



The next big challenge for Progressives:
claiming the intergenerational fairness agenda

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The supposed divide between generations is becoming a prominent theme in public discourse. **Although Millennials¹ and Baby Boomers² indeed have different – and sometimes conflicting - views, the framing of a zero-sum battle between the generations is counterproductive.** But how come the contribution of Boomers to today's society is perceived so negatively? Even worse, why are Boomers blamed for Millennials being generally worse off than previous generations?

Exploitation of generational divides by media or politics can create dangerous and irreversible cleavages between young and old. In fact, this divide operates as a smoke screen for an underlying economic context and public policy choices such as access to housing, decent employment and pension schemes and affordable education.

More often than not, conservative policies result in a gatekeeping of social spending or welfare state provision. The frame provided is one of divide and rule – priority is given to Boomers in detriment of Millennials and what is striking is that such action is being vocalised as such. Against this backdrop, **Progressives need to radically re-think their approach if they want to be the actors that tap into a promising political agenda and that include a board societal coalition in their vision of the world: to bring about intergenerational equity and end warfare between generations.**

Nowadays most know that Millennials are caricatured as irrational consumers of expensive avocado toasts instead of responsible citizens saving up for property. Baby Boomers in turn, are depicted as greedy and affluent pensioners whose consumption patterns are destroying the planet and stealing the future of the next generations. Millennials do consume avocado toasts, but the postponement of home ownership by this generation is rather linked to the weight of student loans and difficult access to the labour market. They reached adulthood at the height of the 2008 economic crisis and ensuing financial austerity. Thus, distinctive markers of adulthood such as buying a house, or starting a family are much delayed for the majority of Millennials when compared to Boomers. When Millennials were suffering from peak austerity, Boomers arrived at their well-deserved retirement age. The whole context was depicted as unfair.

¹ Those born between 1980 and 1994.

² Those born between 1946 and 1964.

It has thus become an easy escape to frame the intergenerational debate as one generation stealing from the other or pinning the blame on one generation to appease the other. The fact is that contemporary politics have failed to bring about equitable policies – because it favoured the cohort that gives it the most return – the generation that actually comes to the ballot boxes – and so Baby Boomers and the generation that comes after, Generation X³ have successfully shaped society and public policies in their favour.

The Boomers and Gen X affluence and these cohorts' preponderant political power creates a feeling of powerlessness among Millennials, who are comparatively more precarious. They see the odds stacked against them – be it in how public policies are reflecting their interests or the extent to which their voices are heard and represented in current political systems. It seems one is confronted with a double revolt by the Millennial generation: one against their grand-parents' generation in socio-economic terms and one against their parent's generation in how politics of today are pursued.

In this context, and for good reason, Millennials seem to have lost faith in institutions and political parties that do not represent them. They have started to question the worth of political processes such as the act of voting for example and consequently, in many occasions and across the board Millennials did not rock the vote but are rocking protests movements in the streets.

But nowadays Millennials appear to experience some of a reputational rebound. Public opinion seems to have shifted from Millennials being apolitical, social media addicts and fond of overpriced avocado toast. **There's a greater societal understanding of the distinctive challenges and economic context that this generation faces (austerity policies and how these impacted wealth and career prospects, for instance). Millennials' expectation of a healthy environment and demand for long-term political vision to fight climate change for example has boosted Millennials' reputation.** Today, perception of what constitutes political engagement or not is changing, and Millennials are the agents behind that change.

Against stereotypes and myth busting perceptions, Millennials are changing the paradigm of political participation in a traditional sense as the recent Fridays for Future movement attest⁴. **Millennials are deeply political and concerned about the state of the world and are ready to take matters in their own hands. There has also been a substantial shift in the relationship that Millennials and other younger cohorts⁵ appear to have towards the ballot box. Young people in the last European elections have led to an incredible turnout increase according to the [latest Eurobarometer](#).**

Millennials have successfully drawn greater attention to the need for an intergenerational agenda that is fair and just. They are not only the central actors of a generational insurgency that is impacting media coverage and the global political agenda but are also calling for follow-

³ Those born between 1965 and 1979.

⁴ And as the [FEPS Millennial Dialogue project](#) has shown.

⁵ Those born between 1995 and 2012, the generation that comes after, Generation Z.

up and swift policy responses that seems to be occupying the space of more substantive forms of political activism as party politics, for example.

For Progressives to win the claim on the intergenerational fairness agenda the issue cannot be about who is more deserving – Millennials or Baby Boomers – or who casts the most votes in their favour. Progressives need to provide the political space for this new way of activism to be heard, understood and valued.

To win the hearts and minds of Millennials and Baby Boomers Progressives need to draw attention on a clear political choice: that of bridging the divide between young and old and deliver fairness between generations. Why? It is a matter of social justice – and for Progressives this is an unquestionable value set and historical political drive.

How can Progressives do that? By delivering on public policies such as access to housing, equal education opportunities, and just pensions.

Our suggested reading: [FEPS – SPERI Policy Brief: Turning intergenerational fairness into progressive policy](#)