

iPolitics: Talking Government with the American Idol Generation

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**Abstract**

In 2008, Mark Bauerlein sent a shot across the bow of the Millennial generation, suggesting in *The Dumbest Generation* that no one in our country under the age of 30 could be trusted. Bauerlein warned that: Millennials “care about what occurred last week in the cafeteria, not what took place during the Great Depression...they heed the words of Facebook, not the Gettysburg Address.” Yet this should not be the case since the constant communication amongst their peer groups has made it so that “equipped with a Blackberry and laptop, sporting a flashy profile page and a blog...teenagers pass words and images back and forth 24/7.” In this article, I conduct a survey of Millennial college students to test their political knowledge and awareness in comparison to their understanding of pop culture. I then see how they respond to the unspoken challenge issued to them by Bauerlein.

## Introduction

The generation of Americans born between 1980 and 2000 does not bowl alone as Putnam predicted; instead, they virtually bowl on their Wii. They cannot identify five Supreme Court justices by picture, but they can easily tell you who Stephen Colbert, Stewie Griffin, and Cartman are. If you ask them if they voted, many will believe you are referring to voting for their favorite American Idol superstar. They understand a sense of community and networks—at least if you are referring to Facebook or MySpace. They have grown up in the era where a Blackberry went from a business tool used mainly by Washington staffers to a key possession for any high school student (before becoming obsolete with the rapid development of iPhones). Gone are the days of trips to the library for academic research and letters delivered through the USPS. Arrived are the days of YouTube videos being posted online before the event has even concluded and any piece of information required being available through a cell phone.

Scholars have begun questioning the long-term effects of the digital age. Facebook is unquestionably a community, but does it present the same traditional benefits of a true face-to-face community? Barack Obama brought out youth voters in record numbers in 2008, but he had to devote significant resources to the cause. Further, much of the effect was because he is Obama. Had John Kerry (or any other candidate) followed the same strategy, he possibly might have failed. If YouTube videos, Facebook messages, and emails come with a price, Obama would have likely been unable to sustain his efforts with these potential voters. Millennial students have grown up in an era vastly different from previous generations. They are interconnected in a superficial manner (consider that a national satellite radio morning show once spent three days discussing whether you can truly consider someone a friend if you do not know what his or her voice sounds like because all you do is text message). But more importantly, Millennial students are not gaining in regard to political knowledge, despite the increase in opportunity to connect through eCitizenship—after all, CNN will even text message you an alert to any major happening in the world.

In this article, I take a closer look at the Millennial generation. Specifically, I examine the political knowledge of these students and how they perceive the political world. Then, I directly challenge the Millennial generation by asking them to read Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation*, which claims the digital age does nothing but dumb down young Americans and ultimately jeopardize the future

of the country. By doing so, I hope to clearly gather a picture of what the typical Millennial student looks and acts like, his or her behaviors when it comes to technology, what s/he know about politics, and whether s/he even cares to learn more. In short, I seek to see if more technology is actually leading to increased political awareness and knowledge. Knowing that there has been a significant push to ensure eCitizenship amongst today's college students, the study helps to see how media literacy ties into political knowledge and participation. If we—as faculty and higher education—want to assure eCitizenship continues to grow, we must be aware of what occurs in the political science classroom.

### **The Millennial Generation**

Howe and Strauss (2000) find that there are currently five major generations comprising the American population: the GI generation (1901-1924), the Silent generation (1925-1942), the Boom generation (1943-1960), Generation X (1961-1981), and the Millennial generation (1982-present). The Millennials have been alternatively labeled Internet Gens, Generation Y, Baby Boomers II, Echo Boomers, the Boomlet, Nexters, the Nintendo Generation, and the Digital Generation. This generation exhibits different characteristics from previous ones, implying that for the new generation requirements and expectations of learning will be quite different (Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil, 2004; Oblinger, 2003; Poindexter, 2003; Raines, 2002).

