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**ABSTRACT**

The cultural salience of generational categories is on the rise: the large and powerful Baby-Boom generation continues to dominate electoral politics while younger Millennials' and Gen Zers' fluency in digital communication technology lets them voice their frustrations. We demonstrate that these three generational groups show many signs of being—or becoming—collective political actors. Majorities identify with their generation, they find these identities salient in their everyday lives, and younger generations especially demonstrate high levels of *generational linked fate*. Generations have distinct political agendas, and many express a willingness to support candidates who prioritize the interests of their generation. These findings force us to reconsider the treatment of generations as only ascriptive groups and instead see them as composed of self-conscious members, capable of acting as collective actors on the political stage. If the patterns we show sharpen further, generations may become defining points of cultural and political cleavage.

The young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

Greta Thunberg, *Time Magazine* Person of Year 2019

Each year, hundreds—possibly thousands—of political polls break down their results by age or generation. Generations have been central to several major research programs including those on postmaterialism (Inglehart 2018), long-term cultural and political change (Alwin and McCammon 2003; Grasso 2016), collective memory (Corning and Schuman 2015; Schuman and Corning 2017), and long-term turnout decline (Miller and Shanks 1992; Dalton 2015; van der Brug and Franklin 2018). Nearly all other research on political behavior routinely controls for age or generation.

Pollsters and researchers, however, typically treat generation as an *ascriptive group*— one that is readily recognized (with some debate about boundaries), with group membership *correlated* with life chances, values, and political outcomes. Among ascriptive groups, only a small subset become collective political actors whose members are self-aware of their common interests and develop salient identities that can drive common

and coordinated political action. Examples include the European working classes during many periods of the twentieth century (e.g., Mann 1973; Weakliem 1993), African Americans since the end of their enslavement (e.g., Matthews and Prothro 1966; Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020); and US Evangelical Christians from the mid-1970s to the present (e.g., Wilcox 1992; Bean 2016).

Surprisingly, even among those who give generations a central place in their research, few consider whether generational members are aware of their group membership or believe their generation is a salient part of their political identity. Recent exceptions tend to focus on Millennials, primarily through the lens of how their use of technology and distinctive life experiences affect their issue priorities (Ross and Rouse 2015; Rouse and Ross 2018). A related body of work shows that politician age is important for voter evaluation (Curry and Haydon 2018; Webster and Pierce 2019; Eshima and Smith 2022), but the role of generation in this process is not yet established.

We are unaware of large surveys that ask respondents about their generational identity in detail compared to many studies inquiring about class, race, ethnicity, or gender—though Ross and Rouse (2020) take a big step in asking about the strength of generational attachment. Building on this effort, we utilize a recent US survey that measures five aspects of *generational identity*: identification, salience, linked fate, common agenda, and intended political actions in support of one's generation. Using these data, we seek to provide a fresh angle on the "Problem of Generations." By analyzing how people understand their identity, we believe that we can better explain their relevant political behavior.

Our results show that contemporary generations are now showing some of the hallmarks of collective political actors, but not others: many individuals both identify with their birth generation and experience the political world through this identity. This suggests the possibility that generational conflict is evolving beyond statistical differences associated with age and toward generations becoming full-fledged political actors. This possibility should be incorporated into future empirical studies. At the same time, the results suggest that we cannot uncritically impute group consciousness to generations based on birth year alone.[1]

The "Baby Boomer" generation is historically unique (Munger 2022), and we show that more Boomers embrace their generational identity than those in any other generation. However, we also find evidence of generational consciousness among the youngest "Generation Z" (18–25 years old, as of 2023). Furthermore, Generation Z shows the highest levels of generational linked fate and the greatest tendency to support politicians who prioritize youth issues. We also show that indicators of collective solidarity are more pronounced among Whites than citizens of color, suggesting that generational identity may compete for salience among those whose identities are politicized because of cross-cutting lines of power and privilege.

## Groups as political actors

Whereas Madison regarded factions as inherently risky to democracy, early political sociologists spoke of political cleavage groups (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) as engines of political change. Class conflict, for example, gave rise to child labor laws, voting rights for the propertyless, workers' rights to bargain collectively, and the 40-hour work week.

Likewise, collective action by African Americans culminated in a civil rights revolution whose formal rights were extended to other groups like the disabled.

Group conflict, then, is central to democracy, with each line of cleavage presenting unique opportunities for change (Schattschneider 1960), often precipitating threats to the status quo that generate feelings of status threat. The most dramatic changes are associated with ascriptive groups that transform into collective actors, whose members are aware of their identities and common fate, and who deliberately advance their interests through coordinated actions such as protest, civic participation, organized interests, and voting.

The distinction between an ascriptive group and a collective actor has been characterized in different ways. Scholars of working-class politics often distinguished between a class *in itself* and a self-conscious class *for itself* (e.g., Thompson 1968; Katznelson 1986). Works on gender and race have focused on concepts like group *consciousness* (McClain et al. 2009) or group *solidarity* (Bledsoe et al. 1995). The terminology is important, and some concepts developed in one research program (like African American race consciousness) might fit imperfectly when applied to others. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that collective political actors differ from merely ascriptive groups in terms of group identity, linked fate, common agendas, and willingness to advance group interests through political action. In this paper, we investigate whether generations in the US today show the hallmarks of collective actors: evidence of transitioning from being a group *in itself* to being a group *for itself*.

We use data from a 2020 survey that includes the Generational Consciousness Battery —a series of questions that operationalize group identification, linked fate, policy agenda, and interest-based voting potential in the context of generational politics. This represents, we believe, the first comprehensive analysis of all the components needed to properly understand generations as potential collective political actors.

## What makes an ascriptive group a collective political actor?

There is no consensus checklist of the criteria required for a generation to be a group "for itself." But research on other collective political actors suggests four criteria.

### Self-identification

How many members in the ascriptive group identify as members of the group? This criterion has been central to work on class politics (Centers 1949; Jackman 1979; Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004), and racial and ethnic politics (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994).

### Identity salience

Simply identifying with a group is not the same as being aware of group identity in daily life. While members of some groups face constant reminders of their ascriptive membership, dominant or privileged groups whose experience is often treated as the norm, such as Whites in the United States for much US history, may less often experience their group identity as salient (Jardina 2019).[2] Social location does not invariably lead to identification or identity salience, especially when multiple and cross-sectional identities are in play (Stets and Burke 2000). Thus the extent of generational identity and identity salience are empirical questions we hope to answer.

