

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Virginia's Millennials and the 2016 Election

by Rachel Bitecofer and Quentin Kidd

Introduction

Millennials, one of six living generations, are the largest generational cohort in American history. Typically characterized as those born between 1980 and 1997,¹ millennials reached an important milestone by the end of 2015: for the first time, all 80 million were of voting age. By every measure they stand to have an enormous impact on the nation.

The millennial generation is distinct from the others for several reasons: Those born before 1990 came of age in an economy that seemed to have no limits while those born later came of age during the worst economic crisis the nation has seen since the Great Depression. However, all millennials came of age in an America in which racial and gender equality are the norms and where technological advancements have fundamentally altered the ways in which we live, work and interact with the world around us.

Even before reaching full generational strength, millennials had transformed the body politic, serving as the driving force behind seismic shifts in public opinion on issues such as gay marriage and marijuana policy. They anchored the new coalition



Rachel Bitecofer



Quentin Kidd

of Virginia voters that, in 2008, helped elect Barack Obama as America's first African American president in history and the first Democratic presidential candidate to win Virginia since 1964. Millennials remained instrumental in keeping Virginia blue for Obama's reelection four years later in 2012.

Several questions now arise regarding the influence of Virginia millennials in the 2016 presidential election: Are millennials as truly apathetic as commonly portrayed, or will they show up to vote again in 2016 as they did in 2008 and 2012? What does Virginia's millennial electorate look like in terms of partisanship and candidate preference? Drawing on data from two Wason Center for Public Policy studies of Virginia millennials conducted in 2014 and 2015, we examine economic and financial concerns millennials bring to the 2016 ballot box, as well as their political behavior in the 2012 presidential election. We then use that data, combined with more recent Wason Center polling conducted during the 2016 presidential primaries, to gain insight into what we might expect from this key voting group in the upcoming presidential election.



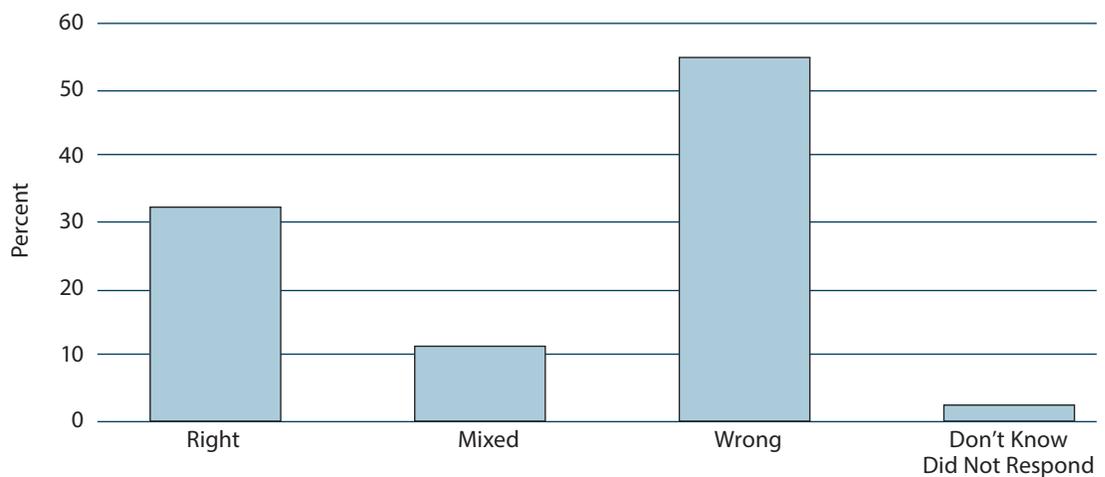
Political Participation

Nationally, millennials are not pleased with the direction of the nation, and Virginia millennials are no different. A recent study of millennial Americans by Harvard's Institute of Politics shows disapproval over approval by a 3-to-1 margin, with 47% of respondents saying things in the nation were headed on the wrong track and only 15% saying things were generally headed in the right direction.² As **Figure 1** indicates, the 2014 Wason Center Millennial study found that 55% of Virginia millennials said they thought things

Economic Sources of Anxiety

According to the Harvard Institute of Politics study, millennials across the country are most concerned about the economy, jobs, economic equality, and personal money issues. (Collectively these are the top issues of 23% of millennials nationally.³) Virginia millennials identify similar top concerns, with 31% saying they view the economy and jobs as the most important issues facing the nation.⁴ When it comes to their own personal financial situation, twice as many Virginia millennials say they are behind where they thought

Figure 1: Are Things in the U.S. Headed in the Right or Wrong Direction?



