

## Millennials and socialism:

### Australian youth are lurching to the left

By Tom Switzer and Charles Jacobs

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was a prescient moment in global history. Although the Soviet union would not officially collapse for another two years, the images of Berliners tearing down this physical and ideological barrier were emblematic of the Europe's failed experiment with Socialism.

The iron curtain that had enveloped most of the continent's east has not brought equality and a classless society. Nor had it brought the promised productivity and efficiency that would see socialism replace capitalism as the primary means of a global economic order.

Rather, socialism had left a warren of poverty, oppression and failed states in its wake. A stark warning to all those who lived through it to never repeat the mistakes of an ideology that, despite its romanticised ideals, led to as many deaths as both world wars combined.

By the late 90s, when Millennials began to vote, prosperity was on the rise. Australia was eight years into record-breaking economic growth. The United States was experiencing a similar economic boom. During the past decade, Millennials have acquired a greater influence in society. Since 2014, the entire generation has been able to vote.

In 2016 they made up over 30 percent of the electorate. The center for independent studies commissioned a polling agency You Gov Galaxy to sample the opinions of 1003 Australian Millennials on their views of socialism and its place in society.

The following paper outlines our findings, looks to similar analyses in other Western countries, and identifies some clear overarching political trends that are evolving as Millennials become increasingly influential.

### **Attitudes Towards Socialism**

The polling undertaken highlights Australian Millennial's views of socialism and how these shape attitudes towards the economy, capitalism and the role of government in society. The most notable finding here was that, overall, 58 percent of Australian Millennials polled view socialism favourably.

Less than a fifth - 18 percent - view the ideology unfavorably. The largest variation was university-educated Millennials 63 percent of whom are favourable to socialism. Those with technical qualifications - 52 percent view socialism favourably.

Given that Millennials are far more likely to be exposed to socialism at university, this could in part be due to technically qualified Millennials' lack of awareness of the ideology and its underpinnings. It is a damning indictment on our school system that nearly a third of non-university educated students have limited to no understanding of socialism as an ideology.

In most constituencies, history is a non-compulsory subject in later years of high school and thus students are not educated on the failed implementations of state-capitalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Millennial graduates viewed socialism more favourably than any other group.

In recent years, critics have suggested that universities are lurching further to the left. Although more evidence-based research is needed, the poll's findings indicate that the trends are indeed enduring, and hint at this being an issue.

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## Views on Capitalism and Government Intervention

It is important not to assume that Millennials' favourable views on socialism directly correlate with the belief that the ideology is ultimately the best approach for managing Australia. While someone may find the overarching values and principles of an ideology endearing, they may not necessarily believe it to be the most rational and effective approach.

To understand how their views fit comparatively, Australian Millennials were asked whether "Capitalism has failed and government should exercise more control of the economy". Overall, 59 percent of Australian Millennials believe that capitalism has failed and that the government must play a greater role in regulating the economy.

Once again, the trend is fairly consistent across comparable groups. Nearly two-thirds - 64 percent - of respondents in regional areas believed that capitalism has failed. Conversely, 56 percent of urban Millennials held this opinion.

It is likely that the loss of industries and jobs in regional areas contributes to this difference. Centralization and offshoring of most manufacturing has disproportionately impacted the regions compared to major cities.

Once again, university-educated Millennials were much more likely to express a firm opinion on the question, with 33 percent disagreeing that capitalism had failed and 57 percent agreeing. Only 11 percent said they didn't know.

## A Flow-on Effect

Dissatisfaction with capitalism, taken together with benign attitudes towards socialism, has meant that many Millennials hold pessimistic views about the current economic outlook. Respondents were asked whether "Ordinary workers are worse off today than they were 40 years ago".

Here the trend again remains consistent, with nearly two-thirds of each grouping agreeing that workers were worse off. Those with no tertiary qualification were the most likely to agree, with 67 percent believing workers were worse off.

The largest group disagreeing with the statement were those with a university degree. The difference between these two groups may be a reflection of the growing "brain" economy, with graduate qualifications increasingly viewed more favourably by employers.

Notably, 69 percent of respondents from New South Wales agreed that the situation for workers has declined; more than any other state polled. This is despite the fact that, for nine consecutive quarters, the New South Wales economy has been the best performing of any state in Australia.

In Western Australia, 53 percent of Millennials believed that workers were worse off, with 43% disagreeing with this statement. The minimum wage has been on the rise, and in the fourth quarter of 2017 weekly income reached an historical high of \$1192 - this was \$254 more than the fourth quarter of 1977.