As Howe and Strauss (2000) explain, Millennials are the most racially and ethnic diverse generation in American history, with 37% being non-white or Latino. One in five has immigrant parents, of which one in ten is not a legal citizen. They have been described as special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Strange (2004) finds them to be conventionally motivated and respectful, structured rule followers, protected and sheltered, cooperative and team-oriented, confident and optimistic about their futures, and talented achievers. Raines (2002) sees a generation that is characteristically sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement oriented. They are confident, happy, and optimistic (Howe, 2003).

They are the generation of technological access. They demand constant access to technology and possess the ability to maintain engagement in multiple technological activities at once. The Pew Research Center (2010) notes in a survey

just *how* connected the Millennials are: Over half use social networking sites and two-thirds use technology to connect to others. Two-thirds have also created original content online. Their personal tech-savvy is spilling over into the classroom and the office, placing demands on professors and employers to increasingly incorporate technology into every aspect of society.

Yet the Millennials have not grown up in the best of times. They watched Desert Storm as children, experienced school lockdowns as a result of Columbine, and watched the Twin Towers fall as they approached college age. They have seen a president impeached, have seen numerous other politicians found guilty (in either the actual legal system or the court of public opinion) of crimes ranging from bribery to prostitution, and have watched some of the most bitter electoral campaigns in American history. The focus of the Millennial generation has been on children and the family, scheduled structured lives, multiculturalism, terrorism, heroism, patriotism, parent advocacy, and globalization (Raines, 2002). Millennials have faced challenges personally, or have watched their peers grapple with vices. Binge drinking, sexual abuse, eating disorders, domestic violence, and sexually transmitted diseases are part of the common vernacular for Millennials. They have likely endured multiple school seminars on the topics before they even enter college.

Newton (2000) notes that the Millennials “did not wait to start college to get out from under the wings of adults and experiment with matters such as sex, alcohol, drugs, spending money, or even different lifestyle options” (p.9). Their hectic lives have made them willing to work from schedules and follow rules—always structuring their time (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Given the nature of education and its emphasis on standardized testing, they are used to being assessed and are extremely goal-oriented (Coomes and DeBard, 2004). They hold extremely close relationships with their parents, who have become increasingly involved in the lives of Millennials (Murray, 1997; Woodward, Love, and Komives, 2000).

According to Newton (2000), these students receive “extensive and rapid exposure to a vast and ever-increasing level of informational activity, which makes them the most informed generation to have lived on the planet” (p.9). However, they tend to risk missing depth for scope given the ease of access. Some have an uncanny ability to multiprocess—as evident by their ability to listen to music, talk on a cell phone, and use the computer all while holding a discussion with their parents (Brown, 2000; Frand, 2000). Some fear, however, that their reliance on

communication technology will stunt their interpersonal skills (Elam, Stratton, and Gibson, 2007). After all, a text message is not the same as a phone call. These students tend to be far more technologically proficient than their parents, teachers, and eventual bosses. They are on the cutting edge, always aware of the latest products and breakthroughs to emerge.

Despite immediate access to virtually any type of media, some scholars charge that this “cacophony” of information limits Millennials’ ability to distinguish between valid, creative content and simple-minded self-broadcasted information (Keen, 2008). Furthermore, the amount of time spent YouTubing, Facebooking and downloading from iTunes is clearly diminishing the time spent reading from a book – even one read on a Kindle. Susan Jacoby (2008) refers to the current generation as not illiterate but “a-literate” (xviii). A 2002 survey by the NEA indicated that fewer than half of Americans read a piece of fiction or literature in the preceding year (xviii).

In addition to not reading the classics, or even a recently generated piece of fiction, Millennials are exceptionally proficient at producing their own online content. As one scholar notes, the web may be full of “the sheer noise of a hundred million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves” (Keen, 2008, p. 16). How many of these millions are Millennials? One can only guess, but the idea of a narcissistic blogger fits the profile of a self-indulgent 20-something. However, the consequence of all this blogging may be “less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information” (Keen, 2008, p. 16). Or it could just be information the way the Millennials want it?