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennial voters solidly favor Warner and put Libertarian Sarvis second to Gillespie." October 23, 2014.

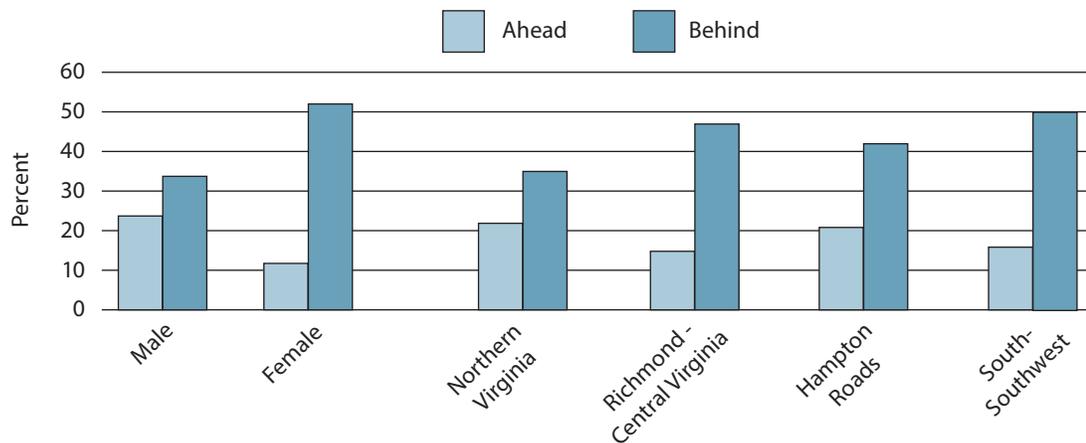
in the United States were headed in the wrong direction, while 32% said things were headed in the right direction. In their assessment of President Obama's performance, Virginia millennials were evenly split with 45% approving the way President Obama was handling his job and 46% disapproving.

Like Virginians generally, the Commonwealth's millennials continue to feel the strain of a post-Great Recession economy that has been slow to recover. Millennials just entering the economy see an enormous obstacle to economic and financial stability—a mountain many of them worry they will never summit. They are apprehensive about their financial future, especially the burden of student loan debt. Because they have come of age at a time of heightened political polarization and gridlock in Washington, they don't hold much hope that politics can provide solutions to many of the ills they, and the nation, face. Instead they have turned inward, expressing more confidence in themselves and in nonpolitical engagement for solutions to issues facing the state and the country.

they would be at this stage in life as those who say they are ahead of expectations: 43% to 19%. As **Figure 2** demonstrates, the financial strain is felt more acutely by millennial women than men, with 52% of women saying their personal financial situation is behind where they thought it would be at this stage in life compared to only 34% of men. The financial strain is also felt unevenly by region: a larger percentage of millennials in South-Southwest Virginia and Richmond-Central Virginia consider themselves behind where they thought they would be in contrast with their peers in Northern Virginia or Hampton Roads. This disparity suggests that some regions of the state have outpaced others in terms of economic growth and opportunity for young Virginians.

Virginia millennials do not feel alone in their personal financial struggles and seem to recognize that systemic issues lie at the heart of their economic concerns. Just over four in ten (43%) say that they are about where their peers are in terms of their personal financial situation, while just over a quarter (27%) say they are behind their peers. Still, nearly a third (31%) say they are ahead of their peers. Education seems to be a key factor

Figure 2: Are you Ahead or Behind Where You Thought You Would Be?