Moreover, from the mid-1980s to about 2012, Australia experienced the biggest national income boom since the gold rushes; and the economy is presently in its 27<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of economic growth, surpassing the Netherlands for the gold medal of the longest expansion in the modern era.

Millennials believe that the government should be taking a more direct approach. 59 percent of poll respondents believe the government should exercise more control over the economy. Additionally, Millennials are frustrated with a lack of government spending on social services.

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Poll respondents were asked whether, “After allowing for inflation, Australia spends less on education and health than we did ten years ago.” While the results were less resounding than for other questions, a majority of respondents in every major variable agreed with this statement.

Overall, 56 percent of Australian Millennials believed that less is spent on these major social services, while 30 percent did not. Those from regional areas - 61 percent and those with no tertiary qualifications - 60 percent were the most likely to be of this opinion.

This may be a symptom of these groups feeling “left out” by the system. Urban and university educated respondents were the least likely to disagree. Statistically, these assumptions are simply wrong. Government spending has grown by 30 percent in real terms in the past decade. In 2007-2008, total government funding for healthcare was 87 billion dollars.

However, the above sentiments have contributed to a massive rise in voter support for increased government spending. Since Millennials were first able to vote in 1998, the percentage of voters favouring more spending on social services has increased dramatically.

While other factors may also be responsible for this trend, there is significant correlation between the growing number of Millennials in the overall voter base and the desire to see the government do more. In 2004, opinion reached a turning point, with more voter - 38 percent - favouring spending on social services than a decrease in tax for the first time since polling began in 1984.

In 2016, Millennials make up nearly a third of the electorate - 31 percent, with 55 percent of voters favouring an increase in government spending - suggesting that they are having a major influence on opinions.

## International Comparisons

A comparison with other Western countries shows that, similarly to Australia, Millennials prefer socialism to capitalism. In 2016, YouGov undertook polls similar to our Australian study in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

In the United States, 43 percent of respondents aged 18 to 29 viewed socialism favourably, with 26 percent viewing it unfavourably. Capitalism was viewed with more disdain. More than a third of American youth - 36 percent - viewed capitalism unfavourably.

A little more than 30 percent viewed it favourably. This was significantly different to the overall American population, who viewed capitalism much more favourably and viewed socialism with significant scepticism.

Falling in 2016, the YouGov poll was also able to gauge the reaction to Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders’ description of himself as a “democratic socialist”. Of Americans aged 18 to 29, 19 percent said this statement would make them more likely to vote for him, with 11 percent saying it made them less likely.

This was the inverse of the overall population, 12 percent saying this statement made voting for him more likely, and 18 percent saying it made them less likely. In the United Kingdom, socialism was significantly more popular across all age groups.

The 2016 YouGov Poll found that British people over 60 were the only age group to view the ideology unfavourably. Among those aged 18 to 24, 38 percent of respondents viewed socialism favourably, with 20 percent viewing it unfavourably.

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Capitalism was significantly more unpopular. Only 25 percent of the youth age bracket viewed it favourably, whilst 40 percent viewed it unfavourably. Meanwhile, 39 percent of all Brits polled viewed capitalism unfavourably.

In similar circumstances to the United States, the United Kingdom has also witnessed the rise of a major political figure who identifies as socialist. Speaking at the 2017 Labour Party Conference in Brighton, leader Jeremy Corbyn argued that the Thatcher era “neoliberal” economic model was broken, and promised to transform “the system” of wealth redistribution in Great Britain.

He is promising to nationalize many of Britain’s key industries, including water, electricity, gas and railways. Meanwhile, Labour’s treasury spokesman John McDonnell has unashamedly quoted from Mao’s “little Red Book” in parliament.

Although Corbyn’s agenda is unthinkable to supporters of the free market, his message has appealed to younger voters, many of whom feel left out in a country what is seen as increasingly unequal. A 2015 YouGov poll of Labour selectorate members revealed that 64 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24, and 67 percent of those aged 25 to 39 - the Millennial generation - preferred Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader.

Only 51 percent of Labour members in the 60 plus bracket favoured him.

## Youth Shifting To the Left

Many will be familiar with the old adage: “If you’re not a socialist at the age of 20 you have no heart. If you’re not a conservative at the age of 40, you have no brain.” However, election data shows that this is usually not the case.

Typically, the youth vote has matched the trend of the electorate. When the overall vote has favoured parties of the right, youth have followed. When it has followed the left, younger voters similarly have matched it.

However, analysis of data from several countries highlights a clear trend that has begun to develop as Millennials make up an increasingly larger percentage of the voter base. What these findings demonstrate is that Millennials favourable attitude towards socialism forms part of a wider shift to the left in the youth demographic.

