal challenges.

In focus groups we conducted with 18–34 year old Oregonians we noted that these popular perceptions are influencing millennials’ view of themselves. This was evident when asked to describe their generation’s worst qualities, which were consistently summarized as: “lazy,” “complacent,” “unwilling,” and “possessing a sense of entitlement.”

The word lazy itself was mentioned in some form more than a dozen times in each group.
In focus groups with 18–34 year old Oregonians, we asked millennials to identify their generation’s strengths and weaknesses. This uncovered a dichotomy of conflicting assessments of millennials’ preparedness for leadership roles in business, politics, government and community involvement. It specifically betrayed a lack of confidence that they can meet the challenges their generation faces.

Our sense is that there is more to the story of millennials than the popular narrative suggests. If we consider who’s making these assessments in the media, businesses, and our statehouses, we must recognize that it’s predominantly a narrative being created by boomers. In Oregon, that narrative is made complex by the massive influx of young new residents in the last decade.

We also noticed a fairly complex intergenerational relationship between millennials and boomers. It should be stated that in our focus groups nearly every millennial who participated showed a degree of reverence, respect, and deference to the strengths and attributes of previous generations. We asked each group: How would you describe the baby boom generation? Across the board, millennials embrace the *hard work*, *ambition*, *leadership*, and *vision* of their parents’ (and in some cases grandparents’) generation.

Millennials do seem to struggle with being in that shadow. Some even fear their peers cede too much responsibility for tackling the tough problems to boomers. While a popular media narrative tries to portray the generational shift as friction or a lack of respect, we saw the opposite.

Millennials nevertheless accept the need to refocus, redesign, and rebuild new avenues to address their generation’s unique social and political challenges.

One difference between these generations that caught our attention is the level of optimism about the future. Oregon’s millennial population is far more optimistic about their future compared to boomers.

So, are millennials being naïve about the challenges we face in Oregon? Or do they see new ways of governing, new economic opportunities, and new tools to collaborate and address our state’s toughest problems?

This is where the conversation gets interesting. Read on.
“We are going to toss out [the] whole political system one day. We really hope you will be there to help that growth, not stifle it.”
- Nick, Washington County, Age 26

“I think more political leaders are starting to listen to us. We are starting to realize our government systems are antiquated because it’s being run by the old guard. What’s new on the horizon is looking better. It’s going to be built on new ideas.”
- Lisa, Multnomah County, Age 32
Testing public perceptions of politics is a difficult subject. One of the challenges with studying millennial perceptions in today’s political landscape is the weight of recent political events on the electorate’s mood.

During the time we fielded our research, Gallup polling found that Americans’ job approval rating for Congress was at just 14% — the lowest annual average in the firm’s history.

We are forced to recognize that the data and qualitative testing we’ve used was conducted during a period of some particularly divisive political events. This includes the October 2013 shutdown of the federal government and the ongoing debate and implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

As much as possible, we have looked at our own qualitative research in the context of current events. This is applied broadly to our exploration of millennials in Oregon. In doing so, we can still offer a valid interpretation of millennial perceptions of sociopolitical issues.

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH**

Researchers, pollsters, and political scientists have offered divergent assessments of millennial views of the American political system. No two studies arrive at the same conclusion. Many offer increasingly polarized views of today’s young voters.
One area where data allow us some context to the changing face of civic engagement among millennials is evident in this generation’s overall political disaffiliation. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 found that half of millennials (50%) are “political independents” — the highest level of such disaffiliation in a quarter century.

In Oregon, the data offer even more interesting representations of this trend, as it shows a growing gap in political affiliations between millennials and boomers.

What is particularly notable is that the younger subset of millennials (18–24) show an increasingly larger percentage of political disaffiliation from Oregon’s party system.