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennials Come of Age." December 31, 2015.

affecting this group's responses: millennials with college and postgraduate degrees are significantly more likely to report being ahead of their peers than those with only a high school education. A substantial part of the financial strain felt by millennials is related to student loan debt. In our 2014 study, Virginia millennials reported having an average student loan debt of \$33,500, and 82% said they viewed the issue of student loan debt for young people to be a major problem.⁵ According to the Institute for College Access & Success, the average national student loan debt was \$28,950 for 2014 graduates with a bachelor's degree. The Virginia average was \$26,432.⁶

about the future and say that they expect their personal financial situation to get better in the next five years (73%) rather than get worse (5%) or stay the same. Men and women share this optimism, although women are slightly more optimistic. Despite spending their formative years in the Great Recession, younger millennials (ages 18–27) are slightly more optimistic about their economic prospects than older millennials (ages 28–36). This outlook may be a product of their having been sheltered from the worst effects of the recession by their parents, whereas older millennials braved the recession on their own and, as such, bear deeper scars.

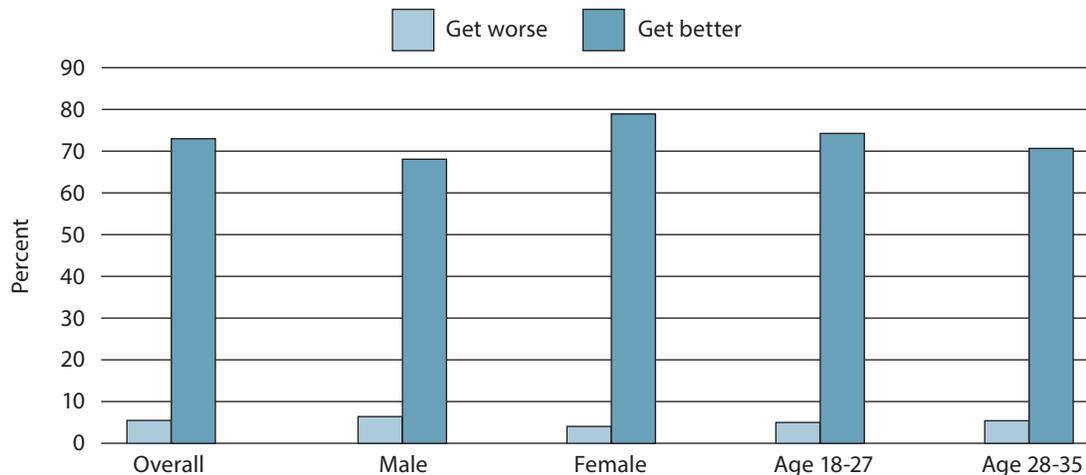
Down, but Not Out

Oscar Wilde once said, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." Despite being anxious over the state of their personal economic situation, Virginia millennials are bullish on their future. As **Figure 3** indicates, Virginia millennials, by a wide margin, are optimistic

Civic and Political Behavior

The Wason Center's 2015 analysis of Virginia millennials reveals that the vast majority (70%) have volunteered or performed community service at some point in their life, with nearly 40% citing passion for an issue or cause as the motivating factor.⁷ Civic participation rates are

Figure 3: Do You Expect Your Financial Situation to get Better or Worse?



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennials Come of Age." December 31, 2015.