This technological multitasking affects this generation’s ability for focus and patience as well. Well over half of American teenagers score below average on basic problem-solving tests that involve such skills as plotting routes on maps and indicate skills related to analytic reasoning (Jackson, 2008, p. 18). They are entering college without the ability to synthesize knowledge, despite possessing spatial skills mastered by playing video games (Jackson, 2008, p. 19). Millennials prefer PowerPoint summaries over reflective essays.

This addiction to technology is following the Millennials as they enter the workforce. Although they bring with them a civic-mindedness and a desire to achieve and are receptive to evaluation, they also come with their own set of baggage that some employers find less than desirable. Older colleagues are not

receptive of “their trademark flip-flops and ripped jeans, ubiquitous iPods and preference for text messages rather than face-to-face communication” (Alsop, 2008, p. 5). This lack of a desire to conform gives the impression of the Millennials as narcissistic and self-indulgent. Despite these drawbacks, many employers are finding this generation worth the investment due to their ability to adapt to changing technology, work in a team atmosphere, and connect easily with a global marketplace.

Yet this generation struggles in both the classroom and the workplace with the constant need for explicit guidance and assurance. Millennials struggle with “independent thinking, decision making and risk-taking,” which frustrates professors and bosses alike (Alsop, 2008, p. 116). However, once Millennials receive direction, their ability to multi-task, utilize technology and strategize with a team to reach consensus comes to full fruition.

In summation, this is a generation that has been ushered into the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the wings of reality television, unlimited text messaging plans, Facebook, Twitter, netbooks, and Attention Deficit Disorder. They have witnessed success in a major military offensive and have seen an airline pilot successfully save a plane full of passengers on the Hudson River. Many have watched their parents get divorced, nearly as many have experienced a loved one’s battle with cancer, and a few have been arrested for sexting. In short, this generation is unlike any other that has come before it.

Students are typically not like their professors. Whether the faculty are Baby Boomers or Generation Xers, it is crucial for them to remember that what may be true for their own cohort is not necessarily so for the young individuals who make up today’s every burgeoning undergraduate population. With the Millennial generation being so vastly different from their predecessors, there is a clear impact on how they best learn and how professors must reach out to assure they benefit as much as possible (Oblinger, 2003; Poindexter, 2003). Newton (2000) reminds his fellow faculty that they must recognize that students enter college inherently different in their attitudes and behavior as a result of the social and technological revolution. To successfully reach them, faculty will need to have greater flexibility and more options than ever before (Hanna, 2003). Merely introducing more technology, however, has been repeatedly shown to not be an effective means to improve learning outcomes (Collis, 1996; Laurillard, 1993; Reeves, 1997; Twigg, 2003).

Millennials, according to Oblinger (2003) and Brown (2000), have expressed distinct learning preferences, including teamwork, experiential activities, structure, and the use of technology. The traditional academic lecture may not satisfy this generation. Levine and Arafeh (2002) show that those who have access to computers throughout their earlier schooling are even more inclined to demand that technology be used in the college classroom. What Raines (2002) ultimately shows is that Millennial students want six things from education: they want to be led, they want to be challenged, they want to work with friends, they want to have fun, they want to be respected, and they want the environment to be flexible. These students are likely to be focused on grades and performance, busy with extracurriculars, eager to be involved in the community, technologically talented, more interested in math and science than the humanities, more politically conservative and more socially liberal than their predecessors (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Rooney, 2003). Since they are more willing to do what it takes to succeed (Murray, 1997), faculty should not worry about pushing them to perform at the highest level (Wilson, 2004).