## Linked fate

How many members of the ascriptive group see their fortunes linked to the experiences of others in their group? The concept of linked fate has been articulated most clearly in the study of African American politics (Dawson 1994; McClain et al. 2009) but has been extended more widely (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2008; Masuoka and Sanchez 2010; Sanchez and Vargas 2016). That said, there is considerable debate about the theoretical and empirical appropriateness of extending the concept beyond its central place in African American identity (Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016). Pérez (2021) argues that linked fate is a downstream consequence of identity and identity salience. Extending that logic to generations we investigate whether American adults perceive their fates to be linked to others who came of age in the same era. Likewise, we do not know if a high degree of generational linked fate will convert into generational political action or candidate preference as it does in the case of racial and intersectional identities (Bejarano et al. 2021; Shaw, Foster, and Combs 2019). These are empirical questions we seek to answer.

## Common political agenda

Do members of the ascriptive group view their members as facing unique social and political challenges compared to others? Even when groups reflect high levels of solidarity due to shared identity and shared linked fate they may not transform into *political* groups (Brooks and Manza 1997). To make this transformation, group members must be in broad agreement about their priorities and challenges. Critically, these challenges must be viewed as systemic, rather than due to individual failings. Unemployment and low wages may plague members of the working class, but if most see these as individual failings of not working hard enough, this will prevent individuals from taking actions consistent with group interests (Brody and Sniderman 1977) and hinder the group's transition to a collective political actor. Indeed, much of the early work on class politics in the United States focused on the puzzle of false consciousness and self-blame (Feldman 1983; Iyengar 1990), a concept extended to the study of other groups (e.g., McClain et al. 2009).

## Willingness to act in pursuit of group interests

Finally, are members of the group willing to take actions that advance their agenda?

While some argue that concerted collective action, especially action likely to result in resistance, requires high levels of *all* key elements (e.g., Crabtree and Dhima 2017), there is no consensus on this nor on how to characterize solidarity when groups display moderate to high levels of some, but not all, of these elements. Likewise, there is no theoretical necessity that these components cohere so that measures are expected to form a unidimensional scale. Indeed, in the absence of strong, unified leadership for every generation, there is no voice to convey "what goes with what." Whether or not the components are correlated and scalable is an empirical question. Our goal is to assess the levels of these attributes in contemporary US generations, connecting the literature on identity as a driver of political behavior with the older research tradition on generational socialization.

### Generational socialization: the limits of theory

Especially within political science, socialization research on generations has adopted the *impressionable years* framework, whereby those who experience common political culture and events as adolescents or young adults (such as the Great Depression or the Cold War) are impacted in ways that are fundamentally different than their parents or their younger relatives. Empirical research tends to treat citizens as atomistic members of their generation who, by virtue of exposure to the same stimuli, display distinctive values (Inglehart 2018), participation patterns (Firebaugh and Chen 1995; Miller and Shanks 1992), or opinions (Sears and Funk 1991).

None of these works examined *generational solidarity*—what Mannheim (1952 [1928]), described as a generational group becoming *actualized*, with the potential to be a political actor. Likewise, although these works often treat generations as political competitors, they do not offer a theoretical account of how generational conflict for resources, status or cultural dominance might create dynamics that lead to actualization, hardening of dividing lines, or crystallization of identity.

This dynamic is implied in Greta Thunberg's 2019 address to the UN General Assembly ("young people are starting to understand your betrayal") and in the quip "OK Boomer," which both resonated among members of younger generations and raised the dander of their elders. We hope to pave the way for research that expands the horizons of the socialization tradition to include outcomes relevant to collective identity and action potential.

### Generations as cultural groups—Greatest to Z

"Baby boom" was coined in 1948 as a demographic description of the sharp rise in postwar births in the US (Whelpton 1948). Initially, the "Boomer" generation as such was regarded primarily as a demographic anomaly that would create pressures on social insurance and health systems (Birdsall and Hawkins 1985). In 1967, however, Time Magazine awarded their famous Person of the Year (POTY) award to "The Inheritors": the young Boomers had inherited a world of "unprecedented affluence … physical and intellectual mobility … a vista of change accelerating in every direction (Time 1967)." So while the unique conditions of their birth and adolescence were widely commented upon, the crucial generational label did not initially stick.

By the mid-1980s, marketers began to refer to Boomers as a distinct target group, but mostly because of demographic characteristics (fewer children, higher divorce rates, fewer multigenerational families, and more dual-earner couples among the married) and not because of a perception that Boomers differed fundamentally from their parents' generation in terms of tastes or values. That would come later. So much later that Boomers were not recognized by scholars as a cultural phenomenon until their oldest members reached middle age. As a result, it is unlikely that young Boomers themselves internalized "Baby Boomer" as a salient identity.

Today, however, Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z are discussed as distinct groups. Despite fuzzy boundaries, each is regarded as having a cultural center of gravity associated with distinct consumer tastes, musical/entertainment preferences, and modes of civic participation (Dalton 2015). Above-baseline cultural and political

attention to Millennials as a group began with the disproportionate impact of the 2008 financial crisis, which disrupted their progress through life milestones like entry into the workforce, homeownership, and marriage. "Millennials" became ubiquitous in the mid-2010s, though, as the combination of a Boomer-dominated media audience and the rise of identity-focused "clickbait" media incentivized the publication of trend pieces about Millennials "killing" the diamond (or golf, or movie) industry (Munger 2020). Time Magazine again serves as a useful cultural barometer, awarding "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation" their POTY award in 2013.

While age-specific policy preferences on school spending and Social Security are not reducible to generational self-interest (Street and Sittig Cossman 2006; Berkman and Plutzer 2004), clear generational differences emerge on issues like climate change (Hamilton et al. 2019; Ross, Rouse, and Mobley 2019; Ross and Rouse 2020). But age differences on a few policies are insufficient evidence to conclude that a generation is a collective political actor. That is the task of this paper.