In the United States, younger voters reflected wider election results from the 1970s to the turn of the century. However, since the 2000 Presidential election, the first where Millennials could participate, there has been a significant divergence.

Youth have begun to back the Democrats at a rate disproportionately higher than the rest of the electorate. When George W. Bush’s overall vote share climbed in 2004, it fell among young voters. When Barack Obama was elected in 2008, 66 percent of young people voted for him.

This was compared to 53 percent of the overall electorate. In 2016, despite Donald Trump’s shock victory, the Republican youth vote actually declined compared to 2012. A strong majority - 55 percent - of voters aged between 18 and 29 supported Hillary Clinton - 7 percent more than the 48 percent of voters who supported her overall.

In the United Kingdom, young voters have also tended to mirror the overall nation. However, a similar divergence to parties on the left has evolved since Millennials started becoming politically active. This is most notable in the explosion of young people voting for the Labour Party in the 2015 and 2017 general elections.

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By this stage, Millennials were making up almost the entire 18 to 34 age bracket. In 2015, 40 percent of this age bracket voted Labour and only 30 percent voted Conservative. This was despite Labour recording its worst election result since 1987 and the conservatives winning 38 percent of the overall vote, as well as claiming their first outright majority parliament since 1992.

In 2017, Millennial voters moved towards Labour in even more overwhelming numbers as part of what many described as a “youthquake”. According to Ipsos Mori poll, 59 percent of young voters supported Labour and just 27 percent backed the Conservatives.

This was despite the Conservatives growing their share of the overall vote from 38 percent in 2015 to 44 percent. In fact, while the Conservatives have increased their overall vote significantly since 1997, their share of the youth vote has declined in three of the last five elections since the turn of the century.

These are the only three occasions since polling began in the 1970s where the Conservative youth vote hasn't declined or increased in correlation with the remainder of the electorate. In Australia, Millennials also appear to be leaning more towards the left.

Over the past decade, as Millennials have come to make up a more critical mass of voters, the polarity of the electorate has moved consistently to the left. The Australian Election Study has mapped out the attitudes of voters over the past two decades.

It asks voters to place themselves on a scale from far left to far right. In 1996, two years before Millennials were first able to vote, the Australian electorate was well to the right on the scale. However, since then voter polarity has moved regularly to the left.

In the 2016 federal election, voter polarity tipped onto the left-wing side of the scale for the first time since the measurement began. Comparing the evolution of this phenomenon over the past two decades with Millennials' combined voting power gives a telling insight into the nation's general shift to the left.

As the number of Millennial voters has grown, voter polarity has moved to the left at a remarkably similar rate. When voter polarity first moved onto the left-wing side of the scale in 2016 it was the first Federal election where the entire Millennial generation was able to vote.

By this stage, the group consisted of 31 percent of all voters. True, not all Australian Millennials are favourable towards socialism. However, the significant portion who see the ideology in a positive light will likely continue to influence this evolution in voter polarity.

Australia's political parties also appear to be moving further towards the left. According to voter's perceptions in the Australian Election Study, Labour has moved 7 percent more to the left than when the study began. Voters surveyed believe that the Greens have also moved to the left by 21 percent.

The liberal party was even perceived to have moved 3 percent to the left since 1996, shifting by more than 10 percent since its highest “right-wing” score in 2004.

## **A Matter of Ignorance**

There is strong evidence to suggest Millennials are contributing to a leftwards shift across the western world. A major part of this move is likely being driven by generally favourable attitudes towards socialism and unfavourable opinions of capitalism.

For the older generations who lived through the Cold War, these attitudes may seem hard to fathom but the soviet union and the eastern block were state capitalist in nature, not socialist.

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However, millennials were largely unaffected by the global impacts of several decades of state capitalist oppression. Consequentially, many may be understandably unaware of its legacy.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of the YouGov Galaxy opinion poll give a telling insight into the attitudes of Australian Millennials. While a strong majority expressing a favourable opinion towards socialism hardly means the country is on the verge of a class revolution, the trend may have a significant effect as Millennials move into positions of power in the coming years.

Importantly, beliefs about government spending and the nature of capitalism could have major policy implications. As has been demonstrated, the influence of Millennials has grown in direct correlation with the electorate's increased favourability for more intervention in the economy, and support for the rise in the nation's social services bill.

Issues such as house prices and low wage growth will only increase the calls for change. Such trends are also evident internationally, and are part of a clear shift in the polarity of young voters. Historically, the youth vote has generally correlated with the overall sentiment of the electorate.

However, as Millennials have come to consist of the majority of the youth contingent, younger voters have moved significantly towards the political left.