### **The Dumbest Generation?**

What emerges from this review is a fairly rosy picture of the Millennial generation. While they are clearly painted with a different brush than their predecessors, it is deemed by most to be mere difference—not necessarily for better or worse. Mark Bauerlein (2008), a former Director of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, however, believes the behavior of the Millennial generation puts the future of America at great risk. Bauerlein (2008) finds that Millennials “care about what occurred last week in the cafeteria, not what took place during the Great Depression....They heed the words of Facebook, not the Gettysburg Address” (p. ix). The constant communication among their peer groups has made it so that “equipped with a Blackberry and laptop, sporting a flashy profile page and a blog...teenagers pass words and images back and forth 24/7” (Bauerlein, 2008, p. x). Bauerlein (2008) finds a central paradox in where American society is headed: “We have entered the Information Age, traveled the Information Superhighway, spawned a Knowledge Economy, undergone the Digital Revolution, converted manual workers into knowledge workers, and promoted a Creative Class, and we anticipate a Conceptual Age...yet young Americans today are no more learned or skilled than their predecessors” (p. 8-9).



Bauerlein believes that individuals under thirty should not be trusted. Youth are believed to be disregarding books and reading in exchange for hours on the internet. But instead of using the World Wide Web as a tool for learning, they tend to use it to follow pop culture and relentlessly gossip about each other. Bauerlein finds young Americans practicing horizontal modeling through sites such as Facebook and MySpace —looking to their peers instead of parents, teachers, or other adult figures. They expect instant gratification and are becoming ever more insulated in their own cocoon of poor grammar and civic illiteracy. What Bauerlein fears most is a dull and self-absorbed generation failing to properly account for its own existence and future - as such, one with no hope of maintaining the intellectual history of America.

Faculty, in Bauerlein's opinion, are equally to blame as he finds them to be too worried about being labeled as old or reactionary to challenge today's students to move beyond his negative opinions. This claim is where the impetus for the present study was formed. As a college faculty member, I took great offense to this claim—particularly as I am a Millennial myself. Knowing that I would be teaching two large lecture courses, I decided to tackle Bauerlein's claims head on. To begin, I administered to both classes (an Introduction to American Government course and a Current Issues in American Politics course) a survey examining how well Millennial students match the textbook definition they are assumed to personify and also whether they align with the negative stereotype brought forth by Bauerlein. Then, in the Current Issues course, students were assigned to read *The Dumbest Generation* and the class spent three weeks discussing Bauerlein's claims, potential merit, and student reactions. After completing the book, they were given a post-test where they were asked to evaluate the book, themselves, and ultimately their generation. The goal of this was two-fold: first, to have a healthy discussion with the Millennial generation about how they view themselves and are viewed by others from different generations, and second, to examine whether being exposed to such a negative critique as that of Bauerlein would have any impact on Millennials' perceptions of themselves.

While using these classes permits me to help paint a picture of Millennials and Millennial behavior, the design does present a series of limitations. First, the study is taking place on a single campus at a single time. While the particular institution has a fair balance of students with regards to high school performance, race, and gender, it is still only a single site. Further, threats to internal validity

included maturation (since students were being exposed to political science coursework in addition to the Bauerlein book) and testing (given that the surveys were designed to be fairly straightforward and to not hide the key questions of interest). The study was exempted from Institutional Review Board approval by the institution's research office.

### **A Picture of Millennials**

Greenberg and Weber (2008, p. 22) believe that Millennials know who they are. To begin the study, they gave 232 students (combined between the two classes) a pre-test that examined numerous facets of their social and political life. Regarding the general demographics of the class, the survey found that the average age was 18.93 (ranging from 17 to 29) and that the average student enrolled had been at the school for just over half a year (with roughly 63% being freshmen in their first collegiate course). As such, the study assures that we are truly looking at Millennials.