### *Is generational politics an all-white phenomenon?*

Every individual holds multiple identities and the salience of each is contingent on many factors (Serpe, Stryker, and Powell 2020). If non-White Americans hold more highly politicized identities than White citizens, these may lessen the relevance and potency of additional identities, such as those based on generation. Expressed another way, when Gen Z members express their frustrations by the retort "OK Boomer," do they envision the Baby Boom generation in its racial and ethnic diversity? Do Boomers of color think the expression refers to them? These questions have a surface resemblance to the question of whether racial linked fate "travels." But the increasing diversity of the United States prevents a simple extension, as the youngest generations are far more racially and ethnically diverse than their elders, creating a complicated asymmetry.

Our sample size will not permit a definitive answer to these questions, a situation exacerbated by the lesser diversity of older cohorts. But we raise this important issue here and will explore it as best we can with the data at hand.

### Data and methods

To answer our research questions, we undertook a nationally representative survey in partnership with YouGov, with 1500 interviews completed between January 14 and January 21, 2020. Figure 1 summarizes the overall survey organization. Respondents were first asked 10 questions provided by other investigators—focusing on discrete emotions about recent news and politics and about democracy in the US. They then were asked to select the generational label and the age description that described them best. Then, half the respondents were assigned to a condition in which they were asked about the identity salience and linked fate based on age, and half asked identical questions referring to generations. Likewise, each person was asked about the most important problem facing their age group or their generation. All analyses employ the survey weights provided by YouGov. The exact question wordings are introduced in each relevant analysis section below.

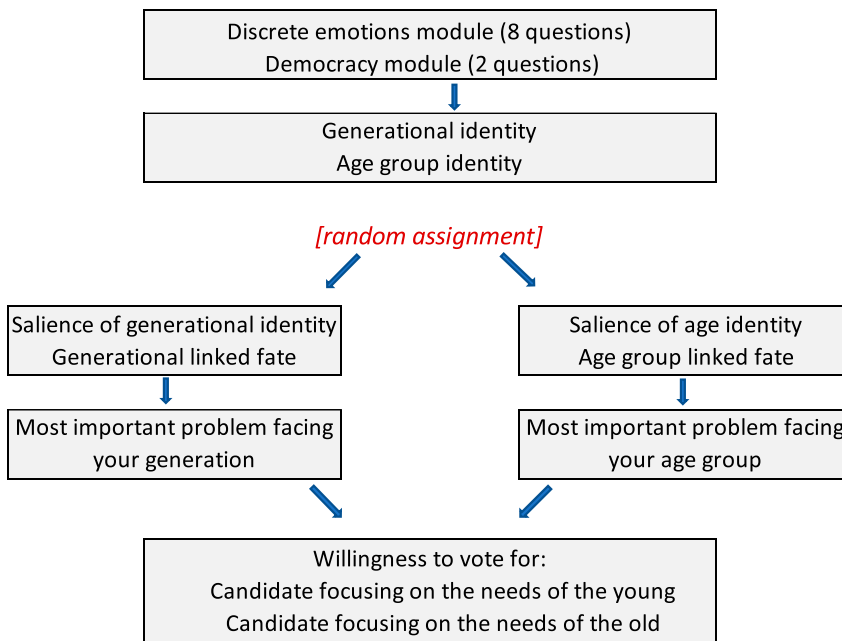**YouGov general population survey** (N=1500) January 14-21, 2020.



Figure 1. Survey flow chart.

## Results

### Self-identification

We first turn to group identification. The wording for the generational identity question comes from a 2015 survey conducted by Pew Research Center.

> These are some commonly used names for generations. Which of these, if any, do you consider yourself to be? If you use another term to describe your generation, please choose "other" and tell us that term.
> • Silent Generation
> • Baby-Boom Generation
> • Generation X
> • Millennial Generation
> • Generation Z
> • Something else (please specify).

To place our respondents' self-identifications in context, we rely on the generational definitions used by the Pew Research Center (Table 1).[3]

The 2015 Pew report found that 40% of Millennials, 58% of Gen Xers, and 79% of Baby Boomers consider themselves to be part of the generation corresponding with

**Table 1.** Pew Research Center's generations, defined.

| Generation | Start year | End year |
|---|:---:|---:|
| Silent generation | 1928 | 1945 |
| Baby-Boom generation | 1946 | 1964 |
| Generation X | 1965 | 1980 |
| Millennial generation | 1981 | 1996 |
| Generation Z | 1997 | 2012 |

their birth year according to these generational boundaries (Doherty, Kiley, and Jameson 2015). Our survey, less than 5 years later, confirms the same rank ordering of generations but also shows increased identification in every generation. As shown by the black bars in Figure 2, generational identification has increased for each of the three largest generations (Pew did not include Gen Z, the oldest of whom were 17 at the time, and they included a category for the "Greatest Generation." Many of the "Silent Generation" in their 2015 survey understandably opted for that label as did, amusingly, 8% of Millennial respondents).

While the black bars measure how many people fully adopt the Pew definitions, it is useful to examine answers meriting "partial adoption," by identifying with a generation just 1 or 2 years away from their birthdate. These show that 17% of those who Pew designates as Gen Z, but who were born in 1996 or 1995, identified as Millennials. A similar percentage of Silent generation members within 2 years of the Pew boundary identified as Baby Boomers. Given the arbitrary nature of the Pew cut-off points, "full" and "partial" adoption is quite high and potentially increasing.[4]
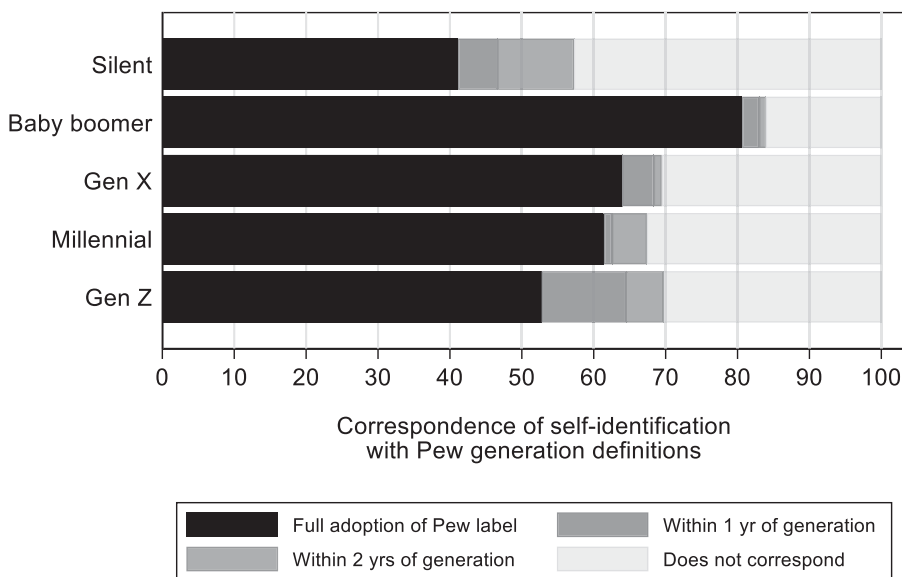


