A Changing Political Landscape As One Generation Replaces Another
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Data Collected by NOP World.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**.................................................................................................................2

**SUMMARY OF HIGHLIGHTS** ..........................................................................................4

**FINDINGS**

The Boomers and Their Influences .............................................................................6

The GIs and Their Influences ....................................................................................7

GIs, Boomers and Politics ............................................................................................8

*Political Candidates and Political Parties* .................................................................8

*Social and Economic Issues* .......................................................................................9

*Obligations and Entitlements* ...................................................................................12

*Boomer Activism* .......................................................................................................13

**CONCLUSION** ............................................................................................................16

**METHODS** ................................................................................................................18
INTRODUCTION

Every candidate for elected office knows that the older population is a force with which to be reckoned. Older people are the group most likely to read newspapers, stay apprised of issues, register to vote, and actually turn out on Election Day. This is certainly true of what has been called “the greatest generation” – those individuals who came of age in the 1940s, fought the second world war, were parents to the baby boomers, witnessed the civil rights and women’s movements, and watched on as one political scandal followed the next during the ’70s and ’80s and ’90s.

Today, this older group of voters, so revered by politicians, is passing on. Their children, the baby boomers, are between the ages of 40 and 57, and within 20 years, will become the older voting group. Will these boomers be as active as their parents in politics? Will they “age” into the roles their parents occupied in the political process, or will they continue to be innovative and independent-minded boomers who happen to have gray hair and bad knees?

Will there be a mature boomer voting block? What will be their defining political issues and how will these issues compare to the concerns that defined their parents and grandparents? What will a candidate have to promise to gain boomer votes? Will boomers become a monolithic voting segment? Or, will they split on the issues, walking in the footsteps of generations before them? More broadly, how will American politics change as one generation rapidly replaces another as the nation’s largest – and perhaps most influential – generation of voters?

The survey results presented in this report suggest answers to these and many other questions. The results reveal that while boomers and their parents agree on as many issues as they disagree on, there are fundamental political differences between the two generations that can be summed up by their experiences with government. The GI generation grew up with a government that was responsible for rescuing the country from the Great Depression, for fighting and winning the only war that could reasonably be argued to have elements of good and evil, and for promoting the greatest economic expansion and rise in affluence in U.S. history. In short, government was responsible for some very monumental tasks and by and large achieved what it set out to do.

In contrast, the children of the GIs – the baby boomers – grew up with a government that could not seem to effectively guarantee even basic civil rights for all of its citizens, condoned or encouraged neglect of the environment, fought a 10-year engagement in
Vietnam for no clear reason and with no clear plan, and seemed to be populated by politicians who were often corrupt and sometimes felonious.

The GI generation’s experiences with government led them to consider government to be a positive force in the world, and to see themselves as actors in a larger drama that included good and evil, and affirmed the individual’s place in affecting which side wins. But in the space of one generation, the boomers’ experience with government led many of them to conclude that government could be more of a problem than a solution, that good and evil were hard to determine and probably a relative matter, and that often those with good intentions were penalized while the corrupt reaped many rewards.

The results of this survey address how the GI and boomer generations regard their political experiences, how those experiences drive their expectations and beliefs, and what changes these expectations and beliefs will cause in the political landscape when the boomer generation becomes the elders of politics.
In less than seven years (2011) the first boomers will reach the retirement age of 65 years. In essence, boomers will start to take the place of their parents and grandparents in the political spectrum as well as other areas. Given that boomers have changed every sector of life they have touched, how will this generation of the U.S. electorate sculpt our political landscape in the future? Also, how will any political changes or activism initiated by boomers compare to that of their elders.

In January 2004, AARP commissioned NOP World, a national survey research firm, to field a random digit dial (RDD) telephone survey designed to provide a comprehensive look at the political behavior, values and interests of baby boomers (ages 40 to 57), their parents and grandparents of the Silent generation (ages 58 to 69) and the GI generation (ages 70+). The survey was conducted nationally among a total of 1,804 adults: 603 boomers, 600 silents and 601 GIs.

Here’s a snapshot of what we found:

- **Our findings suggest that the way in which people select a candidate for national office differs widely by generation.** Boomers are much more likely to vote for a candidate for national office based on where a candidate stands on one or two key issues. GIs are much more likely than boomers to consider the candidates’ personal qualities.