Students were first asked factual questions related to American politics to see their level of knowledge. Forty-three percent were able to identify that the American Constitution has 27 amendments. Just under three-quarters were successfully able to name Ted Strickland as Governor of Ohio. When asked to name four Supreme Court justices, only four students (3.2%) were able to do so, while almost 80% failed to successfully name one. While 34% could identify three first amendment rights, 31% could not identify a single one. Looking at more modern politics, 83% could identify Joe Biden as the Vice President of our country, and approximately 70% were able to name at least three individuals who ran for president in 2008 (with 27% being able to name five). Looking at media, not a single student was able to identify Brian Williams, Katie Couric, and Charlie Gibson as the lead anchors for the three major news networks in America. In fact, 68% could not identify any of the three. Just under 65% were able to name at least one politician that had died in the past year—with all being able to acknowledge the passing of Ted Kennedy, which occurred only a short time before the survey was administered.

Moving from the political to the more social side, the next block of questions asked students to identify different pop culture factoids. Just under two-thirds could identify three reality television shows (with approximately 10% not being able to identify any). Scoring better than they did with naming Supreme Court

justices, 77% of students surveyed were able to identify three judges from American Idol, and 47% could name at least five contestants from the show (with 90% being able to name at least one). Likewise, over 85% of students could identify at least one television judge (with 10% being able to identify four). Eighty-two percent of students knew that John and Kate had eight kids, and 95% could identify three celebrities that had passed away in the last year (39% were able to name three). Asking about less well-known popular shows, the survey still found that over 20% of respondents knew that Gordon Ramsay ran Hell’s Kitchen and over 45% knew that the Real World was being taped in Cancun.

Another section of the survey asked students to identify politicians and celebrities through pictures. The results are available in Table I.

**Table I**

<b>Politician/Celebrity</b>	<b>Percent Identifying Correctly</b>
Barack Obama (P)	98.4
Homer Simpson (C)	91.3
Miley Cyrus (C)	83.3
Ryan Seacrest (C)	76.2
Kim Kardashian (C)	65.9
Eric Cartman (C)	61.9
Lebron James (C)	50.0
Carson Daly (C)	45.2
Nancy Pelosi (P)	27
Roderick McDavis (P)	25.4
Ted Strickland (P)	13.5
Greg Mathis (C)	11.1
Chris Harrison (C)	7.9
Sherrod Brown (P)	4.0
Antonin Scalia (P)	0.8
Anthony Kennedy (P)	0.0

What emerges is a picture that largely backs what Bauerlein suggests. Other than Barack Obama, students are far more able to identify celebrities than individuals who play a direct role in their lives. Clearly, the media plays a direct role as all celebrities except Carson Daly, Greg Mathis, and Chris Harrison are recognized by

at least half of the respondents. Overall, the examination into the political and pop-culture knowledge of Millennial students paints a mixed picture. While students score higher in political knowledge than Bauerlein would likely suggest, they perform far better in matters of pop culture—particularly when asked to identify individuals by picture.

Given the role technology is said to play in shaping the Millennial culture, the next section of the survey asks students about their use of technology. To begin, every student surveyed acknowledged ownership of a cellular phone. More stunningly, 92.1% claimed to have unlimited text messaging, and just under a quarter receive e-mails through their phones. All but five students have active Facebook accounts. On average, students claim to spend 6.8 hours on Facebook per week (roughly an hour a day) with the range of responses going from 0 hours to 50 hours per week. Given the expected amount of time spent on the site, the surveys asks more detailed questions regarding Facebook use, finding that on average a student will have 439.8 friends on the site (ranging from 15 to 3000) and actually acknowledge knowing only 318.02, or roughly 72%. Moving from Facebook, only a third of students have MySpace pages, on which they spend, on average, 1.77 hours per week. Just over 5% of students have Twitter accounts and two-thirds watch YouTube videos. In all, students spend an average of 13.35 hours on the internet per week (or almost two hours a day). These data show that the Millennials are actively using modern technology.

