



After the Fact | [The Millennials Aren't Kids Anymore](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Alec Tyson, Pew Research Center: Many of the formative experiences that prior generations experienced, some large share of millennials have not. And yet they're forming their adult identities without those experiences.

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Dan LeDuc, host: That's Alec Tyson from the Pew Research Center talking about today's largest living generation. And no, it's not the baby boomers anymore. It's the millennials. And they aren't kids anymore, either. In fact, the oldest of them are 37—that's our data point for this episode. It's a sure sign that the millennials are coming of age.

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Dan LeDuc: I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact," a podcast that explores the facts, numbers, and trends shaping our world. And the millennials' numbers are big: There are 80 million of them, and they're starting to make their mark in the workplace, the economy, in politics, and in shaping America's opinion landscape. I talked with Alec to learn more about who they are, what they care about, and what adulthood looks like for them.

Dan LeDuc: We're here to talk about millennials for a lot of different reasons, not the least of which is they're now the biggest generation out there. And they're not sort of the kids that we think of them as anymore. Tell us about them.

Alec Tyson: Well, that's just right. I mean, you can now think about millennials in adulthood. The oldest millennial is 37 years old. And as you mentioned, they're the largest adult generation, over 80 million strong. And of course any generation of that size has a huge impact on the nation's opinion landscape, but increasingly they're playing a larger role in public life and professional life.

Dan LeDuc: So let's break that down a little bit. First of all, let's start with some numbers. That's what the Pew Research Center does so well. So let's take these millennials that we too often



picture as young kids when they're not anymore. Run us through some numbers that paints a portrait for us.

Alec Tyson: Well, one of the hallmarks of the millennial generation is their racial and ethnic diversity. Forty-five percent of millennials are nonwhite. That's far higher than previous generations, than older generations—and in some ways, you can think of their diversity as a window into the future of the country. Even today, a majority of babies under age 1 are racial and ethnic minorities, and it's projected that sometime around midcentury—maybe around 2050—whites will no longer be a majority in this country. So in some ways, the diversity of millennials anticipates some future changes for this country.

Dan LeDuc: So we're seeing the wave of the future here, right, in this new generation.

Alec Tyson: In some ways you are. In some ways that's always the case of the youngest adult generation is that they anticipate changes that the country will continue to move through in the future.

Dan LeDuc: So millennials have come of age with two huge influences. They're the generation that has grown into adulthood in the post-9/11 world, and all that goes with that. And at the same time, technology is playing a huge role in the world, and they are on the top of that wave. What's it all mean?

Alec Tyson: Well, both of those have certainly been formative experiences in millennials' lives. And in the post-9/11 era, our country has had a lot of debates about the trade-offs between privacy and security. And one thing that's unique about millennials is that they've consistently leaned more towards the side of civil liberties than security in these debates. And that makes them a bit distinct than older generations. And I think it's closely connected to their experiences of coming of age in this post-9/11 era and really knowing only this post-9/11 security era.

Dan LeDuc: What about how they get their news? They're big Facebook users, but what else?

Alec Tyson: Well, it's connected to their technology habits, is that many people and many millennials get their political news through Facebook. It's actually their top source of political news. And they rely on it far more than older generations do for political news. And again, this technological revolution of mobile. Many more millennials get news on their mobile device than older adults. It's just something that is accessible to them. It's in their hand. It's part of their day-to-day lives.



Dan LeDuc: And what that means, if you dig down a little bit, is that it's not just the traditional journalist of two generations ago or a generation ago determining what's put in front of you. It's whatever shows up on your Facebook feed through whatever algorithm they might be using, as well as what your friends or acquaintances are putting out.

Alec Tyson: Well, it's certainly true that there is a social aspect to news today. And probably it's most pronounced among millennials than all other generations, that's certainly the case. The technological revolutions that coincide with this generation coming into adulthood are amazing: the mobile revolution, the social media revolution. These are people who in adulthood were really digital natives. They used these technologies. They were used to real-time communication, whether text or instant messenger. And they were used to creating communities digitally online, through Facebook and other social networking platforms. And you can see how these currents that shape their attitudes affect them in their day-to-day lives.

Dan LeDuc: At the same time, they're old enough that they do have some memories of what it used to be—at least maybe for their folks, right?

Alec Tyson: That's right. And it's an interesting thing to think about is that this is a generation, they may be the last ones to remember things like the pay phone or even just desk—landline telephones. And in some ways they are on a bit of a technological cusp.

Dan LeDuc: They'll be the ones, when they are grandparents, telling their kids about, “When I was a kid, we still had to actually go to a pay phone.” You know, “My parents used to drop a dime.”

Alec Tyson: And what's a fax machine, right?

Dan LeDuc: Right. So we know sort of who they are a little bit, and what they've been influenced by. But they're at a point now where they're starting to influence opinion. Their presence is felt at the ballot box, in the workplace. Take us through some of that.

Alec Tyson: Well, one place to start, when you begin to talk about opinion, is that this is a generation that leans Democratic, and you can see that in some of their attitudes. On some of their attitudes they tend to be more liberal than older adults. One great example here is that most millennials—79 percent—think that immigrants strengthen the country. That they are a strength, rather than a burden. And that's much higher than older generations. And they're one of the generations that's most likely to say that the government should play a role in ensuring that all Americans have health care coverage.



Dan LeDuc: What about the growth of the independent voter? That seems to be playing more and more of a role in our nation's political life to begin with. What's going to happen with millennials?