- **Four in 10 of boomers (45%) and GIs (45%) report they often switch political parties.** However, boomers’ reason for doing so differs greatly from that of their parents. Unlike the GIs, who reported changing party affiliation because they felt the party had changed, boomers are more likely to switch parties because their own beliefs changed.

- **A majority of boomers (56% versus 37% of GIs) reported that the country is in need of a strong third party.**

- **Boomers do not differ greatly from their parents on many issues emblematic of conservative or liberal values.** Like GIs, boomers support more welfare programs for those with low incomes and more environmental regulation,
prayer in schools, the death penalty, and stricter prison sentences, as well as their rejection of greater government regulation.

• Eighty-five percent of boomers believe it is a definite responsibility or find it desirable for the government to provide healthcare for all citizens. Similarly, 82% of boomers believe it is a definite responsibility or find it desirable for the government to provide retirement benefits for all citizens.

• Boomers also expect more from the government than GIs. Boomers report that government has a definite responsibility to provide healthcare and retirement benefits for all citizens, assist the poor, protect individual rights and the environment, as well as educate young people.

• This survey suggests that boomers will assert their activism through community groups. A majority of boomers reported that community groups (60%) and individual Americans (57%) are doing a great deal to solve the nation’s problems. Community groups and individual Americans received more votes by boomers than government leaders, public interest groups, religious groups and business and industry leaders.
The Boomers and Their Influences

There are about 77 million boomers in the U.S.; they currently represent about 29% of the U.S. population. In less than seven years (2011) the first boomers will reach the retirement age of 65 years. In essence, boomers will start to take the place of their parents and grandparents in the political arena as well as other areas. But before looking at how the boomers will fill their parents’ sizable political shoes, it is instructive to see just how boomers came to their view of government and politics.

Every generation is influenced by a variety of traumatic and uplifting events, both directly and indirectly. Major events that typically shape the political consciousness of a generation include war, the economy, and social and political issues of the era.

Boomers identify three major influences in their lives: the Vietnam War (67%), the Civil Rights Movement (59%), and the Women’s Rights Movement (51%).

It is no surprise boomers identified the Vietnam War as the top influence of their youth. The draft forced their men into the war. Some served, some didn’t. Boomers were led into battle believing they were becoming the heroes their elders had become in World War II. Instead, they came home beleaguered by what they saw on the front lines and the antiwar sentiment with which their peers greeted them at home. William Strauss and Neil Howe write that “coming home, boomer ‘vets’ had a defeat to haunt them, not a victory to empower them.”

It was a war that split the generation. Even today, roughly 50% of boomers believe the U.S. shouldn’t have entered the war. The other approximately 50% would have been willing to fight to victory. Whichever side boomers lean toward, Vietnam deepened boomers’ skepticism of government. By opposing this war or the way in which it was carried out, boomers learned that they could influence, and in some cases overthrow, rules and structures established by older generations.

For boomers, the struggle for civil rights for minorities and equal rights for women further exemplified how government often acted as an impediment rather than a constructive force for change. Whereas the illegality of denying civil rights to African-Americans was settled in the 1950s, the fact that federal and state governments took over 30 years to enact legislation to insure these rights could be interpreted by many boomers as a failure of our political system.

To top off their skepticism about government intentions and actions, the assassinations of two prominent leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John F. Ken-
nedy, reinforced the fact that those with progressive ideas for government and society are often targets of vicious opposition.

Unlike the GI and silent generations, boomers have never experienced poverty. The economic despair endured by previous generations during the Great Depression certainly taught them to be more frugal and appreciative of what they had. On the contrary, on their maiden voyage into the job market, boomers experienced an extremely strong economy built by the GI generation.

Already weary of government, boomers’ hesitation to trust the establishment was fortified with the news of Watergate. The GI generation produced Nixon, the boomers helped oust him, thus, solidifying the boomer perspective that government was often more a problem than a solution. The scandal led to a further loss of confidence in public officials and a rise in suspicion of bureaucracies.

The GIs and Their Influences

Attitudinal imprints of the GI generation differ from their children and grandchildren. World War II was the principal influence of their youth (79%). The first-ever Boy Scouts became soldiers while Rosie the Riveter led women into the factories to replace the men who went to war. After World War II, the whole of the GI generation was regarded as heroes. Soldiers demonstrated their courage and bravery in battle. Civilians’ valor was exhibited through their long-term rationing and sacrifices in support of the troops. The fathers and grandfathers of boomers were seen as patriotic and self-reliant.