So, does this disconnection from partisan political alignments support the popular assumption among today’s influencers that young voters are less politically engaged than previous generations? To check this, we looked back at voter participation in the 1972 and 1976 elections. This timeframe offers a close comparison of boomers when they were the same age as voter-eligible millennials in 2004 and 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Numbers of Oregon Voters 18-34</th>
<th>429,718</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voters 18-34 who are Independent/no-party</td>
<td>193,907 (45.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters 18-24 who are Independent/no-party</td>
<td>79,344 (48.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Oregon Voters 60 or older</td>
<td>697,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters 60+ who are Independent/no-party</td>
<td>117,971 (16.9%)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATIONAL YOUTH VOTING PATTERNS: BOOMERS V. MILLENNIALS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Election Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: *Federal Election Commission
**Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement
Interestingly, participation rates were nearly identical. Also notable is that we can compare these rates during periods in U.S. history that were both marked by wars, economic challenges, and divisive partisanship.

Given these parallels, we can disprove the generalization that millennials participate in electoral politics at historically low levels (at least compared to boomers). The data also burst a popular media narrative that the 2008 election of President Barack Obama was partly the result of historic participation by young voters.

Statistically, voter data show little difference in 2008 compared to participation rates in the elections of Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter.

For context, voter turnout of 18–30 year olds dropped slightly to 45% in the 2012 election. This was lower than those observed in the 2004 and 2008 elections, but higher than the rates seen in 1996 and 2000, according to the Census Current Population Survey.

So, the question becomes: what is shaping the popular perception that civic engagement among millennials is historically low compared to the previous generation?

There are likely a variety of factors — many of which were divulged in our focus groups. It’s possible that today’s young voters are responding to gridlocked elected officials and a perception that nothing is getting done in Washington. This pull back from traditional civic participation may be supporting the view of a downward trend in youth civic engagement.

Popular narrative suggests a level of disengagement due to shifting political and social priorities within younger populations. This includes 2013 OVB data showing weakening support among 18–34 year olds for bell-weather voter issues — specifically, maintaining and improving Oregon industries such as timber, agriculture, and manufacturing.

**GENERATIONAL VALUES: SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES**

It was interesting to find a number of areas where millennials are in sync with their boomer counterparts. In Oregon, this includes agreement/disagreement about the role of government, environmental protections, and our ability to find common ground on critical issues facing the state.

We found the most notable generational distinctions around issues affecting same-sex marriage, economic development, perceived benefits of government regulation, and building a pro-business attitude within Oregon’s local and state government.

There are several issues that millennials in Oregon seem to be helping shape — including using their influence to overwhelm the views of older demographics. This is particularly true of same-sex marriage, which remains a widely debated issue in Oregon — but one that has reached a
### COMMON GROUND: MILLENNIALS V. BOOMERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The government interferes too much in our everyday lives.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately agree</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It's not the government's business to try to protect people from themselves.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately agree</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The government should stop telling people how to live their lives.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately agree</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: DHM Research, 2013 Oregon Values & Beliefs Survey
## REDEFINING POLITICAL PRIORITIES: MILLENNIALS V. BOOMERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Do you favor or oppose changing the Oregon constitution to allow same-sex marriage?”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>37%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Oregon should increase timber harvests in dense, over-crowded forest stands.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly desirable</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Oregon should reduce government regulations.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly desirable</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Oregon should build and communicate a pro-business attitude in local and state government.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly desirable</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Oregon needs to focus on maintaining or improving industries that historically have been central to Oregon’s economy.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logging/Timber</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: DHM Research, 2013 Oregon Values & Beliefs Survey & DHM statewide telephone, April 2013
tipping point with broadening support over just the last few election cycles.

A [2012 Public Policy Polling survey](#) found that Oregon voters’ views on marriage equality have shifted in recent years. Their data found that 54% of Oregonians say they would vote to legalize same-sex marriage — and 40% are opposed. Voters under 45 support marriage equality in Oregon by a 68–30 spread.

What this data tells us is that millennials may be redirecting their focus towards new (or at least less traditional) issues and views on the state’s future. To paraphrase one of our focus group participants: “I care. I just don’t care about what [today’s leaders] care about.”

Over time, this focus on new, evolving political issues has the potential to reshape what Oregon’s leaders need to consider when engaging this emerging electorate.

**THE RISE OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURISM**

In his *Atlantic* article, Fournier suggests that it’s not just the issues millennials want to debate that are changing. It’s how they engage — specifically, their ability to see how a redesigned system can effect change.