The study next asks students about their media consumption and behavior. Students were first asked if they trust the media; just over 20% of students claim to trust the media, while over 30% say they distrust it and 47% plead indifference. Of note is that only one student claims to strongly trust the media, while ten claim to strongly distrust it. Table II presents viewership rates for both local and national news.

**Table II**

<b>Days Watched</b>	<b>Local News</b>	<b>National News</b>
0	32.5%	34.1%
1	18.3%	20.6%
2	20.6%	23.0%
3	11.1%	9.5%
4	6.3%	5.6%
5	7.1%	4.0%
6	0%	2.4%
7	4.0%	0.8%

Roughly one-third of students never watch either news source, while only approximately 10% can be considered regular viewers. With regards to what they watch for news, CNN was the most watched station followed by Fox, ABC, NBC, MSNBC, and CBS. Regarding newspaper readership, 40% never read a newspaper (online or in print), while just under 5% read it daily. On average, a student will read the paper between once and twice per week. Looking at more modern forms of news, the survey determines that approximately 46% of Millennials surveyed watch *The Daily Show* and just under 40% watch *The Colbert Report*. When asked their primary news source, an overwhelming majority of students use the internet (either in general or specific sites, such as CNN.com, the *Drudge Report*, the BBC website, online newspapers). Other answers worth noting include *E! News*, *Rolling Stone*, and word of mouth. The internet also clearly emerges as the majority response when students are asked how politicians can best reach them (with Facebook gaining most support). Other answers to consider here include personal contacts, clever TV commercials, appearances on shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and SportsCenter commercials.

Looking at actual political behavior, students were asked if they voted in 2008, with 48% responding that they did. Of the 48%, 67% voted for Obama, 31% for McCain, and 2% for Paul. Of the 52% who did not vote, over three-quarters were not of age. Other reasons for not voting included: being harassed on campus by members of both campaigns, feelings of no political efficacy, not agreeing with either candidate, and not feeling informed enough to make that decision. Looking

at party identification, 9% of the class members were Strong Democrats, 31% were Democrats, 29% were either Moderate or did not know, 24% were Republican, and 7% identified as Strong Republican. When asked if online sites are a useful way for campaigns to reach Millennial voters, an overwhelming majority believed that they are, particularly since that is where Millennials spend so much of their time. The minority, who do not see the value in online sites and communication, believe that they will largely just be ignored regardless.

The pre-test ultimately paints a thorough picture of the Millennial generation. They are technologically-advanced; they clearly follow pop culture; they are not as politically aware as someone like Bauerlein may hope; and they are not media savvy, unless we count new media. After reading *The Dumbest Generation*, students in one class were given a post-survey to measure potential attitude changes. Students were asked their level of agreement with two statements after reading the book, and an additional five statements before and after reading the book.<sup>1</sup> The mean responses and attitude changes are presented in Table III.

**Table III**

Statement	Mean Pre-Test	Mean Post-Test	Change
I am concerned about the Millennial generation’s lack of political participation.	2.34	1.80	-.54
I believe Facebook is a positive tool for our generation.	2.60	2.78	+.18
I believe that technology is improving the lives of people my age.	2.14	2.49	+.35
I believe that our generation is largely informed about world affairs.	3.56	3.91	+.35
I believe that my generation is more intelligent than my parents’ generation.	2.81	3.08	+.27
I became angry at the author at points of reading the book.		2.04	
This discussion would not have worked with an older instructor.		1.91	

<sup>1</sup> 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree

The post-survey data notes changes in attitudes, on average, in the predicted direction. After reading *The Dumbest Generation* and subsequent class discussions, students were more concerned about their generation's lack of political participation, less likely to view Facebook as a positive tool (pointing to the findings of Siegel [2008] that the internet can be both a blessing and a curse), less likely to assume that technology is inherently good, more likely to feel that their generation is uninformed about world affairs, and less likely to believe that their generation is more intelligent than that of their parents. All change measures are statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence as tested through a t-test. As a result, we can have confidence that the inclusion of the book contributed to meaningful shift in student opinions.