Before the war, the GI generation survived one of the hardest economic periods in our nation’s history. Learning hard lessons during the time, GIs designated the Depression as a close third of their major influences (51%).

With the Stock Market crash of 1929 came economic despair. Four years later in 1933, over 25% of the workforce was unemployed. One-fifth of US banks closed their doors, wiping out the life savings of nine million people. Professional salaries declined by up to 40%. Soup kitchens and bread lines fed a nation of poor. The government was unwilling to step in for more than three years, leaving the GIs to fend for themselves. Families were forced to make choices between bad and worse. It was a time of survival, a time of self-reliance – until Roosevelt’s New Deal.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s plan created jobs through the Civilian Conservation Corps. Bank accounts became FDIC insured (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation). The National Housing Act was passed, which in turn created the Federal Housing Authority (FHA). The Securities Exchange Commission was formed to regulate the stock market. Arguably the biggest undertaking came with the passage of the Social Security Act.

The act established federally funded un-
employment compensation and retirement benefits. Although the GIs had become self-sufficient, these programs addressed systemic problems that only the government could solve. To the GIs, it was further proof of the constructive potential of government. It is easy to understand why GIs most often named Roosevelt when asked what national leader they most admire from the past 100 years.

**GI s, Boomers and Politics**

The vastly different political experiences of the GIs and boomers have led to political behavior and attitudes unique to each of the two generations. From the criteria they use to select their leaders to their generations’ signature issues to their consideration of obligations and entitlements, to what it means to be politically involved in 2004, life experience has shaped each generation’s unique approach to political involvement.

**Political Candidates and Political Parties**

Our findings suggest that the way in which people select a candidate for national office differs widely by generation. Boomers are much more likely to vote for a candidate for national office based on where a candidate stands on one or two key issues. GIs are much more likely than boomers to consider the candidates’ personal qualities. Boomers’ attention to the issues instead of a candidate’s personal qualities allows for more volatility in an electorate since issues are more nuanced, and can change. Meanwhile, the GI generation’s focus on a candidate’s personal qualities suggests a level of trust in political leaders – and leadership – that simply may not exist among the boomers.

Despite differences in how they select candidates, the generations are remarkably similar with regard to party switching. Four in 10 of boomers (45%) and GIs (45%) report they often switch political parties. However, boomers’ reason for doing so differs greatly from that of their parents. Unlike the GIs, who reported changing party affiliation because they felt the party had changed, boomers are more likely to switch parties because their own beliefs changed.
This difference could explain why boomers are more receptive to third party candidates than GIs.

A majority of boomers (56% versus 37% of GIs) reported that the country is in need of a strong third party. Roper Reports tracking studies conducted by NOP World show that with the exception of the silent generation, there has been an increase in the percentage of people who affiliate themselves with an independent party (see Figure 2). While the trend toward greater independence for both GIs and boomers is increasing, this increase is greater for boomers than for GIs.

**Social and Economic Issues**

Boomers do not differ greatly from their parents on many issues emblematic of conservative or liberal values. Like GIs, boomers support more welfare programs for those with low incomes, and more environmental regulation, prayer in schools, the death penalty, and stricter prison sentences, as well as their rejection of greater government regulation.

Yet, on several social issues, boomers differ with the GI generation. Almost six in 10 boomers support legal abortion and stem cell research, and boomers are over twice as likely as their parents to support gay marriage. If one considers the issue of gay marriage to be on the frontier of liberal social issues, then 26% of boomers who support it means that one can probably assume even greater support among boomers for liberal social issues that are not so close to the frontier of liberal values.

Tracking data from Roper Reports indicate that while boomers are generally less likely than GIs to consider themselves con-
servative, over time conservatism has decreased across generations. In 1992 boomers (42%) and GIs (51%) reported that they were conservative. By 2004 this percentage had decreased (boomers 39% and GIs 46%).

Boomers may remain conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues well into the future. Roper Reports research findings further suggest that attitudes toward these issues do not necessarily get more conservative with age. Data from 1984, for example, show that the GI generation which was in its '50s and '60s at the time had attitudes on abortion, school prayer and the death penalty that were almost identical to their opinions today. Likewise, boomers who were in their '20s and '30s in 1984 also showed attitudes about these issues consistent with the attitudes they have today.  