**Figure 2.** Percentage of respondents who fully or partially adopt their Pew-assigned generation. Note: Respondents replying "something else" are coded as "does not correspond" in this figure. The probability of Baby Boomers fully adopting their generational label is statistically higher ($p < 0.01$) than that of members of all four other generations (t-ratios range from 4.11 to 7.10).

More generally, the results show that generational identification is common. Overall, 66% of the respondents fully adopt the generation assigned to them by Pew. When we define as "partial adoption" those within 2 years of the cutoff and who selected the "correct" adjacent category, 72% overall adopt their Pew-defined generation. To place this in context, we examined class identification data from the General Social Survey, calculating the percentage of blue-collar workers who self-identified as "working class." Even when blue collar is defined narrowly to only include skilled manual laborers and non-agricultural semi-skilled laborers, we find only 60% adopt the working-class label (details in Appendix A). In that context, generational identification is widespread, creating at least the potential for collective action.

For the remainder of the paper, we assign each survey respondent to their self-identified generation. Respondents who offered "something else" as their generation are treated as missing in analyses involving generational self-identification below.

### Salience of generational identity

Nominal group membership can be made temporarily salient in the context of a survey while playing a minor role in our day-to-day lives. It is more important whether the respondent is aware of their generational identity in the course of their daily life. We asked each respondent:

> You said you think of yourself as member of the << named generation >>. Some people think about their generation all the time, during many activities. Others only think of themselves as a member of the << named generation ..in specific situations where they are reminded of it. How about you? Would you say you think about yourself as a member of the << named generation >>…
> - Almost all the time
> - Just now and then
> - A lot of the time
> - Hardly ever

Figure 3 provides reports on generational salience by self-identified generation. Falling short of a majority, 48% of those in Generation Z say that they think of themselves in generational terms a lot of the time or more, followed closely by the next youngest generation, the Millennials (45%). Gen X members exhibit the lowest level of generational identity salience and Boomers and the Silent Generation lie in between. Boomers lag younger generations in identity salience, a pattern that mirrors low White identity salience prior to the Obama presidency (Jardina 2019). Overall, however, the cross-generational differences are small.

### Linked fate

Some Americans might identify as being unemployed, dog owners, or Irish. They might consider those identities highly salient. But salience does not guarantee feelings of group consciousness or political solidarity. Collective action requires the recognition of collective interests and common fortunes due to structural aspects of society and culture. We
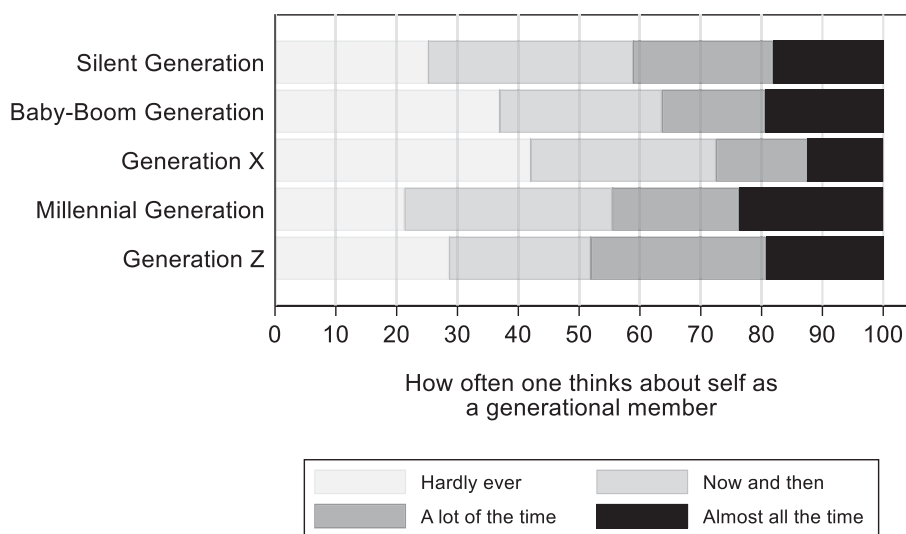
**Figure 3.** Generational salience by self-identified generation. Note: Based on ordinal logistic regression, Millennials have significantly higher generational salience than those who identify as members of Generation X ($p < 0.01$) or Baby Boomers ($p = 0.02$). Gen Xers have significantly lower salience than Silent ($p = 0.02$) identifiers. No other pairwise comparisons are significant.

included a survey experiment that randomly assigned respondents to one of two versions of the linked fate question. Half the sample was asked:

> How much do you think what happens to Americans in the << named generation >> will have something to do with what happens in your life?
> - Not at all
> - Just a little
> - Some
> - A lot.[5]

Our survey question uses language as similar as possible to classic questions measuring racial linked fate among African Americans to enhance comparability. Overall, the levels of perceived linked fate approach those typically seen for racial and ethnic groups. According to a 2019 Pew survey, 61% of Whites and Hispanics answered "some" or "a lot," along with 66% of Asians, and 73% of Blacks. In our survey, 56% overall did the same. But the overall percentage hides important differences across generational groups.

Figure 4 shows that Gen X is an outlier in their low levels of linked fate (only 7% say "a lot," and the majority say "just a little" or "not at all"); Silents are only slightly higher in each category. Boomers are higher in linked fate than either of these adjacent generations, with over a quarter reporting the highest level.