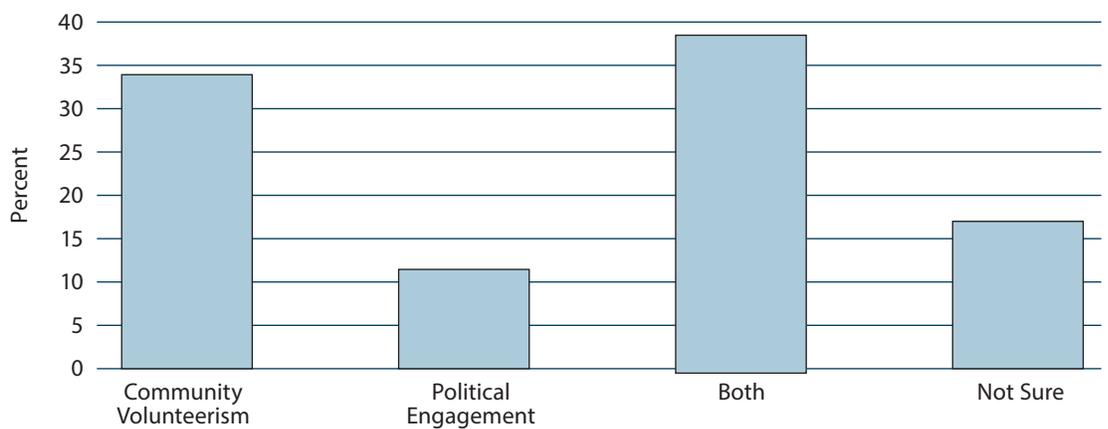
slightly higher among younger Virginia millennials (ages 18–27), which may reflect increased emphasis on service learning in high schools over the past decade. Peer influence appears to have a significant effect on millennial civic engagement. A strong majority of millennials surveyed (84%) said they would be likely to volunteer or engage in community service if prompted by a friend to do so. In the area of politics, the response was less robust. A majority of Virginia millennials said they would consider attending a political event (62%) or volunteering to work on a political campaign (52%) if prompted by a friend. As **Figure 4** reveals, Virginia millennials see community volunteerism as a more effective means of solving important issues facing the country than political engagement (33% compared to 11%), although a plurality (38%) identify a combination of the two as the most effective means of affecting change.

The 2012 Election

In the 2012 election, Virginia millennials varied widely in their rates of registration and voting patterns. Although, as **Figure 5** shows, 66% of Virginia’s millennials were registered to vote, older millennials (ages 28–36) were significantly more likely to be registered to vote than younger ones (78% compared to 52%). On the other hand, registration rates were similar for men and women. With respect to actual turnout, though, 61% of Virginia millennials reported casting a ballot in the 2012 election. Of that group, 66% of millennial males reported voting, compared to 56% of their female counterparts (**Figure 6**). The gap between older and younger millennials is even more pronounced. Although 74% of those ages 28 to 36 indicated they had cast a ballot, only 47% of those ages 18–27 reported having voted. Looking ahead, 73% of Virginia millennials indicated that they plan to vote in the 2016 election.

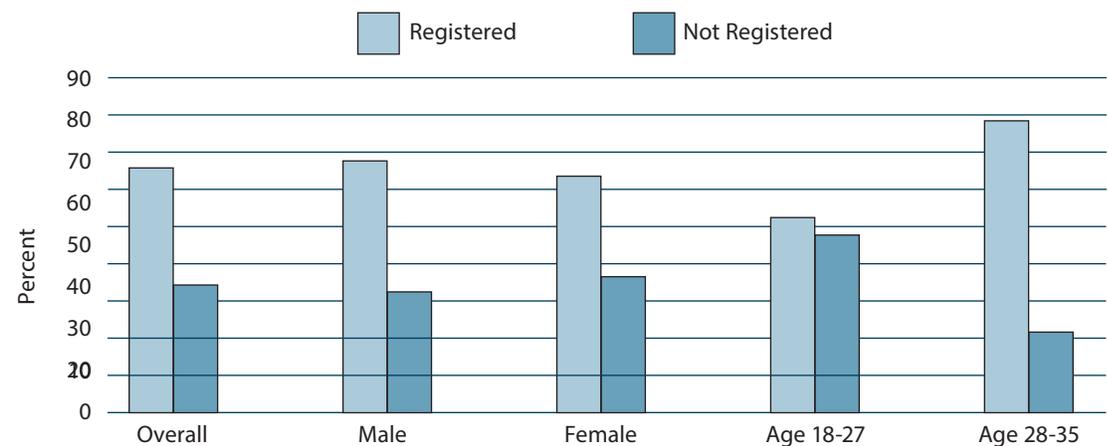
In terms of party identification, 36% of Virginia millennials identified themselves in

Figure 4: What is the Best Method to Solve Issues Facing Country?