Alec Tyson: Well, the party ID story among millennials is a really interesting story, and it's really a two-part story. On the one hand, as you suggest, 47 percent identify as independent. And that's much higher than older generations. But we know that most people who identify as independent also lean towards one of the two major political parties. And when you combine the share of millennials who either identify as a Democrat or are an independent who say they lean toward the Democratic Party, that's where you get this strong Democratic imprint. You get 56 percent of millennials identifying or leaning Democratic compared with just 33 percent who identify or lean Republican.

Dan LeDuc: Are there issues out there where we're starting to see this?

Alec Tyson: Well, you can think about it this way. Today, if this is the largest adult generation, any opinion in this country today is necessarily the composite of all adults. Now, millennials are a large share of all adults. So their views are shaping all opinion currents—is one way to think about it. And as we said, millennials are only just beginning to exert themselves in public life, at the ballot box, and in professional life.

Dan LeDuc: Right, so now they're in the workplace, where what's acceptable in the workplace is going to be more and more influenced by their norms. They're going to become supervisors and business owners. And they're also going to be entering public life. They're going to start running for office. And then we're really going to start seeing some more influences, it seems.

Alec Tyson: That's right. And one way to talk about this is to talk about their electoral impact, or the size of their potential electoral impact. We know that in 2016 they matched baby boomers as the largest bloc of eligible voters—69 million eligible voters. But we also know that young people don't vote at as high rates as older people. So when you ask them how many actually voted, only 49 percent of eligible millennial voters said they actually voted in the 2016 election. That's far lower than the share among older adults. For example, nearly 70 percent of baby boomers at least self-reported that they voted. So there's still a big gap there, and you'd expect some of those gaps to close in future elections as they become older and more likely to participate in the electoral process.

Dan LeDuc: I guess it's an important caveat to the entire conversation that we shouldn't be talking about millennials as this monolithic group here.



Alec Tyson: That's right. That's always key in generational research. There are very useful guidelines to talk about cohorts of adults who have some similar experiences and are relatively proximate in birth year. But of course you acknowledge that there is a great amount of diversity within any generation.

Dan LeDuc: Sure. Let's talk a little bit about their educational levels. I mean, every generation seems to be slightly better educated than the one before it. Where do they fit in, in that stream of things?

Alec Tyson: Well, you put it just right. This is the most educated generation of adults that the country has seen to date. And that's a continuation of some trends in this country. Thirty-eight percent of millennials ages 25 to 36 have a college degree. And that's high when compared with past generations.

Dan LeDuc: When they were that age.

Alec Tyson: When they were at that age—important point. But it's also really important to acknowledge that most millennials of that age do not have a college degree. Sometimes there's this impression of millennials as all well-educated and upwardly mobile.

Dan LeDuc: So what happens to non-college millennials?

Alec Tyson: I think we know today that the disparities between those with and without a college degree are as wide as they may have ever been in this country. Just for example, among millennials who are in the workforce, those with a college degree earn about \$24,000 more than those without a college degree. That's a huge divide. It's much wider than the college/non-college divide that you might have seen among baby boomers when they were young. And there are real disparities in this country today between those with and without a college degree. These are some of the issues that millennials may be tasked with facing as they age.

Dan LeDuc: They've also sort of changed what it means to be—we're calling them grown up, but a lot of the markers of adulthood are different now. Or at least different for this generation. What are some examples of that?

Alec Tyson: Well, you can really—there's several. It's really across all aspects of their life. Some of the ones that are well known and deeply important is they're less likely to be married at this age than previous generations. And of course, related to that—many of these trends are related to one another—delaying childbirth. Many millennial women are having children later in life. And then again, these trends are all related to one another. Homeownership is lower



among millennials. And I guess that makes sense when you think about that fewer are married and many are delaying childbirth. And then one other factor that's different, certainly, than some of the older American generations is military service is relatively low among this generation. You can think of the Vietnam era or even Korea or World War II. Those are the moments when many, many people had experience with military service. A bit less so with millennials today.

Dan LeDuc: You know, it seems like one way of looking at it is some of these influences were available, whether it was the experience of military service or taking on that first mortgage—which anybody who has one knows the responsibility that comes with it. The millennial generation sort of is missing some of these shared experiences. Yet they have other ones. They are creating their shared experience through that digital life that you were mentioning earlier, and their quickness to form communities.

Alec Tyson: Yeah, it's a really interesting conversation, and really interesting question. But I think how you put it just right, that many of the formative experiences that prior generations experienced, some large share of millennials have not. And yet they're forming their adult identities without those experiences. And it's not to say that it's a positive or negative, it's just different.

Dan LeDuc: The ripple effects of everything we've been talking about today, to me, are just astonishing. What it's going to mean for pensions and Social Security and health care as these groups age out and their kids come of age later in life? It's astonishing where we're headed.

Alec Tyson: It is. And so many of these have policy implications. But they also have personal implications. You can just think about perhaps earlier generations who came to know their grandparents. This may be relatively young seniors, maybe people in their 60s, maybe even late 50s—but certainly in their 60s or mid-60s. And then you think about some of the trends we see today. If these trends hold up delaying childbirth, their only memories of their grandparents may be of very older folks. Now certainly that won't be true for all people in future generations. But these are some of the personal implications of the trends that we're talking about. It's really all these questions and more of that we'll be following in coming decades, and it's really going to be a fascinating story to watch.

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Dan LeDuc: Alec Tyson studies social and political trends for the Pew Research Center and wrote about the influence of millennials in the latest issue of Pew's annual journal of ideas, called *Trend*. That issue is all about generations, and you can read it at pewtrusts.org/trend.



And if you want to hear more about the subject, check out our last episode with psychologist and author Jean Twenge. She has identified a new generation taking shape and even has a name for it. Listen in, and she'll tell you all about it.

Thanks for listening to this podcast. You have helped us to make it into the top 20 in our category on Apple Podcasts. Please keep those reviews coming. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."