The boomer generation is very diverse, and they will carry many of their midlife social and political interests into their senior years. Of course, boomers can be expected to focus some of their attention on the age-related issues of Social Security and Medicare.

Losses in the Stock Market and companies under-funding pensions may have made boomers a bit more conservative with their retirement dollars. A study conducted by Roper Public Affairs of 1,200 boomers, in 2004 shows that 30% of boomers plan to work in their retirement years because they need the income.

This finding might help to explain some of boomers’ increased confidence in Social Security. Approximately, seven in 10 boomers (71%) say they have at least a

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Figure 4
*Attitudes toward social and moral issues*

Figure 5
*Generational fluctuation of conservatism*

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6 See AARP report “Baby Boomers Envision Retirement II”
somewhat favorable view of Social Security, up 15 percentage points since 1998. The same study found that 54% of boomers are very or somewhat confident that Social Security will be there for them when they retire (up 19% since 1998) and 63% feel they can count on Social Security as a source of income in retirement (up 15% since 1998).

The other age-related issue of Medicare is also likely to receive increased boomer attention in the future. Boomers acknowledge that they are not adequately maintaining their health. Also, many boomers anticipate inadequate health coverage in their retirement years. Almost six in 10 (58%) do not expect their current employer to cover their health insurance needs. These findings suggest that boomers will be in need of healthcare assistance such as Medicare to replace employer healthcare benefits.

In the current study, a slight majority of boomers were opposed to privatizing Social Security (51%) and Medicare (52%). There is no way of knowing for certain how boomers will address the issue of privatizing Social Security and/or Medicare; however, findings from this study suggest that at the very least boomers will want to maintain these programs and will want the government to provide them. Eighty-five percent of boomers believe it is a definite responsibility or find it desirable for the government to provide healthcare for all citizens. Similarly, 82% of boomers believe it is a definite responsibility or find it desirable for the government to provide retirement benefits for all citizens. Regardless of how boomers choose to deal with these two important issues, in the future boomers will have the political clout to structure these entitlements to meet the needs of their generation.

In the future, boomers may choose to champion issues other than Social Security and Medicare. Some have suggested that boomers may choose to pick up the mantle their parents leave behind. Our findings suggest there are indeed issues which both boomers and their elders strongly favor or oppose. A similar percentage of boomers and GIs favor mandatory waiting periods and background checks for handgun purchases, prayer in public schools, increased military defense, increased environmental regulations, and imposing the death penalty on serious crimes (see Figure 6). Increased government regulation of business is an
issue for which each generation reported similar opposition (boomers 62% and GIs 60%).

In the future, boomers may feel more inclined to address specific issues they believe to be a definite responsibility of the government and they may be more politically active regarding these issues. Our findings show a majority of boomers feel that the government has a definite responsibility to provide an adequate national defense, protect individual rights, educate young people, protect the environment, protect consumers’ privacy and provide healthcare for all citizens (see Figure 7). Half of boomers report providing retirement benefits to all citizens as a definite responsibility for the government.

Looking ahead, this specific set of issues may receive a great deal of attention from boomers; especially since two of these issues directly influence boomers’ retirement years: retirement and health care benefits for all citizens. They also include an issue boomers are quite familiar with: the fight for the rights of all people.

However, boomers may run into more political fight than they bargain for.

The issues of consumer privacy and a strong national defense might not provide any enduring political battles, but on other issues, boomers may be in for a heated competition with younger generations for scarce resources. Due to the size of the boomer generation, the cost of public retirement benefits and healthcare will garner a larger share of the federal budget. Younger generations may feel a need to protest legislation for tax increases necessary to sustain boomer benefits. Boomers may have to make decisions about how to maintain their own retirement benefits without jeopardizing the financial stability of future generations.

**Obligations and Entitlements**

Boomers also expect more from the government than GIs. Boomers report that government has a definite responsibility to provide healthcare and retirement benefits for all citizens, assist the poor, protect individual rights and the environment, as well as educate young people. This is an
ironic finding given that GIs grew-up with the government solving many of their major problems when they were maturing into adulthood. Yet they still expect less of their government than do the boomers.