Fournier speculates that the rapid rise in millennials’ participation in community service projects, and an outsized desire to make a difference in the world, has driven millennials away from traditional political engagement. These methods — voting, holding elected office, government service, and campaigning for candidates — sit in a category of inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Even the bungled rollout of the Affordable Care Act’s and Cover Oregon’s online exchanges offers millennials proof that the old pillars of government and politics can’t get technology — their most trusted and valued tools — to work.

This is driving today’s 18–34 year old electorate towards an emerging hybrid of politics, philanthropy, and business often referred to as “social entrepreneurship.”

Fournier theorizes that millennials will expand this sector of the economy as a means of creating innovative and successful solutions to the nation’s biggest challenges in healthcare, education, energy, and finance.

The rise of social entrepreneurship brings us back to the tension between whether millennials are influencing the marketplace of ideas, or merely adjusting to today’s economic circumstances. This is one area where clearly a shift in economic innovation is having a lasting impact. Just as the expansion of the non-profit sector in the 1980s and 1990s affected the influence of political leaders, the rise of social enterprises is exerting increasing influence over policy, philanthropy, and politics.
Increasingly, business schools at Oregon State University, University of Oregon, Lewis & Clark College, and Portland State University are launching programs focused on the expanding sector of global businesses that address everything from water scarcity to education. Financial giants, including J.P. Morgan and Citigroup, recently projected U.S. social impact enterprises to account for nearly half a trillion dollars in economic growth over the next decade.

**INCREASING FOCUS ON LOCAL ISSUES**

Evidence of millennial reengineering is present in how they are effecting change at a state-by-state level. This includes advocating for issues such as marriage equality and education reform.

In a national poll conducted in 2013 by the Pew Research Center, researchers were able to show that the local influence of millennials has reached a tipping point — driving states and local jurisdictions to pass laws supporting same-sex marriage and legalized marijuana use.

This, according to the National Journal's Ron Brownstein, has "seeded a belief among political leaders that change on these issues is inevitable because public opinion, over time, will only tilt further as more millennials ... enter the electorate." Long-term, millennials may disproportionately participate in key ballot measure initiatives, but not participate in electing specific candidates or supporting partisan party platforms.

Recently, evidence that political operations are starting to follow this trend has emerged. A [2013 profile in the New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/28/us/politics/young-democrats-turn-attention-to-local-politics.html) examined how national political parties are recognizing a need to steer campaign resources away from the policy debates in Congress. They are recognizing the need to increase their focus on local politics to engage more voters and drive policy change.
“There was no simpler time. Never, ever.”
- David McCullough, historian
The economy remains an urgent political priority — both nationally and in Oregon. The lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis continue to stifle most segments of our workforce. Even as hiring activity picks up, the prospect of a “jobless recovery” and sustained income gaps are creating headwinds in the broader economy. Unemployment, economic development, income inequality, and economic stimulus remain front and center in our national discourse.

Where millennials fit into this debate becomes clear when looking at several key figures:

- The median net worth for younger-age households is $3,662 — down 68% from the 1980s (Pew Research Center).
- The percentage of the U.S. workforce under 25 has dropped 13% since 2008 (Bureau of Labor and Statistics).
- The unemployment rate for 18–34 year olds has been in double digits for nearly six years. In Oregon, the unemployment rate for 16 to 24 year olds is 17.8% — more than twice the state average. The unemployment rate among 20 to 24 year olds is one and a half times the overall unemployment rate and their participation is near record lows (Oregon Employment Department).
- The average U.S. college student today carries $12,700 in credit-card debt.
- Debt from college education loans totals nearly $1 trillion nationally. In Oregon, student loan debt for the Class of 2012 averaged $26,639 — with more than 60% of Oregon college students carrying debt after graduation (Institute for College Access & Success).
- 42% of recent college graduates are working in jobs that don’t require a college education (Heldrich Center for Workforce Development).

TOPLINE SUMMARY

Sustained un- and under-employment, combined with student loan debt, are creating long term economic challenges for millennials in the workforce.

Behaviors and lifestyle trends – including delays in marriage, household formation, and having children – don’t prove we’re facing the rise of a predominantly urbanist generation.

