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Futurist Book Group Discussion

Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube and the Future of American Politics

Morley Winograd and Mike Hais

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Synopsis of the June 2008 meeting of the Futurist Book Group (WFS Washington DC Chapter), joined by Tom Key, coordinator, Orange County (California) chapter; summarized and reviewed by Ken Harris

FUTUREtakes readers who believe in cyclical theories of history or who are political junkies will find *Millennial Makeover* compelling reading. Being a history lover as well as a futurist, I found the book fascinating, and I look forward to observing the Millennial Generation (i.e., those born between 1982 and 2003) in this year's US presidential election and beyond.

The authors apply the generational dynamics theory of Anglo-American history propounded by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their books written between 1991 and 2006, specifically to American politics, and draw conclusions based on survey research conducted by Frank N. Magid Associates.

A key conclusion is that American political history consists of cycles of 30-40 years of stability interspersed with much shorter periods of profound change called realignments. These political cycles approximate Strauss and Howe's generational cycles. Each generational cycle consists of an Idealist (today the Baby Boomers), a Reactive (today Generation X), a Civic (today the Millennials), and an Adaptive generation (today those born since 2003). Only in Idealist and Civic realignments can truly significant change take place. Idealist realignments like the time of Republican Party ascendancy that began with the 1968 presidential election are times of increased independent party identification, negative political attitudes, focus on divisive social issues, limited use of (or decline in) the national government, and greater economic inequality. Civic realignments are times of enhanced party identification, straight-ticket voting, rising or stable voter turnout, use of the national government to deal with major societal and economic concerns, and greater economic equality like the period of Democratic Party ascendancy that began in 1932. The authors bolster their case that a civic realignment is on the horizon by showing that Millennial attitudes are much like those of previous civic generations.

Idealist realignments began with the presidential elections of 1828, 1896, and 1968 and civic realignments with those of 1860 and 1932. The best arguments put forth in the book that the next realignment will be civic and increasingly driven by the Millennial generation are:

- The Millennial Generation, the largest in American history, is already more numerous than the Baby Boomers and exerting its influence through high voter turnout, volunteer efforts, and asserting its preferences in the marketplace even though its members are not yet in positions of direct power within organizations.
- The Millennials are uniquely equipped for success in the globalized world because, having had uniquely attentive parents, they are extremely self-confident and optimistic about the future; accustomed to working in teams; globally-oriented and, most importantly, far more able to exploit the capabilities of new electronic media than any other current generation. Realignments not only coincide with generational change but also with emergence of new mass communication media and the ability of a political party to make effective use of the new media.
- Democrats regained control of Congress in the 2006 mid-term election with significant help from Millennial generation volunteers and candidates using campaign messages especially appealing to the Millennial Generation. Generally in realignments the previously weaker party (beginning in 1968, the Democrats) becomes the stronger.
- Democrats were more willing in the 2006 mid-term election to conduct Internet campaigning than Republicans and, in the early 2008 race, Senator Obama was more successful than Senator Clinton because he made better use of Internet campaigning and fund raising.
- Voter turnout was significantly higher in the 2006 mid-term election than in 2002.

The greatest uncertainty in the book is whether the crises (e.g., the 9/11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the global credit crisis) of this decade have been sufficient to trigger a civic realignment. Far more serious crises—the Civil War and the Great Depression—caused the two previous civic realignments. The authors say, “We may be fortunate to find, in retrospect, that 9/11 was the only catastrophe the country needed in order to set off the chain reaction of responses that will lead to the next realignment. Or, Millennials, like other civic generations, may have to live through a series of even greater and more devastating shocks before the country is ready to move in a new direction.” Given this uncertainty, they might have explored the implications of a prolonged period of transition to the coming civic era. Would there be more of the culture wars and political gridlock that have so characterized U.S. politics in the recent past or would politicians of the “sensible center” find ways to achieve the compromises (e.g., the \$700 billion bailout legislation passed over strenuous objections of the Democratic left and Republican right) necessary to resolve major socioeconomic problems satisfactorily without a fundamental realignment? Or might a new party lead the civic realignment like the Civil War/Reconstruction era Republicans?

Hais and Winograd have long been active in Michigan Democratic politics. No doubt they are delighted that all signs point to a realignment in which the Democratic Party will be dominant for the next three or four decades. However, they are careful to point out that a much different Republican Party could also be dominant in the coming civic era. Both the Republican and Democratic Parties have led both civic and idealist realignments. However, they don’t specify what policies a successful Republican presidential candidate would have to advocate, and that his or her administration would have to execute, to assure dominance. They feel Senator McCain has a chance to distance himself sufficiently from the

Bush administration, but the need for him to hold the Republican conservative base, which still strongly supports President Bush, may prevent him from doing so.

A recent *Washington Post* article, “The Amazing Adventures of Supergrad” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/03/AR2008060302837.html>) strongly supports the authors’ view that the Millennial Generation will be unusually influential in all walks of life. In keeping with the Millennials’ technological bent, you can see and hear Winograd and Hais at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLTnHALVHkE> and http://www.pbs.org/newshour/search_results.html?q=winograd+and+Hais&x=12&y=7.

The book is a must read both for U.S. voters before they cast their 2008 ballots and for citizens of other nations seeking a fundamental understanding of the US political system.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- According to the book, alternating idealist and civic realignments have occurred at 32-36 year intervals. To what extent have these cycles correlated with other cycles such as business and financial cycles? To political gridlock, close elections, and electorate polarization in two-party democracies? (Also consider the cycles discussed by other authors such as Peter von Stackelberg.)
- In the present era of rapid and accelerating change, in what ways will cycles of the future resemble those of the past? In what ways will they differ?
- In what ways will two-party democracies change in the next decade? Consider (a) the declining role of nation-states, (b) the impact of IT (see Youngsook Park’s articles, this issue and past issues), (c) the tradeoffs between holding onto political bases while capturing “swing votes” from independents and “undecideds,” (d) shifts in relative power among the branches of government (e.g., in the US, legislative, executive, and judicial), and (e) the ephemeral nature of third parties (at least in the US).