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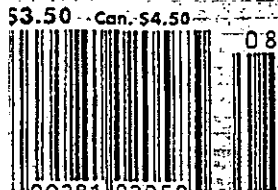
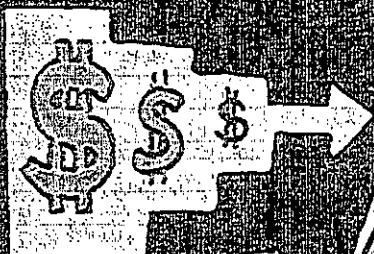
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A POLITICS FOR GENERATION

The agenda that
Xers care about
will define the
next center of
American politics.



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A POLITICS FOR GENERATION X

by TED HALSTEAD



Today's young adults may be the most politically disengaged in American history. The author explains why, and puts forth a new political agenda that just might galvanize his generation

EVERETT Carll Ladd, a political scientist, once remarked, "Social analysis and commentary has many shortcomings, but few of its chapters are as persistently wrong-headed as those on the generations and generational change. This literature abounds with hyperbole and unsubstantiated leaps from available data." Many of the media's grand pronouncements about America's post-Baby Boom generation—alternatively called Generation X, Baby Busters, and twentysomethings—would seem to illustrate this point.

The 1990s opened with a frenzy of negative stereotyping of the roughly 50 million Americans born from 1965 to 1978: they were slackers, cynics, whiners, drifters, malcontents. A *Washington Post* headline captured the patronizing attitude that Baby Boomers apparently hold toward their successors: "THE BORING TWENTIES: GROW UP, CRYBABIES." Then books and articles began to recast young Americans as

ambitious, savvy, independent, pragmatic, and self-sufficient. For instance, *Time* magazine described a 1997 article titled "Great Xpectations" this way: "Slackers? Hardly. The so-called Generation X turns out to be full of go-getters who are just doing it—but their way."

Stereotyping aside, some disquieting facts jump out regarding the political practices and political orientation of young Americans. A wide sampling of surveys indicates that Xers are less politically or civically engaged, exhibit less social trust or confidence in government, have a weaker allegiance to their country or to either political party, and are more materialistic than their predecessors. Why are so many young people opting out of conventional politics, and what does this mean for the future of American democracy? Might it be that today's political establishment is simply not addressing what matters to the nation's young? And if so, what is their political agenda?

to Baby Boomers, most of whom came of age during the period of unparalleled upward mobility that followed the Second World War, Xers grew up in a time of falling wages, shrinking benefits, and growing economic inequality.

Since 1973, while the earnings of older Americans have mostly stagnated, real median weekly earnings for men aged twenty to thirty-four have fallen by almost a third. In fact, Xers may well be the first generation whose lifetime earnings will be less than their parents'. Already they have the weakest middle class of any generation born in this century.

Falling wages and rising inequality have affected all young Americans, regardless of educational achievement. During the said-to-be economically strong years 1989–1995 earnings for recent college graduates fell by nearly 10 percent—represent-

just see a government drifting toward the political equivalent of Chapter 11; they also see a crippled social structure, a dwindling middle class, and a despoiled natural habitat.

Despite bipartisan fanfare about balancing the federal budget, the fiscal outlook remains quite bleak for young adults—and for reasons seldom discussed. Long before Social Security and Medicare go insolvent under the burden of Boomer retirement, entitlement payments will have crowded out the public investments that are essential to ensuring a promising future. Government spending on infrastructure, education, and research has already lessened over the past twenty-five years, from 24 percent to 14 percent of the federal budget, and the downward squeeze will only worsen. In other words, Xers will be forced to pay ever higher taxes for ever fewer government services.

Financially most frightening, however, are the nation's skyrocketing levels of personal debt and international debt. With all the focus on balancing the federal budget, not enough attention has been paid to the fact that American families, and Xers in particular, are increasingly unable to balance their own books.

Xers carry more personal debt than did

any other generation at their age in our nation's history; in fact, a full 60 percent of Xers carry credit-card balances from month to month. In addition, those who attend college face the dual burden of soaring tuition bills and shrinking federal education grants. From 1977 to 1997 the median student-loan debt has climbed from \$2,000 to \$15,000. The combination of lower wages and overleveraged lifestyles is doubly worrisome to a generation that wonders if it will ever collect Social Security.