But the youngest generations report the highest levels of linked fate. Millennials are evenly distributed among the top three categories, with only 8% reporting "not at all." Gen Z's responses are remarkable; 45% report "a lot" of generational linked fate. To
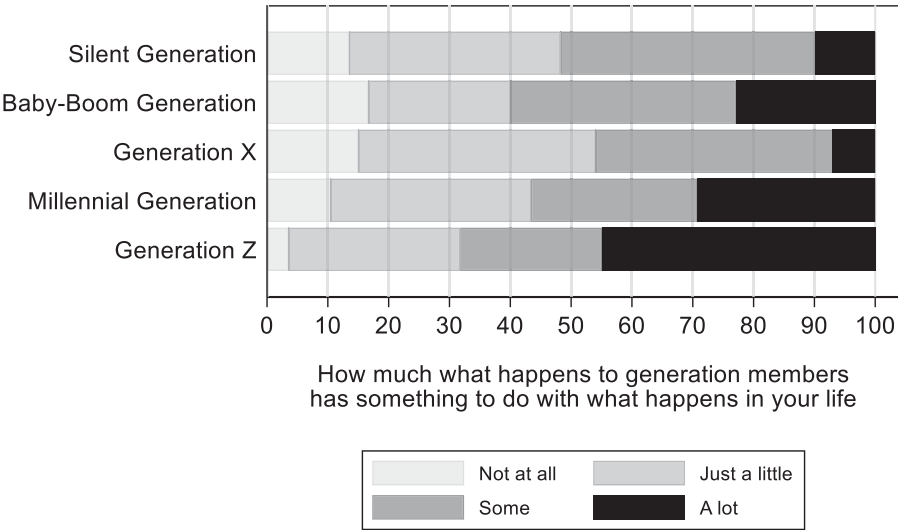
**Figure 4.** Generational linked fate by self-identified generation. Note: Based on ordinal logistic regression, Baby Boomer identifiers have significantly higher linked fate than those who identify as members of Generation X ($p < 0.01$); Millennial identifiers have significantly higher linked fate than those who identify as members of Generation X ($p < 0.01$); Generation Z identifiers have significantly higher linked fate than those who identify as members of Generation X ($p < 0.01$) and those who identify as members of the Silent Generation ($p = 0.012$). No other pairwise comparisons are significant.

place this in context, self-identified Zoomers are more likely to report generational linked fate than Asians, Whites, and Hispanics to report racial linked fate, and only slightly less likely than Blacks.

## *Common agenda*

To assess the distinctiveness of each generation's political agenda, we asked two questions:

- What would you say is the most important problem facing Americans in the << named generation >> today?

**Table 2.** Five most frequently mentioned problems facing one's generation.

| Silent (N = 114) | Baby boomer (N = 466) | Gen X (N = 355) | Millennial (N = 334) | Gen Z (N = 72) | Something else (N = 155) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Health (22%) | Healthcare (45%) | Healthcare (23%) | Jobs (22%) | Environment (19%) | Healthcare (17%) |
| Healthcare (16%) | Social Security (22%) | Retirement—unspecified (16%) | Environment (19%) | Mental health (18%) | No money (12%) |
| Moral values threatened (13%) | Retirement—unspecified (16%) | No money (14%) | Social Problems—other (12%) | Social Problems—other (16%) | Political threat (12%) |
| Political threat (12%) | Health (15%) | Social Security (10%) | Healthcare (10%) | Jobs (13%) | Health (12%) |
| No money (13%) | No money (14%) | Jobs (10%) | Student debt (10%) | Inequality (12%) | Social Problems —other (11%) |
| | | Political threat (10%) | | | |

- You said << named problem >> is the most important problem facing your generation today, what is the second most important problem?

This resulted in 3000 free-text answers. The authors developed a preliminary list of themes and operational instructions for coders. Every answer was coded by two RAs. For details of this procedure, see Appendix B.

Distinct agendas can be seen by examining the top five most important problems mentioned by each generation (Table 2). The healthcare system ranks as the first or second most mentioned problem for the three oldest generations, falls to #4 for Millennials (mentioned by 10%), and drops to eighth place for Zoomers. In contrast, the environment (including concerns about climate change) was named by 19% of Gen Z and Millennials, while mentioned by only 7%, 5%, and 1% by Gen X, Boomers, and members of the Silent Generation, respectively.

The two younger generations were also more likely than their elders to mention inequality and topics such as crime, drugs, and bullying (in "social problems—other"). While the patterns are different, we should note some important points of overlap. Every generation named either a lack of money or jobs as a top five concern, for example. A more comprehensive analysis is presented in Table C1 in the Supplemental Materials. This shows that the full array of most important problem topics is moderately predictive of group membership (adjusted Pseudo $R^2$ is 0.22).

### Generation-based issue alignment

The different agendas revealed by the open-ended Most Important Problem question are striking. But is it politically consequential if an individual's perceived problems are aligned with others in the same generation? That is, if a Boomer—unlike her generational peers—ranks climate change and mental health as the most important problems facing her generation, does that imply anything about her likelihood of voting based on generational interests? To investigate this systematically, we first assess generational issue alignment. High alignment means that an individual named those problems that were most often mentioned by members of their generation relative to how often it was named by members of other generations. We quantified alignment by first estimating a multinomial logit model in which the dependent variable is the self-identified generation, and the independent variables are a series of dummy variables coded 1 if the MIP answer was tagged for a particular category and 0 otherwise. The models (Appendix C) show that answers highlighted in Table 2 are highly predictive of group membership. Based on these models, we generated predicted probabilities in each group. To illustrate, one Boomer stated that the MIP facing his generation were "democrats," which was tagged to be in the political threats category. Another mentioned "Losing social security" and "health." The first was only given 0.23 probability of being a Boomer (just slightly above chance) while the second was estimated to be a Boomer with probability 0.75. In this way, the predicted probabilities of membership—when predicted solely based on answers to the MIP question—serve as a measure of issue alignment *relative to others in the same generation*.[6]

**Table 3.** Pairwise correlations among identity salience, linked fate, and issue alignment, by self-identified generation.

| | Polychoric correlation of | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Identity salience and linked fate | Identity salience and issue alignment | Linked fate and issue alignment | *Mean correlation* |
| Silent | .15 | .08 | .17 | *.13* |
| Boomers | **.23** | .04 | .09 | *.12* |
| Gen X | **.41** | **.27** | .08 | *.25* |
| Millennials | **.43** | .04 | .18 | *.22* |
| Gen Z | **.55** | −.10 | .27 | *.24* |

Note: Polychoric correlations (ordinal by ordinal) or polyserial correlations (ordinal by continuous). Bolded coefficients are twice their standard error.