The ability of technology and businesses to respond to emerging challenges such as climate change, healthcare, and education remains a bright spot for the millennial workforce.
What this data tell us is that we have one of the most educated generations in recent memory. Today, more than a third of the millennials age 26–33 have at least a four-year college degree — making them, according to recent data analyzed by the Pew Research Center, “the best-educated cohort of young adults in American history.”

Prior to 1985, there is little national data on U.S. college graduation rates; however, we know that college graduation rates have risen steadily since the passage of the G.I. bill in 1944 and the Higher Education Act in 1965. According to census data, college attendance in the U.S. grew sharpest in the early 1990s — climbing to 15.2 million in 1999 and jumping to 20.4 million in 2011.

In Oregon, there are approximately 183,000 students attending college — roughly 36% of whom will complete their associates degree or higher.

But this education has brought with it historic levels of un- and under-employment in the wake of the Great Recession. Millennials in Oregon’s workforce today are facing economic conditions that reduced their expectations of the current job market.

Indeed, millennials are being shaped by the Great Recession. They have entered the workforce during a relatively flat-to-modest economic recovery. College debt adds to this long-term economic hardship.

According to our focus groups, the issues that Oregon millennials care most about were clear: job creation, job training, reducing the cost of their education, and economic opportunity.

It shouldn’t be surprising to today’s leaders that many near-term economic issues are perceived as largely irrelevant among millennial populations in Oregon. This includes the recent debate over reforms to the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) and balancing the state’s budget — suggesting that elected officials have not been effectively translating how these long-term issues will influence future generations.

Only 1% of millennials in Oregon feel that PERS reform was the most important issue for state officials to do something about – compared with 10% of boomers.

We asked focus group participants: “When it comes to Oregon’s economy, what do you think should be the most important priorities that should guide elected officials, policymakers, and business leaders?”

AMONG THE ANSWERS (NOT RANKED):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Creating jobs</th>
<th>Green technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Reducing taxes for small</td>
<td>Local issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives for businesses to</td>
<td>businesses</td>
<td>Fostering a small business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relocate to Oregon</td>
<td>Tech and manufacturing</td>
<td>culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MILLENNIALS V. THE AMERICAN DREAM

Politics and the economy intersect heavily. This intersection forms the root of the central question summarized in our introduction: is this generation shaping market conditions in our economy, or is the economy forcing them to adapt to historically challenging circumstances?

We should accept that it’s probably both. However, there are areas where we can discern notable trends that suggest (at least for now) millennials are adapting to conditions out of their direct control. Long-term, this will likely create an altered version of what the American Dream will mean to millennials and their children.

What’s clear is that millennials don’t define economic success and opportunity the way the boomer generation has modeled it. On the surface, it appears that millennials have reduced expectations of rising incomes between generations. But the Great Recession has brought with it an odd shift in behaviors.

Millennials are marrying later in life, which is slowing down household formation, homeownership, and births. According to 2013 Pew data, only 26% of millennials today are married. At roughly the same age that millennials are today, 36% of Generation X and 48% of baby boomers were married.

In addition, traditional societal networks have been digitized and mobilized — replacing previous generational models of community involvement and socializing.

There are interwoven social forces that exert enormous influence on these behaviors. They include the steady increase in the number of women in the workplace and the “green wave” of environmentalism of the early 2000s.

Today, many environmental advocates prefer to view millennial preferences for smaller homes, alternative transportation, and reduced consumption as proof points that this is a generation responding to the threat of climate change.

Not quite. Urban development researchers like Joel Kotkin offer more nuanced analyses of these generational trends. In a 2013 essay on the economy and millennials, Kotkin speculates that many theorists have it wrong. Millennials haven’t abandoned the suburbs, or marriage, or family formation, or cars, or materialism. Instead, they are simply recreating the image of the family, the home front, and the workplace in their own image.

This is typical of each generation throughout history.

Kotkin reminds us that the changing face of the “middle class,” the reputational damage done to homeownership during the recent economic crisis, and the influence that technological innovation has had on millennials deserves credit for this shift. In the decade ahead, six million millennials will hit their 30s — and, according to Kotkin, this figure will accelerate through 2050.
We’re more likely experiencing a temporary slow-down in the key behavioral indicators used to make assessments of economic trends. Most unmarried millennials (69%) say they would like to marry, but feel they lack the necessary lifestyle pillars — job security, a growing economy, homeownership — to make that viable.