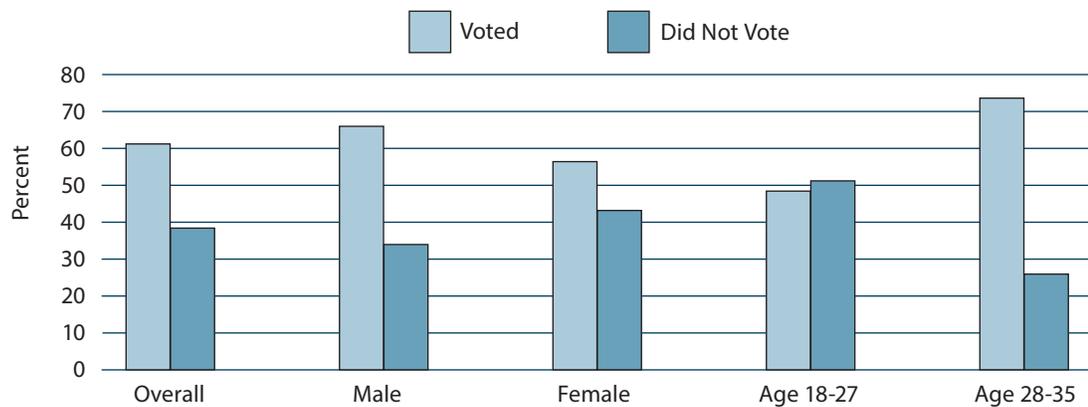
Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, “Virginia Millennials Come of Age.” December 31, 2015.

Figure 5: Virginia Millennial 2012 Voter Registration



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, “Virginia Millennials Come of Age.” December 31, 2015.

Figure 6: Virginia Millennial 2012 Voter Turnout



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennials Come of Age." December 31, 2015.

December as Democrats, 32% as independents, and 23% as Republicans, revealing a significant advantage for the Democratic candidates (Figure 7).⁸ Like their counterparts nationwide, Virginia millennials supported President Obama over Mitt Romney in 2012 by 60% to 30%, with virtually no difference between men and women. Given the significant party-identification advantage enjoyed by the Democrats, the 30-point gap between Obama and Romney in 2012 is not surprising. Millennials were also surveyed for their opinion on several political issues. Analysis reveals that Virginia millennials overwhelmingly support decriminalizing marijuana (74%), legalizing medical marijuana (78%), instituting term limits for members of Congress (79%), and limiting the amount of money individuals or groups can spend to influence the outcome of elections (79%).

The 2016 Elections

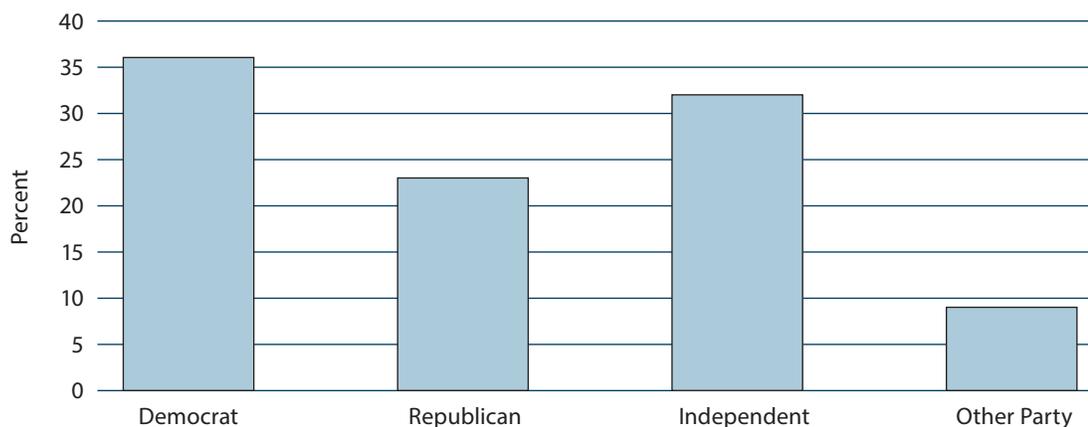
The data regarding the political behavior of Virginia millennials in the 2012 election, combined with new data collected during the 2016 primary elections, allow us to develop a picture of Virginia millennials heading into this fall's

election cycle. According to exit polling conducted by the National Election Pool (NEP), millennials made up 12% of the Virginia Republican primary electorate and 16% of the Democratic primary electorate. In the Democratic primary, Virginia millennials strongly preferred Bernie Sanders to Hillary Clinton (68%—30%), which is similar to findings from other states. The Republican primary was far more competitive with 35% of Virginia millennials voting for Rubio and 30% for Trump.⁹