Then there is America's ballooning international debt. For the past two decades the nation as a whole has consumed more than it has produced, and has borrowed from abroad to cover the difference—nearly \$2 trillion by the end of this decade, or more than a fifth of the total annual output of the U.S. economy. In the short life-span to date of most Xers, America has gone from being the world's largest creditor to being its largest debtor. At some point in the future, especially as interest on our international debt accumulates, investors in other countries will become reluctant to keep bankrolling us. When they do, we will have no choice but to tighten our belts by cutting both investment and consumption. In other words, just as Xers start entering their prime earning years, with their own array of debts and demographic adversities awaiting them, they may well find themselves having to pay off the international debt that Boomers accumulated in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite the penumbra of long-term debt, the U.S. economy remains the envy of the world; U.S. social conditions, however, are certainly not. America has some of the worst rates of child poverty, infant mortality, teen suicide, crime, family

Xers appear to be calling for a synthesis that unites components thought to be mutually exclusive. Like conservatives, they favor fiscal restraint. Like liberals, they want to help the little guy.

ing the first time that a generation of graduates has earned less than the previous one. And circumstances are far worse for the roughly 67 percent of Xers aged twenty-five to thirty-four who don't have a college degree. In 1997 recent male high school graduates earned 28 percent less (in dollars adjusted for inflation) than did the comparable group in 1973, and recent female high school graduates earned 18 percent less. When politicians and the media continually extol the economy's performance, many Xers just scratch their heads in disbelief.

The economic hardship facing today's young cannot be overstated: America's rate of children in poverty—the highest in the developed world—rose by 37 percent from 1970 to 1995. During the same period the old notions of lifetime employment and guaranteed benefits gave way to the new realities of sudden downsizing and contingent, or temporary, employment. Forty-four million Americans lack basic health insurance today, and Xers—many of whom are part of the contingent work force—are the least insured of all. To compound these problems, many Xers received a poor education in failing public schools, which left them especially ill-prepared to compete in an ever more demanding marketplace.

A LEGACY OF DEBT

BESIDES struggling against downward economic mobility, Generation X is inheriting a daunting array of fiscal, social, and environmental debts. Although most media reports focus on the national debt and the likely future insolvency of Social Security, the real problem is actually much broader. When they envision their future, Xers don't

should use any budget surplus to cut taxes. Like Democrats, they want to help the little guy—but unlike traditional Democrats, they are unwilling to do it by running deficits.