So, the question we should be asking is once this slow-down abates, what will the “return to normal” look like for housing, the job market, and community formation?

THE SHARING ECONOMY

Socioeconomic innovation is designed to change underlying beliefs and structural relationships. From this perspective, we can see how social entrepreneurship reflects the underlying intentions of millennials to disrupt the economic playing field.

Social entrepreneurship uses the basic theory of capitalism (making a profit) to solve complex problems. It does this while generating sustainable growth of a business doing many of the things that our government and elected officials seem unable to do—at least with any urgency.

One area where this is most evident is the “sharing economy” popular among millennials. The concept of collaborative consumption includes everything from carsharing services (Zipcar, Uber) to digital media (Netflix) to housing (Airbnb). Its purpose is to share the cost of a service or product, thereby reducing the overall level of consumption by allowing others to share its use.

Again, the question we are attempting to understand is if the economy of collaborative consumption is a necessity for young people during tough economic times? Or, is this a sustainable sector of the economy that will grow through further innovation and investment?

Many services embedded within this “sharing economy” bring together two incredibly powerful concepts that millennials are uniquely equipped to utilize: technology and social networking. This intersection provides evidence of millennials putting many of their self-identified strengths — innovation, creativity, adaptability — to work in order to disrupt old markets.

Looking back at the data from the Oregon Values & Beliefs survey, we are able to make some comparisons that illuminate where this thinking fits into regional millennial mindsets. Of note are several questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Our country would be better off if we all consumed less.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“We need to buy things to support a strong economy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Climate change requires us to change our way of life such as driving less or living more simply.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is interesting is the data doesn’t show much difference between millennials and boomers around their attitudes towards consumption. Where it begins to show signs of change is in specific behaviors — such as driving.

Technology makes accessing a shared car selective, location-specific, and more cost-effective, thereby saving on the cost of buying, owning, and maintaining a personal vehicle.

When presented with an option that advances a social cause, such as influencing climate change, millennials react to it strongly. While it’s not the central force influencing their decisions, it’s clear from the research that driving less to reduce climate change is a strong factor.

This provides added context to the push vs. pull of whether millennials are truly influencing today’s marketplace. Regardless of the leading motivator, companies that create sharing platforms, particularly if they advance a cause, stand to benefit from this behavioral shift.

It is worth noting that a 2012 survey of adults conducted by Zipcar found that the millennials were the most willing demographic to give up their cars. Every other age group in the study said that giving up their cars would have the most negative impact on their daily lives.

More than any age group, millennials (44%) said they attempt to reduce the amount of time they drive. They were also more likely to communicate with friends digitally than in person. Technology, such as their iPhones, ranks as more important to millennials than owning a car.

Of course, the urban millennials in our focus groups felt that some of their generation’s reliance on technology is also a weakness. Participants told us that apps and Google allow them to get information and services “without really thinking,” which underscores a critical distinction between access to information and understanding.

This rapid adaptability to technology is seen by many millennials as a growing reliance on pre-built tools that don’t require critical thinking skills. A palpable interest in innovation and the next big thing portends an inability to focus on the details and specifics of how things work. In short, the ubiquity of information has downgraded the importance of foundational knowledge and theory.
Thus, we circle back to why many boomers view millennials as unprepared and unskilled in the workplace.

**WORKFORCE VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS**

Perhaps the greatest debate over millennials and the economy centers around the friction between boomer managers and millennial workers. Much has been written about the changing expectations of millennials in the workforce, and there’s disagreement on whether this is a reflection of workforce preparedness or a paradigm shift in the workplaces of tomorrow.

We do have a lack of attention span. Our fathers could build a house or rebuild a car. We can’t do that. I don’t even know how I got here because I used GPS on my phone. I don’t know how to fix my dishwasher – unless I watch a YouTube video.

*Caleb, Washington County, Age 34*

A [2013 study conducted at Bentley University](https://www.bentley.edu) found that the majority of today’s business leaders, corporate recruiters, and educators gave college graduates average to below average ratings in workforce preparedness. The study also found that 63% of these decision-makers say it’s difficult to manage millennials.