Party Defection

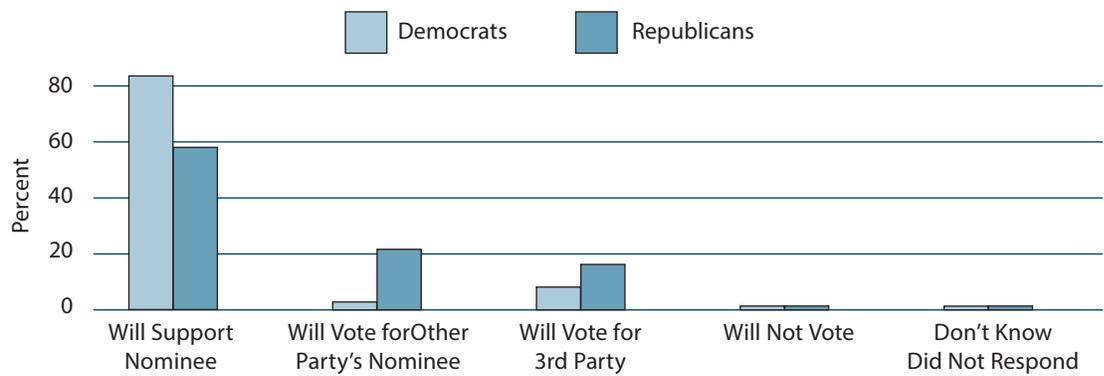
A Wason Center for Public Policy survey administered after the 2016 Virginia presidential primary in March asked Republican primary participants who did not vote for Trump and Democratic primary participants who did not vote for Clinton about their intentions for the fall general election. Specifically, these respondents were asked if they planned to support the party's nominee despite not having supported them in the primary and were given several options: voting for the nominee, voting for the other party's nominee, voting for a third party candidate, or not voting in

Figure 7: Virginia Millennial 2015 Party Identification



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennials Come of Age." December 31, 2015.

Figure 8: Virginia Millennial Intent to Defect in the 2016 General Election



Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "If Trump is Nominee, Many VA Republicans will Defect; Clinton Suffers no Such "Loyalty Gap" Among Democrats," April 7, 2016.

the election (**Figure 8**). A strong majority (84%) of Virginia millennials who voted for a candidate other than Clinton in the Democratic primary indicated they would cast their ballots for Clinton if she became the nominee. However, only 56% of Virginia millennials who voted for a candidate other than Trump in the Republican primary said they would vote for him if he became the party nominee. In fact, 21% said they would vote for the Democratic nominee and another 16% said they would opt for a third-party candidate, creating a combined millennial defection rate of 37%.¹⁰

In our first measurement of the Clinton/Trump head-to-head in this fall's general election, Clinton carried the Virginia millennial vote 47%-28%. It is clear that Trump will have to make considerable inroads among Virginia millennials in order to address that 19% gap. Still, this difference is more modest than the 30-point gap in the 2012 election between Romney and Obama. It is possible that Trump's celebrity status will help him with millennials. Clinton has struggled to win young voters in the primary, losing their vote to Sanders by wide margins. That being said, it is not likely that young voters will abandon the Democratic candidate unless Trump can position himself better than Romney did in 2012.

The Wason Center survey also asked respondents whether Trump's support of a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States or Bernie Sanders's identification as a democratic socialist made it more or less likely that they could support the candidates. Interestingly, the vast majority (80%) of Virginia millennials said Sanders's identity as a democratic socialist would make them more likely rather than less likely to support him. Of course, it should be noted that the millennial generation is the first post-Cold War generation. There is a generation in which international terrorism, rather than the spread of communism, has been the dominant foreign policy

paradigm. In addition, their experience with capitalism includes the Great Recession and years in which income inequality has been increasing significantly. As such, it is possible that millennials have a more favorable or, at least, less unfavorable impression of socialism than do older generations.