## Do we see evidence of a generational identity belief system?

To see whether generational members show evidence of constraint among identity salience, linked fate, and issues, we calculated polychoric correlations (appropriate for ordinal measures).

Table 3 shows that salience is positively correlated with linked fate for all groups, but especially the three youngest generations. If the salience of generational identity should continue to rise in the coming years and these correlations hold, the feeling of linked fate would be expected to rise for these three generations as well.

In contrast, linked fate and identity salience are only weakly correlated with issue alignment. Only two correlations exceed 0.20 (Gen X for identity salience and issue alignment and Gen Z for linked fate and issue alignment—both with $\rho = 0.27$, but the latter is non-significant). This may be due to the zero-sum nature of the MIP question, but it could also reflect the ability of citizens to identify similar issues of concern in the absence of subjective solidarity.

The right-hand column reports the mean correlation in each row, summarizing the inter-correlations for each generation. These exceed 0.20 only for the three youngest generations and then only barely. As such, there is no evidence that these measures of generational consciousness can be used to create a unidimensional, composite scale. Stated another way, group consciousness is not currently a coherent belief system but instead constituted by loosely connected elements.

### Willingness to act politically

From the perspective of electoral politics, of course, the most important indicator of a collective actor is whether generational identity affects voting decisions. In that light, we asked respondents if their vote choice would be affected if a politician said they would be a "strong advocate for" either *younger* or *older* generations; each respondent saw both options in random order.

Suppose a candidate were running for office who said that the needs of today's [**younger/older**] generations were not being met and that candidate would be a strong advocate for the interests of today's [**younger/older**] generations. Would that make you:
- More likely to support that candidate
- Less likely to support that candidate
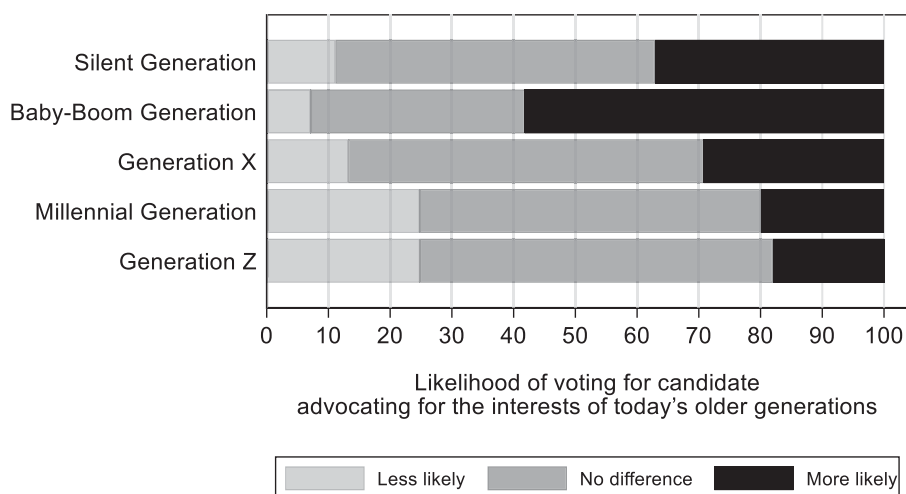- It would not make any difference one way or the other.

**Figure 5.** Support or opposition to candidate advocating for the interests of older generations. Note: Based on ordinal logistic regression, Baby Boomer identifiers are significantly more likely to vote for a candidate advocating for older Americans than those who identify with all other generations (all $p$'s < 0.01). Silent Generation identifiers are significantly more likely to vote for a candidate advocating for older Americans than those who identify as Millennials ($p < 0.01$) or with Generation $Z$ ($p < 0.01$).

Figure 5 displays how many respondents from each (self-identified) generation would be more likely to support a candidate advocating for older generations (black), would be less likely to vote for the candidate (light gray), or who said it would make no difference (medium gray). The Boomers are striking positive outliers. All other generations have "no difference" as the modal category, but most Boomers say they are more likely to support this politician (and fewer of them are *less* likely to support). Boomers display more group consciousness in the form of self-interested voting than the Silents, who are of course older than the Boomers and who might naively be expected to be more intrinsically interested in the interests of older generations.[7] This comports with Figure 4, which shows Boomers with higher levels of linked fate than Silents.

Among younger generations, we see considerable indifference, with more than 55% saying this candidate's advocacy would make no difference, and only slightly more saying "less likely" (25%) than saying "more likely" (20% for Millennials and 18% for Gen Z).

Figure 6 replicates this analysis for a politician who would advocate for the interests of *younger* generations. The figure shows that more than 52% of Millennial and 46% of Gen Z identifiers are more likely to support this politician, showing group-based voting levels that are just short of the Boomers' support for the elderly-focused politician. Members of the Silent and X generations are somewhat more likely to support than oppose this politician, though a majority of each express indifference. Again, however, the Boomers stand out with 3 in 10 saying they are less likely to support a candidate advocating for younger citizens. This striking finding lends support to the growing generational cleavage between the Boomers and younger generations.