Employers, according to the Bentley study, report that this impacts the productivity of their business. Another recent [analysis published in *TIME*](https://www.time.com) framed this in the context of training and technical skills — a reference to data that show a dramatic increase in U.S. employers claiming millennials lack critical thinking, creativity, interpersonal, communication, problem-solving, and writing skills.

*We need to update the curriculum to focus on the job market demands, to be less focused on academia or 4-year college visions. My brother just dropped out of college to do computer programming and coding. Education is all theory. It’s not hands on learning to code. We should be more focused on how to help people move forward.*

*Jake, Multnomah County, Age 26*
So who’s to blame for millennial unemployment? We are once again trying to dissect and understand opposing viewpoints. Is this a result of a generational skills gap? Or are millennials in the driver’s seat — and unwilling to play by the traditional rules in the workplace?

The truth is that this isn’t an either/or scenario. As core economic drivers have changed over the last two decades (particularly post-Great Recession), millennials are attuned to the realities of a rapidly changing economic landscape. This includes the skills, the professional training, and the values-based systems that they see as important on the job.

Like it or not, millennials will gain the upper hand in this debate over the next decade. Time is on their side. Boomers will begin to retire and millennials will be granted more influence over how they want to transform the definitions of economic productivity, efficiency, and entrepreneurship.

The OVB data offer another key trend here in Oregon. If we look at the difference between boomers and millennials on what matters most in the workplace, the divide is clear: 24% of millennials ranked “contributing to society’s benefit” as most important to them, versus just 15% of boomers.
TOPLINE SUMMARY

The overlap between millennial views of government versus politics makes separating these two categories difficult for researchers.

Millennials and boomers show divergent opinions about the role of government — specifically, the value of government regulation and the public sector’s need to support societal priorities.

While millennials are among the highest in political disaffiliation, national data show that many millennials are still largely divided along the traditional political party lines when it comes to the role of government.

What is the role of government? It’s a complex question that receives plenty of attention in today’s culture of 24-hour news. We wanted to try and understand how millennials view their government — and the role it plays in supporting their core values.

The intersections between government and politics make it difficult to analyze one without factoring in the other. In our research, it was hard for millennials to think of government without the political influences on the public sector — elections, campaign contributions, and corporate influence.

We are left with a somewhat thin set of data for assessing millennial views on the government itself. However, there are several takeaways from our cross-sectional analysis of OVB data and our focus groups.

The government is one area where Oregon’s millennials and boomers seem to be in divergent camps. The OVB data show us that boomers largely expect elected officials and government leaders to focus more on government efficiency — reduced taxes, the deficit, retirement reforms, and reduced regulations.
There also appear to be differing levels of support for government regulations between these two groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“What is the most important issue for local government officials to do something about?”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government spending</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education funding</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“The government should reduce government regulations in Oregon to support economic development.”</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly desirable</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat desirable</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly undesirable</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Millennials appear to show a more pro-government view. This is notable when it comes to the government’s role in helping ease personal debt (particularly from education costs), increase job opportunities, and provide more funding/support for training, skills, and investments in technological innovations.

We were able to make some comparisons of this Oregon data to a recent study conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics. Their 2013 survey of young American attitudes towards public service included a look at millennials’ views on government spending and the role of government. They polled millennials on everything from increasing economic opportunity to setting the moral compass for the country.

We previously referenced the growth of political disaffiliation among millennials. What’s important to recognize, however, is that while they may not align with party affiliation, millennials still vote along partisan lines.

When it came to the role of government, the Harvard survey found that between 2010 and 2013 millennials themselves began to take on partisan views of this age-old question.
The Harvard researchers offer us an interesting look at the growth of partisanship among the millennial generation. Their researchers point out that “the divide between political parties, even among our youngest voters, is stark.”

Let’s again put this in a historical context. The 1972 presidential election was the first national election in which a large percentage of boomers were eligible to vote. In that election, 18–30 year old voters skewed Democratic when compared to older voter blocks.