Regarding the proposed Muslim ban, although 42% of Virginia millennials said it would make them less likely to support Trump, a plurality (47%) said that it would make no difference in their vote.

Conclusion

Millennials are fully enfranchised as of 2015, which means the formidable political weight of the millennial voter could be fully felt for the first time in the 2016 presidential election. In Virginia, millennial voters have been scarred by the economic turbulence of the past decade but remain optimistic about the future. They see civic engagement as important, even if they disagree on the best method of affecting change. The influence of Virginia's youngest generation of voters will no doubt factor heavily into the political strategies of the Trump and Clinton campaigns. The candidate who can best articulate a message that capitalizes on the economic anxieties of young Virginians may have the upper hand. The political behavior of millennials in the 2012 presidential election and data drawn from the 2016 presidential primaries clearly show that the Republican Party needs to make inroads with this important cohort if it hopes to carry their vote in the general election this fall.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rachel Bitecofer is a lecturer in the department of government and director of the Wason Center for Public Policy survey research lab at Christopher Newport University. She received her Ph.D. in political science from the University

of Georgia in 2015, and her B.S. from the University of Oregon in 2009. Her research focuses on political campaigns and elections, political behavior, and public opinion.

Quentin Kidd is a professor of political science and director of the Wason Center for Public Policy at Christopher Newport University, where he has taught for eighteen years. He is a recipient of the State Council for Higher Education for Virginia Outstanding Faculty Award as well as four campus-wide teaching, research, and mentoring awards. Kidd received his Ph.D. from Texas Tech University and M.A. and B.A. in political science from the University of Arkansas. He has authored or co-authored five books including most recently *The Rational Southerner* (Oxford 2012, co-authored with M.V. Hood and Irwin L. Morris) and *Civic Participation in America* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011), and nearly 30 peer-reviewed studies and book chapters, and funded research reports.

Endnotes

- 1 There are no "official" start and end dates for generational cohorts. The U.S. Census Bureau does not define generations. The millennial generation is generally characterized by scholars as starting as early as 1978 and ending as late as 2004. The most commonly used starting year for the millennial generation is 1980, which is the year we use.
- 2 Harvard University Institute of Politics, "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service," (2013). http://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/160423_Harvard%20IOP_Spring%202016_TOPLINE_u.pdf
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, "Virginia Millennial voters solidly favor Warner and put Libertarian Sarvis second to Gillespie." October 23, 2014.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Debbie Chocrane and Matthew Reed, "Student Debt and the Class of 2014," The Institute for College Access & Success, Tenth Annual Report (October 2015). http://ticas.org/sites/default/files/pdf/classof2014_embargoed.pdf
- 7 By comparison, according to the Corporation for National & Community Service, 30.1% of all Virginia residents reported volunteering in 2014, the most recent year available for statewide data on volunteering. See: <https://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/VA>.
- 8 As a point of comparison, according to the 2012 Virginia Exit Poll, 39% of all voters identified as Democrats, 32% as Republicans, and 29% as independents. Barack Obama won Virginia, 51% to 47%.
- 9 National Election Pool, conducted by Edison Research, March 1, 2016. Republicans N=1523 Democrats N=1413
- 10 It is expected that the actual defection rate will be lower. The Wason Center will be conducting a follow-up survey after the election in late November 2016 to find out how many defectors actually followed through on the stated intention to defect and to test for differences on defection rates between millennial voters and other Virginia voters.

If you would like to receive email notification of future Web-based issues please visit [The Virginia News Letter subscription page](#) to register for inclusion in our email distribution list. Then you will receive notifications six to nine times per year with a synopsis of each article and an opportunity to download a copy.

VOL. 92 NO. 2 JULY 2016

Editors: Bob Gibson and Billie Easton

The Virginia NEWS LETTER (ISSN 0042-0271) is published by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206; (434) 982-5704, TDD: (434) 982-HEAR.

Copyright ©2016 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia. The views expressed are those of the author and not the official position of the Cooper Center or the University.