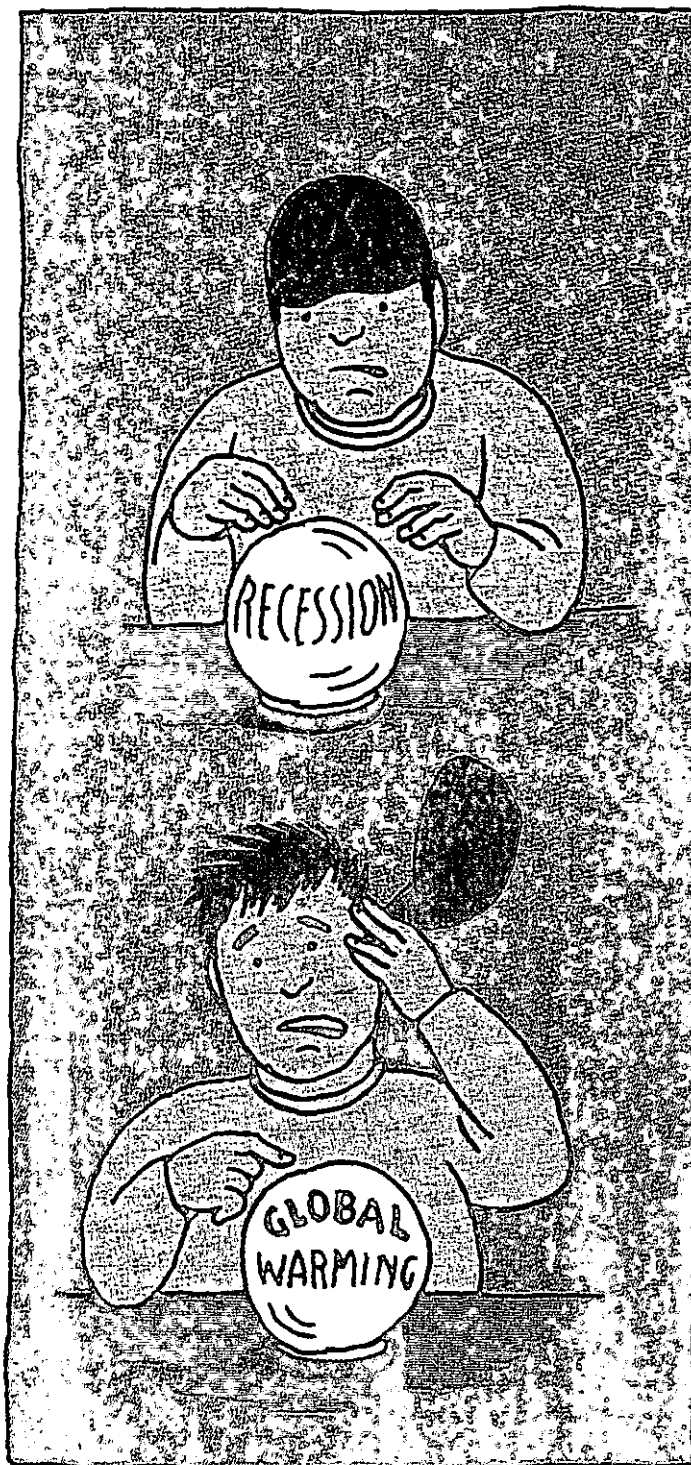
The Generation X social synthesis is no more conventional. Although the young are presumed to be more tolerant and socially permissive than their elders, today's young are returning to religion, have family-oriented aspirations, and are proving to be unsupportive of some traditional liberal programs, among them affirmative action. There are numerous indications that Xers—many of whom grew up without a formal religion—are actively searching for a moral compass to guide their lives, and a recent poll suggests that the highest priority for the majority of young adults is building a strong and close-knit family.

Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religion and society at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who studies the religious life of Generation X, says, "It is too early to predict whether today's young adults will form lasting commitments to particular religious denominations or institutions, but it is quite clear that there is a renewed level of interest in religion and spirituality among the post-Baby Boom generation. Many, in fact, have embarked upon a spiritual quest." As if they were spiritual consumers, young adults are shopping around among a wide range of religious traditions. In the process they are finding new ways to incorporate religion into their daily lives: for instance, church socials are rapidly becoming the new singles scene for Xers who want to combine their devotional and romantic ambitions. A clear majority of older Americans believe that a more active involvement of religious groups in politics is a bad idea, but Xers are divided on the issue.

This revival of spiritual and family-oriented aspirations represents a partial repudiation of the moral relativism that took hold in the 1960s and has since become a mainstay of American pop culture. In essence, many Xers are struggling to find a new values consensus that lies somewhere between the secular permissiveness of the left and the cultural intolerance of the right.

When it comes to race relations, Xers are particularly difficult to categorize. They are the cohort most likely to say that the civil-rights movement has not gone far enough. Yet, like Americans of all ages, they register a high level of opposition to job- and education-related affirmative-action programs. The American National Election Survey has reported that 68 percent of Xers oppose affirmative action at colleges. This seeming paradox can be explained in part by the fact that most Xers—though genuinely concerned about improving race relations—are among the first to have felt the actual (or perceived) bite of the affirmative-action programs that their parents and grandparents put into place.

Improving public education is one of the highest policy priorities for Xers. In fact, when asked what should be done with any future budget surplus, nearly half favor increased education spending. They seem to understand that knowledge



will be the key to success in the information- and service-based economy of the twenty-first century. Their strong emphasis on education betokens a larger belief in the importance of investing in the future. Rather than maintaining the social-welfare state, the Xer philosophy would favor the creation of a social-investment state.

Although Xers have forsaken conventional political participation en masse, it would be a mistake to assume, as many do, that they are wholly apolitical. There is considerable evi-

petual partisan infighting, collude to favor upper-income constituencies and to prevent a range of issues (including campaign-finance reform) from being acted on. Seeing themselves as the "fix-it" generation, Xers long for leaders who will talk straight and advocate the shared sacrifices necessary to correct the long-term problems that preoccupy them most. But today's elected officials are far too deeply trapped in a politics of short-term convenience to deliver anything of the sort. Not surprisingly, then, Xers are eager to do away with the two-party system. They register particularly strong support for third parties, for campaign-finance reform, and for various forms of direct democracy.