But generational patterns offer evidence that this consistently shifts as populations age. Early adulthood attitudes to government don’t remain fixed. The data proves this. According to Pew, over half of all boomers today (53%) say their political views have grown “more conservative” as they have aged. Only 35% say they have grown “more liberal.”
“I wouldn’t have any impact running for office. It’s all about money. I make more of a difference advancing the cause by supporting an organization.”

- Sarah, Clackamas County, Age 32
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

TOPLINE SUMMARY

Raised by a generation of public service-oriented parents, many millennials are active in their community and in volunteering. The effect is a generation that places a higher level of importance on benefiting the community in their careers.

Organizations looking to engage millennials in volunteering, donations, and advocacy need to align their brand with a generation that views causes as a reflection of their own personal brands.

Outcomes are most important to millennials. Showing clear, compelling evidence of how time, resources, and funding make a difference are more important to this data-obsessed generation.

Millennials are some of the most active community and civic volunteers. This “community involvement” is itself a broad category that covers philanthropy, volunteerism, political advocacy, community leadership, donor relations and fundraising, and partnership development.

The profile of millennials as community activists contrasts with the civic involvement of their parents’ generation (think the liberation, civil rights, and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s). Rather than anti-government protests or civil disobedience, millennials view community engagement through a more entrepreneurial (and less activist) lens.

Millennial views on community involvement directly impact how Oregon’s leading non-profits and charities engage this growing population. This has been noted in national research — including the 2013 Millennial Impact report that analyzed this trend to help non-profits better engage prospective millennial donors.

Local attitudes towards community involvement are echoed in the Oregon Values & Beliefs findings. Millennials have an outsized desire to see a bigger purpose in their community involvement — they want to believe in the cause. In Oregon, millennials ranked “belief in the cause” highest (42%) for the reasons they’d get involved with community engagement work compared to boomers (34%).
MILLENNIALS AND VOLUNTEERISM

Volunteerism is a topic that comes up frequently with millennials. This is a generation raised by activist parents. Moreover, they were brought up in an era where volunteer service was aggressively positioned as a critical part of professional development.

Fournier’s profile itself reminds us that volunteerism is likely a top-down force for millennials. Their parents, concerned about college applications and a hyper-competitive job market, drive them to do community service.

The impact this has, however, seems to have altered millennial views. Some data suggest that it has had a lasting influence on their attitudes and beliefs about everything from the workforce to the role of politics in effecting change. According to a 2011 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, millennials rank “the ability to improve the community” on an equal level with salary in what they want most in a job.

The Harvard data also offer a look at volunteerism among the millennial population today. According to their research, 34% of all millennials have volunteered for a community service in the past year. In addition, 53% of college students report volunteering — of which, 41% do so at least a few times a month.

Interestingly, we noted that Fournier’s argument about career path positioning has some validity. High school students in the Harvard data rank as the most active in community service and volunteering programs.

COMMUNICATING AN ISSUE

What we know is that millennials have shifting expectations for how organizations should communicate critical social issues.

Since millennials view non-profits and businesses as the change agents for society — not government — they are harder on what these institutions must deliver. Many citizens will volunteer because it makes them feel good. Millennials, however, seem to view volunteerism as the most effective means for achieving a desired outcome.

Where this appears to be changing is in the view of community involvement not as charity, but as a systems-driven approach to making a global impact. The OVB data elevates this point between millennials and boomers:
“What are the most important reasons for supporting charitable or religious organizations or individuals you do not know well?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help those who are less fortunate than myself</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the world a better place</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Most Important</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help those who are less fortunate than myself</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the world a better place</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third Most Important</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help those who are less fortunate than myself</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the world a better place</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2013 Oregon Values & Beliefs Survey

Millennials hold organizations and businesses more accountable to a strategic goal — often tied to global impact versus charitable good will. They don’t believe change will occur through traditional government institutions. Boomers may have pushed harder for government systems to change — as embodied in the anti-government protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Millennials seem more focused on the accountability of NGOs and mission-driven groups.

Some of this shift in expectations has been the result of the rising influence of social media and expanded access to information. Such tools encourage and allow millennials to have loftier expectations of their personal ability to make an impact. They live in a world of data collection and rapid accessibility. In our focus groups, many mentioned that these tools make them impatient with slow progress towards measurable outcomes, and that they aren’t as willing to donate money as they are willing to invest time and resources.