In sum, we see the capacity for identity-driven voting among Boomers and the two youngest generations. This is primarily in terms of voting *for* an in-group supporting
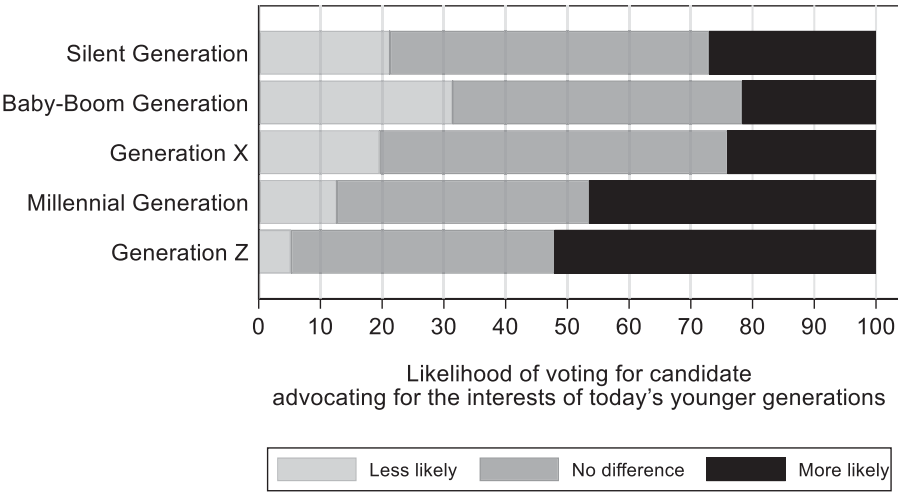
**Figure 6.** Support or opposition to candidate advocating for the interests of younger generations. Note: Based on ordinal logistic regression, Millennial identifiers are significantly more likely to vote for a candidate advocating for younger Americans than those who identify with Silent, Baby Boomer, or Gen X (all $p < 0.01$). Generation Z identifiers are significantly more likely to vote for a candidate advocating for younger Americans than those who identify with Silent, Baby Boomer, or Gen X (all $p < 0.01$).

candidate, but there is also some evidence of voting *against* a candidate advocating for members of competing generations. We examine how the other facets of generational identity predict instrumental voting.

### How interest-based voting is linked to identity, linked fate, and issue alignment

We have established that generational identity is common, is salient for many self-identified Millennials and Gen Z, and is a source of perceived linked fate for many Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z. We showed that citizens perceive different social and political problems as most important to their generation. We have also shown a modest correlation, in most generations, between identity salience and linked fate, but weaker connections to policy alignment. Finally, Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z members express a greater likelihood of voting for candidates who are advocates for the interests of their generations and a slight tendency to vote against a candidate standing up for other generations' interests. We now turn to our final question: whether interest-driven voting is connected to other forms of group consciousness.

To do so, we add interest-based voting to our correlational analyses, though we note that the results are essentially the same if we treat voting tendency as a dependent variable and the other elements, along with generational identification, as independent variables (see Appendix D1). The upper panel of Table 4 reports tetrachoric correlations between voting for a candidate championing the interests of younger generations. All three of these facets are significantly correlated—in the expected direction—for Millennials. The most striking finding is a strong correlation between interest-based voting and linked fate among Millennials ($\rho = 0.50$) and Zoomers ($\rho = 0.42$). Echoing the results

**Table 4.** Pairwise correlations between interest-based voting and indicators for group political consciousness, by self-identified generation.

| | Polychoric correlation of | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Identity salience and pro-young voting | Linked fate and pro-young voting | Issue alignment and pro-young voting | Mean correlation |
| Silent | .18 | .22 | −.05 | .12 |
| Boomers | .10 | −.01 | −.10 | .00 |
| Gen X | **.21** | .04 | .01 | .09 |
| Millennials | **.23** | **.50** | **.26** | .33 |
| Gen Z | .12 | **.42** | .07 | .20 |
| | Identity salience and pro-old voting | Linked fate and pro-old voting | Issue alignment and pro-old voting | Mean correlation |
| Silent | .13 | **.39** | −.03 | .16 |
| Boomers | **.26** | **.30** | **.25** | .27 |
| Gen X | −.14 | −.09 | −.19 | −.14 |
| Millennials | −.01 | **−.36** | −.07 | −.15 |
| Gen Z | −.03 | −.25 | −.24 | −.17 |

Note: Polychoric correlations (ordinal by ordinal) or polyserial correlations (ordinal by continuous). Bolded coefficients are twice their standard error.

in Table 3, linked fate appears to be the core element of younger generations' political consciousness, with issues playing a much smaller role.

The lower panel reports correlations with voting for a candidate focusing attention on the needs of older generations, and the results are quite different. Boomers now stand out as displaying generational consciousness with modest and statistically significant correlations across the board. Boomers with high generational salience, strong sense of linked fate, and whose issue priorities are most aligned with their fellow Boomers are precisely those voters inclined to vote for a candidate focusing on their generation. Among the two youngest generations, we again see the role of linked fate—in this case driving generational conflict and the willingness to vote *against* candidates focusing on older citizens' concerns.

While we cannot probe this in depth, we replicated all key analyses for Whites and non-Whites separately. These are reported in Appendix G in considerable detail. The results reported above are evident in Whites and non-Whites alike but are considerably crisper when we examine Whites alone. This is consistent with the idea that non-Whites have more competing politically relevant identities than White citizens, though this could change in the future (Jardina 2019). These differences in degree notwithstanding, the evident similarities suggest that generational identity penetrates most Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, but the differences suggest a fruitful area for future research in conducting a more nuanced and theory-driven exploration of differences.

## Are the apparent effects of generational identity an artifact of age?

The survey we employ randomly assigned half of the respondents to questions about age, rather than generation. The age identification question would seemingly be easier than placing oneself in categories that have arbitrary boundaries. Still, 8% opted for "something else" rather than the offered choices of "young," "middle aged," or "old." This is slightly less than the 10% who insisted on "something else" to the generation's question.

Likewise, the salience of one's age would be expected to be higher given that one's age is primed so frequently (e.g., doctors and dentists ask about one's age, but never one's

generation). Here we see very few reports of "never" thinking about one's age (10%) compared to 33% who never think about their generation. But beyond that, salience is quite similar.

Turning to linked fate, we again see similar responses to the two parallel questions. In both instances, 21% of respondents say what happens to others in their reference group has implications for their lives.

These similarities raise the question of whether generational identity is nothing more than a different way of saying that one is young or old. To explore this, we examined self-interested voting. We regressed each of the ordinal voting questions on the full array of dummy variables indicating generational membership and age identity. In both cases, generational identity has strong, statistically significant effects *after controlling for age identification*. For instance, the odds of Boomers supporting the candidate favoring older generations is three times higher than those of Millennials even after controlling for actual age and age identification. Likewise, Millennials were 1.7 times more likely and Gen Z 2.3 times more likely to support the candidate favoring younger generations than were Boomers. Thus, even in the absence of robust political consciousness, generational identity has political consequences that cannot be attributed to simply "feeling old" or "feeling young."