The final core belief that helps to define the political views of today's young adults is their commitment to environmental conservation. Thanks to the advent of environmental education and the spread of environmental activism, Xers grew up experiencing recycling as second nature; many actually went home and lobbied their parents to get with the program. In fact, the environment is one of the rare public-policy arenas in which Xers are fairly aware. Many have incorporated their environmental values into their lifestyles and career choices. For instance, a 1997 *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Tomorrow's Leaders: The World According to Generation X" revealed that most current MBA students believed that corporations have a clear-cut responsibility to be environment-friendly in their practices. This generation does not believe that a tradeoff is necessary between a strong economy and a healthy environment.

Fiscal prudence, economic populism, social investment, campaign reform, shared sacrifice, and environmental conservation—this constellation of beliefs transcends the existing left-right spectrum. It should be immediately apparent that this generation's voice is not represented by any of the established leaders or factions in the political mainstream. And Xers seem to recognize as much—61 percent agree with the statement "Politicians and political leaders have failed my generation." So how would American politics change if the voice of Generation X were suddenly heard?

A NEW POLITICAL AGENDA

DESPITE its feeble rates of political participation, Generation X has already—if unwittingly—exerted an influence on the substance of our politics. This may seem counterintuitive, but who would deny that young Americans were a major force in pushing the balanced-budget cause to the fore? In part this is owing to the large number of Xer votes cast in 1992 for Ross Perot, the candidate who staked much of his campaign on balancing the federal books. Though Perot lost, his pet issue gained momentum as candidates from both parties scrambled to win over Reform Party voters, and the young ones in particular. Recognizing that Generation X makes up a large and particularly unpredictable voting bloc, candidates from across

the spectrum have gone out of their way to woo the youth vote, usually by paying lip service to some of young people's more obvious concerns, including, most recently, Social Security reform. Over time, however, Xer support for issues such as balancing the budget and saving Social Security will turn out to be only part of a much broader agenda, one that could come to challenge the status quo on everything from taxes to social policy to political reform.

For years the nation's tax debate has revolved around the question of how much to tax, with the left arguing for more and the right for less. In keeping with the concept of balanced-budget populism, the Xer economic agenda would start with the assumption that the government's share of national income should remain roughly constant. It would focus instead on a far more profound set of questions: What should be taxed? Who should be taxed? What should we invest in? and Who should get the benefits? Over the past several decades the tax burden has crept further and further down the income and age ladder, with the benefits going increasingly to the elderly and the well-to-do—the government now spends nine times as much on each elderly person as it does on each child. If Xers had their way, the collection of taxes would become more progressive and the distribution of benefits more widespread.

One would never know it from partisan skirmishes over income-tax cuts, but the payroll tax actually constitutes the largest tax burden borne by 70 percent of working families and by a full 90 percent of working Americans under age thirty. It is also the most regressive of all taxes, because it kicks in from the first dollar earned, falls exclusively on wages, and is capped at \$72,600. An appealing solution to this problem would be to replace payroll taxes with pollution taxes, thereby boosting wages, promoting jobs, and cleaning up the environment, all without raising the deficit. Taxing waste instead of work is precisely the kind of innovative and pragmatic proposal that could help to galvanize the members of Generation X, who have been put to sleep by the current tax debate.

Sooner or later Xers will figure out that America could raise trillions of dollars in new public revenues by charging fair market value for the use of common assets—the oil and coal in the ground, the trees in our national forests, the airwaves and the electromagnetic spectrum—and the rights to pollute our air. We currently subsidize the use of these resources in a number of ways, creating a huge windfall for a small number of industries and a significant loss for all other Americans. The idea of reversing this trend by charging fair market value for the use of common assets and returning the proceeds directly to each American citizen plays to a number of Xer political views—it is populist, equitable, libertarian, and pro-environment all at once.

The populist economic leanings of young adults will also lead them to rethink various other elements of the social contract between citizens, government, and business. For one thing, ending corporate welfare would appeal to a gen-

particular issue and can register their opinions with the push of a button. It is not hard to imagine a day when citizens will be able to register and vote online, and to monitor the performance of their elected officials with electronic scorecards.