As such, millennials will approach community engagement investments with an eye towards measurable data. How will a donation or volunteer hours contribute to a specific outcome?
For non-profit marketing and communications professionals, the strategy used to engage this generation requires a far more sophisticated accounting of the measurable actions. The old model of donor communications — using images of impoverished populations, environmental disasters, or neglected animals — simply does not resonate with this generation of metrics-obsessed volunteers.

Millennials are also more concerned with aligning their values with an organization’s mission. In this era of personal brand development and management through social media, millennials see their community involvement as a direct reflection of their identity.

This requires Oregon’s community leaders to 1) meet millennials in the social spaces where cause-based engagement is more relevant to them; 2) present a clear demonstration of outcomes associated with their direct engagement; and 3) articulate an individual’s ability to make an impact.

Of course, if it helps them get into college or land a good job, that doesn’t seem to hurt either.
“The impulse of older generations to categorize and classify everyone and everything is natural. Making generalizations is a cognitive reflex needed to process observations, develop resolutions, and translate them into action. Defining millennials’ attitudes, beliefs, and values seemingly makes it easier to understand them and relate to them.”

- Brad Chase, Capitol Media Partners
While it’s tempting to summarize this undertaking with a set of conclusions, the complexity of this topic requires us to avoid repeating that trap. Instead, we offer a brief summary of insights based on our process of analysis.

This allows us to present our observations rather than report facts. To a large extent, this is the core of why millennial behaviors and attitudes remain such a Rubik’s Cube to the current generation of leaders.

There are three central insights that we can offer:

1. **Millennials think government institutions and traditional political systems are limited.** They endeavor to drive social change through non-profits and social entrepreneurship.

2. **Millennials are simultaneously empowered by and handicapped by an over-reliance on technology and the expanding accessibility of information.** They are notably self-aware of this behavioral trend; the long-term question will be how they use digital tools to redesign and rebuild constructive methods for our workplaces, government, and social institutions.

3. **While the popular notion is that millennials are driving rapid changes in the marketplace, the truth is that millennials’ behavior is as much shaped by modern market forces as it is shaping them.**

There are easily a number of qualifications that come with attempting to offer such concrete assessments. No one study or report can fully capture what it is that is shaping millennials, or adequately explain how they are shaping the world around them.

This is the very struggle that so many of us have come to discuss with an interest in arriving at clearer answers to what this intergenerational shift means — and what it forebears.

To aide in this struggle, we offer the following:

**IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW THE FUTURE.** If we step back from the data and the headlines, we should accept the reality that it’s impossible to predict the success and failures of the next generation. Throughout history, challenges have emerged at critical turning points that have tested the will of our citizens. The Civil War. The Great Depression. World War II. Watergate. 9/11. No generation has ever been fully trusted to tackle the nation’s greatest challenges until their leadership was called upon in a time of crisis.
AVOID CREATING A STEREOTYPE. Perhaps the best step we can take is to sidestep our natural inclination to place millennials in a box. If we recognize the differences between today’s youngest millennials (in their teens and early twenties) and the oldest (their early 30s), we should accept that millennials are difficult to label. Instead, recognize that the sub-groups within this generation will continue to evolve. So too will the media, tools, ideas, and models they use to engage in politics, expand the economy, and drive social change.

ACCEPT INTER-GENERATIONAL PATTERNS. We should all pay closer attention to the patterns that exist in times of generational transition. There will always be a reluctance of young people to do things the old way — just as the baby boomers rejected the Vietnam War, embraced the civil rights movement, and gave birth to modern environmentalism. The millennials have yet to arrive at their established point of leadership. When they do, history tells us that they will do things differently — as all generations have throughout time.

INNOVATION WILL WIN. The word “innovation” came up frequently in the course of this project. From our own research to our review of the national literature, it seemed to be the word most used in our focus groups and in the national discourse about millennials. If we embrace the American tradition of opportunity and prosperity, we should take comfort that this next generation of leaders has an unflappable focus on innovation — on new ideas and new pathways to greatness. With time, we should rely on that foundation. It is what makes every generation dedicated to preserving our unique American ideals for the next.
#insights

Quinn Thomas Public Affairs and
DHM Research