Looking at only the post-test information, on average, students found themselves angry while reading the book at some points. I included this question as an attempt to examine the personal response that students had to the attacks levied on them by Bauerlein. Another interesting question raised in the survey (and throughout class discussion) was whether students felt this exercise would have been possible if I, in fact, were not a Millennial myself. On average, students did not believe the experience would have been as ultimately successful, and they admitted in class discussions that the atmosphere would have taken a more confrontational tone and that they would have been less likely overall to openly discuss their take on Bauerlein's numerous claims and concerns. Millennials may, after all, do as Hoover (2009) suggests and overcome the many stereotypes placed upon them. While this question was fairly personalized to my particular case, it does raise interesting questions about how students react to the presentation of different materials when students and instructors are from different generations. Based merely on my experience in this setting, it seems to be possible that generational divergence can alter student perceptions of material—and in a sense learning. Such a claim, however, should be viewed as speculative at this time until further research can be conducted.

### **Conclusion**

From the data presented, it appears that Millennial generation is unlike any of its predecessors in important ways. There are, however, difficulties in making any assertions given the nature of this study and data. First, the data looks at only Millennials without any comparison to Baby Boomers or Generation X. Further, the research is designed to be exploratory in nature. Rather than testing set

hypotheses, I simply aimed to see how students would react to a critical reading of how they operate in their political environment.

What the data does show us, however, is that Millennials are technologically savvy, they follow pop culture, and they do not know as much about the political world as one would hope. Bauerlein's scathing indictment, however, appears as if it might be overstated. After all, if this generation is so acutely unaware of its political surroundings and the impact that a lack of knowledge could have on their future, would they be willing to adjust their views, even slightly, when confronted with survey after survey condemning their current level of civil awareness? While much focus is being placed on the ideas of eCitizenship and efforts to use technology to create better citizens, the present study suggests that instructors can feel free to directly challenge Millennial students on their perceived misuses of the vast amount of information and knowledge available to them. In doing so, they can push students to stretch their boundaries and use new technologies to benefit parts of their lives they may have never paid attention to.

From an instructional perspective, faculty need to feel free to challenge Millennials. In the current study, students responded to a direct challenge by acknowledging their own potential weaknesses and discussing ways to improve. While the study did not follow students to see if they would ultimately increase their performance, it does present early findings that suggest students may very well do so. Rather than dumbing down information and viewing students as technologically-obsessed and unable to think critically, the issue may very well be that instructors need to challenge Millennial students and help them to determine what eCitizenship means in their present and future lives.

In the article, I have examined the political knowledge of Millennial students. The findings suggest that students know more about politics than some may expect, yet any political knowledge is dwarfed in the aggregate by the volumes of information they have retained regarding popular culture. When students are confronted with the potential downfalls of their current use of new technologies as tools of citizenship through a reading of *The Dumbest Generation*, their attitudes demonstrate a measurable shift. They become more conscientious and more willing to challenge the assumptions on which they have based their political lives. While the Millennial students appear in this study the same way they do in most of the relevant literature, this study suggests that they are more willing and embrative of a challenge than previous scholarship suggested. Millennials must heed the calls



and the warnings and begin to see new technologies as opportunities for increased knowledge and awareness—rather than simply as mechanisms for having celebrity news at their fingertips and a direct connection to all of their friends. If we hope that students become full eCitizens, perhaps we need to have more direct conversations where we permit Millennials to draw the necessary conclusions that can lead to a better understanding and practice of democracy as they fully enter the political world. After all, new technologies—if not redirected—will continue to include, as Keen (2008, p. ix-x) says, “MySpace and Facebook creating a youth culture of digital narcissism; open-source knowledge sharing sites like Wikipedia undermining the learning about the outside world; [and] the cacophony of anonymous blogs and user-generated content deafening today’s youth to the voices of informed experts and professional journalists”.

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