The introduction of electronic communication within corporate America has helped to flatten organizational hierarchies, boost information flows, increase decision-making speed, and, most of all, empower workers. It is at least conceivable that the introduction of electronic forms of democracy could serve to re-engage a generation that has been alienated by today's money-, spin-, and celebrity-dominated politics. And if Xers do eventually enter the fray, their agenda will transform America's political landscape.

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

REPUBLICANS and Democrats will be tempted to dismiss the Xer agenda, because it threatens their electoral coalitions and the politics of short-term convenience. But both parties will do so at their peril, because many of the issues that Xers care most about are already rising to the political surface.

A glimpse of the future may come, strangely enough, in the election of Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota. Much of Ventura's support came from young adults, who took advantage of Minnesota's same-day registration law and stormed the polls, helping to create a record turnout. This suggests that if a political candidate can somehow capture the passion of young adults, they will do their part. Ventura offered young Minnesotans something refreshing: a clear alternative to Democrats and Republicans, and a willingness to take on the status quo. But Jesse Ventura is no figurehead for Xers; he is just an early beneficiary of their pent-up political frustration.

As the Xer political agenda starts to take hold, it will further strain existing loyalties. On the Republican side, the odd-bedfellow coalition of social conservatives and economic libertarians that has defined the party for the past two decades is coming apart as a result of the Clinton impeachment saga, whose most lasting legacy may be that it dealt a coup de grace to the political aspirations of the religious right. The Democratic coalition is just as fragile, particularly since it has been losing its base of working-class white men, and the potential retreat of the religious right may deprive Democrats of an obvious opponent against which to rally. As these de-alignments unfold, major shifts in the makeup and core agendas of both parties become almost inevitable.

The stability of today's political consensus is also contingent on the promise of an economy that continues to expand. Take that away, and the props of the status quo—a balanced budget and the novelty of a budgetary surplus, a booming stock market and stable price structures, low unemployment and rising wages, falling welfare rolls and crime rates, and the

illusion of a painless fix to Social Security—all topple at once. No business cycle lasts forever, and the global economic crisis of 1998 should come as a warning of what may lie ahead. The prospect of a significant recession leaves the future of American politics wide open.

Turning points in our nation's political history, occasioned by the collapse of an existing civic and political consensus, have usually been accompanied by rampant individualism, weakened institutions, and heightened levels of political alienation. On these scores Xers are playing out their historic role remarkably well. But such periods of civic unrest have also stimulated new political agendas, which eventually force one or both parties to remake themselves around new priorities and coalitions. Could the Generation X political agenda serve as the basis of America's next political consensus?

Balanced-budget populism, social investment, no-nonsense pragmatism, and shared sacrifice could resonate quite strongly with Americans of all ages—particularly the increasing number who are fed up with conventional politics. What is more, the Xer synthesis of a middle-class economic agenda with a moderate social one could remake the powerful alliance between progressives and populists that dominated national politics (and brought widespread upward mobility) from the 1930s to 1960s, when it was ripped apart by the cultural upheaval of the Baby Boom. In practical terms this new politics—based on fiscal prudence, economic populism, family-friendly morality, social investment, campaign reform, environmental conservation, and technological innovation—could eventually take hold in either of the major parties, both of which are now searching for a coherent agenda and a lasting voter base. For Democrats it could mark a return to the party's New Deal roots, and for Republicans it could give substance to heretofore vague calls for a "compassionate conservatism."

Since this new politics could speak to many of those who are alienated by the current political order, Xers and older Americans alike, it could give birth to our nation's next majoritarian coalition. Such a coalition could do a great deal to reinvigorate our nation's democracy, benefit the majority of its citizens, and restore legitimacy to our political system.

When history books are written at the end of the twenty-first century, it is unlikely that the post-Baby Boom generation will still be referred to as a nondescript "X." One way or another, this generation will be judged and labeled by its legacy. Today's young adults will be remembered either as a late-blooming generation that ultimately helped to revive American democracy by coalescing around a bold new political program and bringing the rest of the nation along with them, or as another silent generation that stood by as our democracy and society suffered a slow decline.

The great question of twenty-first-century politics is whether a critical mass of Xers will eventually recognize the broader potential of their agenda, and outgrow their aversion to politics. ☼