30.8: New Horizons

Americans looked anxiously to the future, and yet also, often, to a new generation busy discovering, perhaps, that change was not impossible. Much public commentary in the early twenty-first century concerned the millennials, the new generation that came of age during the new millennium. Commentators, demographers, and political prognosticators continued to ask what the new generation will bring. *Time’s* May 20, 2013, cover, for instance, read *Millennials Are Lazy, Entitled Narcissists Who Still Live with Their Parents: Why They’ll Save Us All*. Pollsters focused on features that distinguish millennials from older Americans: millennials, the pollsters said, were more diverse, more liberal, less religious, and wracked by economic insecurity. “They are,” as one Pew report read, “relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry—and optimistic about the future.”

Millennial attitudes toward homosexuality and gay marriage reflected one of the most dramatic changes in the popular attitudes of recent years. After decades of advocacy, American attitudes shifted rapidly. In 2006, a majority of Americans still told Gallup pollsters that “gay or lesbian relations” was “morally wrong.” But prejudice against homosexuality plummeted and greater public acceptance of coming out opened the culture—in 2001, 73 percent of Americans said they knew someone who was gay, lesbian, or bisexual; in 1983, only 24 percent did. Gay characters—and in particular, gay characters with depth and complexity—could be found across the cultural landscape. Attitudes shifted such that, by the 2010s, polls registered majority support for the legalization of gay marriage. A writer for the *Wall Street Journal* called it “one of the fastest-moving changes in social attitudes of this generation.”

Such change was, in many respects, a generational one: on average, younger Americans supported gay marriage in higher numbers than older Americans. The Obama administration, meanwhile, moved tentatively. Refusing to push for national interventions on the gay marriage front, Obama did, however, direct a review of Defense Department policies that repealed the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy in 2011. Without the support of national politicians, gay marriage was left to the courts. Beginning in Massachusetts in 2003, state courts had begun slowly ruling against gay marriage bans. Then,
in June 2015, the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 in Obergefell v. Hodges that same-sex marriage was a constitutional right. Nearly two thirds of Americans supported the position.34

While liberal social attitudes marked the younger generation, perhaps nothing defined young Americans more than the embrace of technology. The Internet in particular, liberated from desktop modems, shaped more of daily life than ever before. The release of the Apple iPhone in 2007 popularized the concept of smartphones for millions of consumers and, by 2011, about a third of Americans owned a mobile computing device. Four years later, two thirds did.35

Together with the advent of social media, Americans used their smartphones and their desktops to stay in touch with old acquaintances, chat with friends, share photos, and interpret the world—as newspaper and magazine subscriptions dwindled, Americans increasingly turned to their social media networks for news and information.36 Ambitious new online media companies, hungry for clicks and the ad revenue they represented, churned out provocatively titled, easy-to-digest stories that could be linked and tweeted and shared widely among like-minded online communities,37 but even traditional media companies, forced to downsize their newsrooms to accommodate shrinking revenues, fought to adapt to their new online consumers.

The ability of individuals to share stories through social media apps revolutionized the media landscape—smartphone technology and the democratization of media reshaped political debates and introduced new political questions. The easy accessibility of video capturing and the ability for stories to go viral outside traditional media, for instance, brought new attention to the tense and often violent relations between municipal police officers and African Americans. The 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, focused the issue, and over the following years videos documenting the deaths of black men at the hands of police officers circulated among social media networks. It became a testament to the power of social media platforms such as Twitter that a hashtag, #blacklivesmatter, became a rallying cry for protesters and counterhashtags, #alllivesmatter and #policelivesmatter, for critics.38

Figure 1. Just weeks after seventeen students were murdered at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, more than two million Americans across the country participated in the March for Our Lives demonstration to advocate for more effective gun control laws. Several Stoneman Douglas students emerged as prominent national activists in the wake of the shooting. This photo of the demonstration, taken from the Newseum in Washington D.C., captures a graphic on the exterior of the museum listing five protections of the First Amendment.

Phil Roeder via Flickr
Another social media phenomenon, the #MeToo movement, began as the magnification of and outrage toward the past sexual crimes of notable male celebrities before injecting a greater intolerance toward those accused of sexual harassment and violence into much of the rest of American society. The sudden zero tolerance reflected the new political energies of many American women, sparked in large part by the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. The day after Trump’s inauguration, between five hundred thousand and one million people descended on Washington, D.C., for the Women’s March, and millions more demonstrated in cities and towns around the country to show a broadly defined commitment toward the rights of women and others in the face of the Trump presidency.

As issues of race and gender captured much public discussion, immigration continued on as a potent political issue. Even as anti-immigrant initiatives like California’s Proposition 187 (1994) and Arizona’s SB1070 (2010) reflected the anxieties of many white Americans, younger Americans proved far more comfortable with immigration and diversity (which makes sense, given that they are the most diverse American generation in living memory). Since Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society liberalized immigration laws in the 1960s, the demographics of the United States have been transformed. In 2012, nearly one quarter of all Americans were immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants. Half came from Latin America. The ongoing Hispanicization of the United States and the ever-shrinking proportion of non-Hispanic whites have been the most talked about trends among demographic observers. By 2013, 17 percent of the nation was Hispanic. In 2014, Latinos surpassed non-Latino whites to become the largest ethnic group in California. In Texas, the image of a white cowboy hardly captures the demographics of a minority-majority state in which Hispanic Texans will soon become the largest ethnic group. For the nearly 1.5 million people of Texas’s Rio Grande Valley, for instance, where most residents speak Spanish at home, a full three fourths of the population is bilingual. Political commentators often wonder what political transformations these populations will bring about when they come of age and begin voting in larger numbers.