Although GIs have benefited greatly from government programs, they still maintain a high degree of self-reliance. Unlike GIs, boomers would prefer to shift the burden to the government at no cost to themselves. Boomers are less likely to report that paying taxes is an important obligation for every citizen and less likely to believe that serving in the military or serving on a jury is an important obligation for citizens.

**Boomer Activism**

When people speak of boomer activism, they typically conjure up images of the radical protests and demonstrations of the '60s. However, such ardent action is hardly likely to recur. This type of activism generally declines with age. More mild forms of protest and political activism will more than likely replace the rancorous dissent expressed during the civil rights movement and war protests of the '60s.

Boomers will certainly use alternative means of activism. Their level of skepticism about government may make them wary of conventional forms of political engagement. Boomers will most likely choose means of activism that allow them to tailor a movement around issues important to them, regardless of the degree of social impact. In short, boomers want to advance their social agendas on their own terms.

Their strong sense of entitlement and self-directed motivations will help to create a more decentralized, broader, community-based path for activism. Our findings along with recent political strategies hint at the means and measures boomers will use to their political advantage in the future.

This survey suggests that boomers will assert their activism through community groups. A majority of boomers reported that community groups (60%) and individual Americans (57%) are doing a great deal to solve the nation’s problems. Community groups and individual Americans received more votes by boomers than government leaders, public interest groups, religious groups and business and industry leaders (see Figure 8).

Given technological advancements made in the area of telecommunications and a more Internet-savvy group of activists, it is easy to conclude that boomers will use technology to further their political activi-
ism. By combining the use of technology and community groups boomers could develop communities of interest via the Internet to advance their political agendas with like-minded individuals. Boomers could actively participate in single and multi-issue, virtual communities.

Web-based activist communities will appeal to boomers who are wary of conventional politics and politicians. They will be able to establish a decentralized means of activism and be better able to tailor their efforts.

What all this means for politics and the political process may be called “tailored engagement.” That is, boomers can be expected to be as active as their parents in the political process but it will be on issues they consider important and in ways they think are effective. Boomers will be the last to appear at a political rally in which there is no discussion of issues that clearly affect them. They will be the last to support a candidate because of party affiliation or only because of a general sense that he or she would make a good legislator. Tailored engagement means that political participation by boomers will be more like the social engagement of their youth – socially active but skeptical about politics; concerned with their communities or other things that directly affect them; results-oriented with more regard for producing benefits than for achieving higher goals or fulfilling moral imperatives; and conducted through arrangements that may neglect the traditional political structures to which their parents felt an allegiance.

In fact, despite their skepticism about government, and perhaps because of their self-interest, boomers are the most likely generational cohort to engage in all but two measures of civic action that directly influence their communities (see Figure 9).

One conclusion that could be drawn from this combination of skepticism about government and concern for community is that boomers will separate activism from politics. That is, even though their concern with community may be driven by self-interest, their skepticism about the political process and the abilities of government may produce a type of boomer activism that is defined by issues, focused on communities, and informal in structure – precisely the characteristics that traditional political parties have lost.

A more costly means of activism is termed checkbook activism. Professor John Williamson of Boston College explains that checkbook activism is currently being used by boomers but has not gained much attention. Boomers are using their checkbooks as a means of supporting various social and political causes. The money pays for advertising, lobbying efforts and other means of tailored political engagement. Williamson has concluded that if boomers continue to build wealth at levels that exceed their parents, checkbook activism may prove more influential than boomer protests of the ’60s.
Nevertheless, all of the methods of activism mentioned thus far allow boomers to use a broad, issue-oriented community to get their message out. Such communities would be politically flexible. They could exist to advance a single or multi-political issue or cause, and would not have to be affiliated with a political party.

Conversely, boomers could very well choose to develop a third party or support a third party candidate. Our findings indicate that 56% of boomers think there is a need for a strong third party. A more cohesive boomer population is definitely large enough to support an independent candidate or create a political party that would focus on older persons’ (boomer) issues. National political parties created for older people are not an entirely new occurrence. In the early 1990s two national “senior” political parties were established in the Netherlands. They were born out of dissent over national policies targeting older people. Both Union 55+ and the General Senior Citizens’ Union occupied a total of seven seats in parliament.7

While the creation of elder parties in the Netherlands proved successful, this is unlikely in the U.S. where the current trend is for boomers to move away from party-based political participation and toward a more decentralized issue-based participation.