From a purely statistical standpoint, a cross-sectional analysis cannot rule out the possibility that the effects we attribute to generational identity are more directly caused by life-cycle effects. No Millennials or Zoomers interviewed in the early 2020s have reached retirement age and few Silents or Boomers recently became parents for the first time, so generation and life cycle are necessarily intertwined. Only future research that asks similar questions over a long time span could definitively speak to this question and we encourage such work. However, our sample members readily display *generational* identity and report thinking of themselves in these terms. This bolsters our generational interpretation of the findings.

## Conclusion

We began this paper with a question. Do generations in the United States today display characteristics that we associate with collective political actors? We found that a majority of American adults adopt a culturally labeled generation, and most adopt it "fully," which is notable given the arbitrary cut-off dates imposed by pollsters and cultural critics. We also found evidence of identity salience, with more than a third thinking of themselves as generational members "a lot of the time" (nearly a majority in the case of the emerging Generation Z). We also found levels of linked fate that approach those found in studies of racial and ethnic minorities. Further, we found evidence of shared political agendas within generations, as younger and older generations identified quite different "most important problems." Finally, we found some willingness to favor candidates committed to one's generation and a willingness to vote *against* candidates favoring other generations.

We did not, however, find high levels of constraint among the various facets of identity. A sense of linked fate was consistently correlated with generational salience and voting intentions, but those other elements were not typically intercorrelated with each other. Linked fate was only predictive of issue alignment among Zoomers.

These broad patterns, however, hide important differences across generations. Generation X stands out as having the lowest levels of identity salience, generational linked fate, and issue alignment. Caught in the middle, Gen Xers do not tip towards candidates committed to advancing the interest of young or old.

Boomers have the highest rate of identification but, paradoxically, the lowest level of identity salience and only middling levels of generational linked fate. It may be a privilege of hegemony to be nonchalant about your group membership—in much the same way that many Whites may not have highly salient identities *as* White Americans unless prompted. Boomers, however, are not shy about their political preferences when their interests are threatened: 31% said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who was a "strong advocate for the interests of today's younger generations." That was the highest level of opposition recorded in either question. Likewise, 58% said they would be more likely to support a candidate favoring older generations. Boomers, it would seem, are prepared to marshal their very high levels of voter turnout to advance their generational interests.

In contrast, Millennials and Zoomers had the highest levels of identity salience and linked fate, and high levels of issue alignment. Almost as much as Boomers, they expressed a strong willingness to vote for candidates favoring their generations and vote against a candidate favoring their elders.

Unfortunately, we lack comparable data from earlier periods so we cannot say whether the indicators of generational solidarity are increasing, whether constraint among them is getting stronger, or if the potential for identity-based voting is on the rise. It is possible that the distinctiveness of the youngest generations could erode if they are updating their views more rapidly than older generations, though this seems unlikely (Kiley and Vaisey 2020). But we can say that three generations—Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z—show potential to transition into collective political actors who not only show statistical tendencies of within-group similarity, but the potential to act as the collective "we" that Greta Thunberg spoke of in the epigraph to this paper.

Mannheim's classic work on "The Problem of Generations" has informed our approach, but it does not provide any dispositive test of the necessary and sufficient conditions that transform a birth cohort into a Generation, an actualized collective political actor. One aim of this paper has been to connect Mannheim's sociological insights with recent theoretical and statistical advances in the study of identity groups in democratic politics. We believe this has been a worthwhile synthesis, but in closing, we emphasize the additional analytical challenge posed by the *ephemerality* of generations. While we hope to develop a more mature social science of generations, they are still a fundamentally historical phenomenon, more likely to emerge in changing political, social, and technological contexts but never fully predictable in advance.

The Boomers, for example, are historically unique and have been central actors in the creation of postwar America. Given the strong association with age and turnout, they are likely to continue to dominate electoral politics for another twenty years, while their gradual retirement from the workforce, now about halfway complete, will reshape the United States economy. This extended dominance has the potential to inspire group-based resentment among younger generations. We find some evidence for this among Zoomers, but more research with larger samples and over an extended period will be needed to confirm this; we encourage more research that focuses on this youngest and most diverse generation. A growing willingness to vote *against* other generations' interest

would signal that the youngest generations are converting generational consciousness into political action. Ubiquitous social media use allows group politics to transcend geography, enabling co-generationalists to communicate and organize more easily. If progress in communication technology continues to accelerate, generations may become defining points of cultural and political cleavage.

## Notes

1. Of course, any empirical exploration on a single identity must avoid broad brush conclusions that assume away important variation across social locations defined by the intersection of multiple identities (Smith, Bunyasi, and Smith 2019).
2. This measure is similar to the "strength of group attachment" measure used in Garcia-Rios, Pedraza, and Wilcox-Archuleta (2019) and Ross and Rouse (2020). We are unaware of a conclusive argument in favor of either measure and we support more research on this topic.
3. The question for age was "Do you describe yourself as young, middle aged, old, or something else?"
4. There are potentially interesting patterns in the "non-adoption" answers. People on the cusp of these (arbitrary) birthyear cutoffs are the ones who are likely to identify with the adjacent generation, although this is not symmetric: people on the cusp are more likely to identify with the older generation than with the younger generation, except for the Silent generation, which is the least salient across the board. Otherwise, rates of identification with "something else" (which contributes to the "does not correspond" bin) hold steady between 7 and 11 percent, again with the exceptions of the Silents at 25 percent.
5. The other half were asked the same question concerning their self-named age group.
6. This method of calculating alignment yields a mean alignment score influenced by the baseline probability of identifying with the generation. For example, the mean alignment score for Baby Boomer identifiers is 0.43 while that of the smaller Gen Z is 0.27. These are inconsequential for within-generation analyses reported below. For a pooled analysis, we would recommend utilizing within-generation standardized scores.
7. Because fewer members of the Silent generation self-identify as such, we repeated the analysis by restricting inclusion to those who were "correct" or received "partial credit." The results are essentially unchanged.

## Authors' contributions

KM and EP contributed to questionnaire content, statistical analysis, and collaborated in the writing of the manuscript.

## Ethics approval

This project involved voluntary participation in a survey. The procedures and recruitment materials were reviewed by the IRB at Penn State University (study # 00004261) and declared exempt.

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## Availability of data and materials

Replication data set and code to replicate all tables and figures will be made available upon request one year afterpublication.

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