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7 See “Older People and Voting Participation: Past and Future” by Rober H. Binstock in The Gerontologist Vol. 40 #1, p. 18-31
In the future, boomers are going to make up a substantial part of the electorate and an even larger portion of likely voters. Potentially, boomers will have the political power to influence issues important to their generation. Boomer activism quite possibly will be more aggressively directed toward entitlements that boomers feel are a responsibility of the government. If so, such issues will most likely include Social Security and Medicare but may also include education, consumer issues and the environment.

Regardless of the issues boomers choose to address, their brand of political activism will certainly be different than that of their elders. Much of this has been foreshadowed by differences in political behavior between generations. Our findings indicate that boomers have a greater belief in government entitlements and a lesser belief in personal obligations than the GI generation. Boomers are more likely to feel the government owes them something and less likely to believe they owe the country certain obligations, such as military service and paying taxes.

Boomers also differ from GIs in making their voting decisions. Unlike GIs, boomers are almost equally likely to consider both where the candidate stands on political issues and personal qualities of the candidate. GIs are more likely to focus on the personal qualities of a candidate more than where the candidate stands on the issues.

Additionally, boomers seem to be open to changes in their political ideology. Boomers are more likely than their elders to switch parties because of changing personal views rather than a change in the party. A greater percentage of boomers are choosing to label themselves as “Independents.” Also, boomers are more receptive to the idea of a strong third party.

In much the same way, it is expected that boomers will also put their unique stamp on political activism. Our findings suggest that further differences exist in how boomers will exert their political activism. Boomers are more likely than their elders to report community groups and individual Americans are doing a great deal to solve the nation’s problems. Hence boomers may be more likely to combine these sources with technological advances such as virtual communities of interest and blogs to push their agendas.

These differences provide insight into how boomers may choose to develop the political landscape of the future. Generally, boomers are going to pursue their political interest on their own terms. This means boomers will certainly redefine political participation into some form of personalized participation. Activism will be arranged into decentralized communities of individuals connected by a single issue or even multiple issues.
Political flexibility will rule the day. Communities of interest will be able to take action rapidly from the latest ground swell of popular opinion. Information is easily and quickly distributed across the country allowing good tactical ideas to take shape and set in motion within hours. These various means of participation will not require nearly the amount of money as rigid, conventional campaigns. Communities of interest allow activists to use whatever methods they can afford to get the word out from printing out campaign flyers to posting messages to virtual chat rooms to organizing demonstrations.

Given these means of future political activism and the findings of this study regarding boomers’ political behavior, the plight of politicians employing only conventional means of campaigning seems bleak.

Even so, there are measures future candidates can take to improve their outreach to the boomer electorate of the future. Future political candidates should be prepared to address an electorate with a conflicted self-interest. Boomers are more socially liberal and economically conservative. They want more government entitlements but would rather not be taxed to acquire them. Candidates may be forced more than ever to straddle the lines between social liberalism and economic conservatism.

Our findings suggest boomers will assuredly redefine political activism and possibly the political landscape of the future. Regardless of how boomers accomplish this, once the youngest segment of boomers reach the age of 65 the boomer population at large will represent approximately 25% of the U.S. electorate. The political clout of 77 million boomers or more is hard to ignore. Future political candidates would be foolish to pursue a politics-as-usual course to reach such a self-directed, issues-oriented, entitlement-seeking group.
METHODS

In January 2004 AARP commissioned NOP World a national survey research firm, to field a random digit dial (RDD) telephone survey designed to provide a comprehensive look at the political behavior, values and interests of baby boomers (ages 40 to 57), their parents and grandparents of the Silent generation (ages 58 to 69) and the GI generation (ages 70+). The survey was conducted nationally among a total of 1,804 adults: 603 boomers, 600 silents and 601 GIs.

The national survey has a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples of this size, the results obtained in the sample would fall in a range of 4 percentage points of what would have been obtained if every person in the afore stated age groups had been surveyed. For presentation purposes, percentage points have been rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. For questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total to significantly more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent. Similarly, when only selected responses are shown, percentages may total less than 100%.

*A more detailed methodology and annotated questionnaire can be provided upon request.*
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