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# Millennials' Diverse Political Views

A Typology of the Rising Generation

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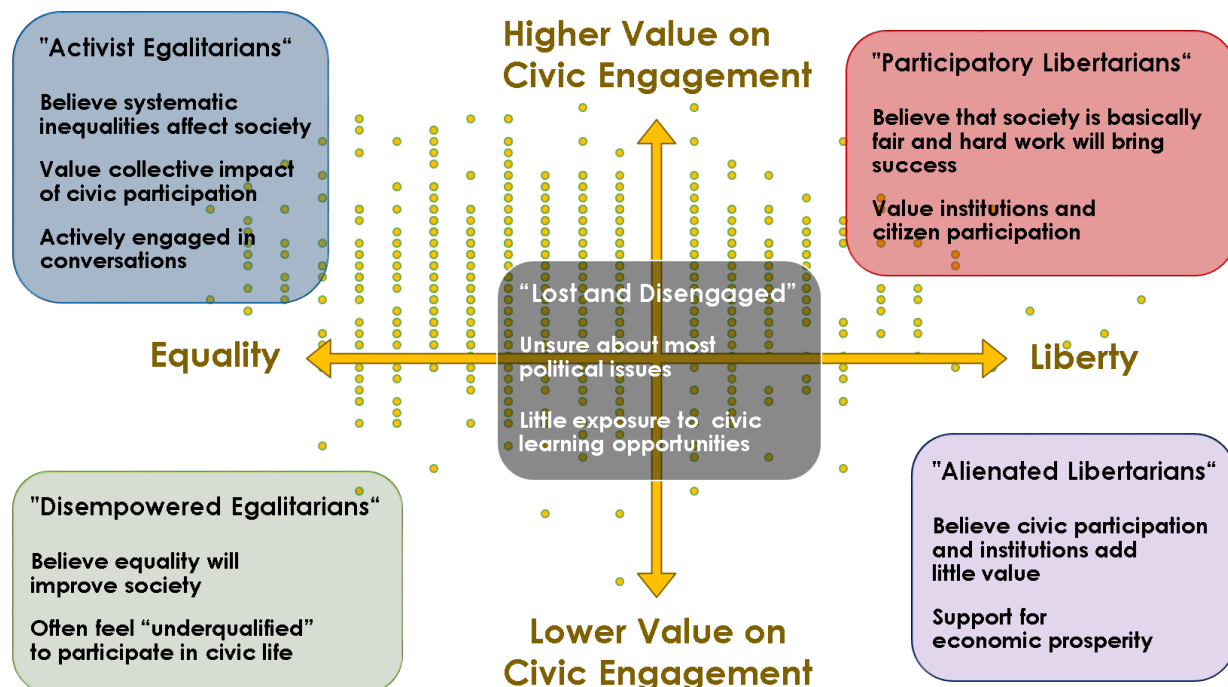
Millennials are already the largest group of potential voters and are destined to dominate American politics in decades to come. As the most demographically and economically diverse generation in American history, they naturally hold a wide range of opinions. In the 2016 election, for example, voters under the age of 30 split their support: 55% percent for Hillary Clinton, 37% for Donald Trump, and 8% for other candidates.

To get beyond stereotypes and a simple left/right ideological spectrum, we use recent survey data to categorize all Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 into five groups:

- Activist Egalitarians (39%)
- Participatory Libertarians (29%)
- Disempowered Egalitarians (8%)
- Alienated Libertarians (5%)
- Lost and Disengaged (18%)

The two **egalitarian** groups are concerned about social, political, and economic inequality, and they tend to support government action to combat it. The two **libertarian** groups are concerned about individual freedom and are more skeptical of government. Neither group is limited to ideological purists, who are rare. These labels describe general leanings toward either equality or liberty.

### Distribution of Youth Typology on Two Core Beliefs



Within both the libertarian and the egalitarian sides, there are disagreements about **civic engagement**. Millennials of all political stripes differ on whether it is useful for people like them to engage with fellow members of their community or with institutions—or both—to change society.

Those two distinctions produce four groups.

A fifth group (about one in five of all Millennials) do not seem sure where they fall on many of the questions we asked; they are also disconnected from news media, poorly informed, and therefore largely **Lost and Disengaged** from a civic life in which they do not feel prepared to participate.

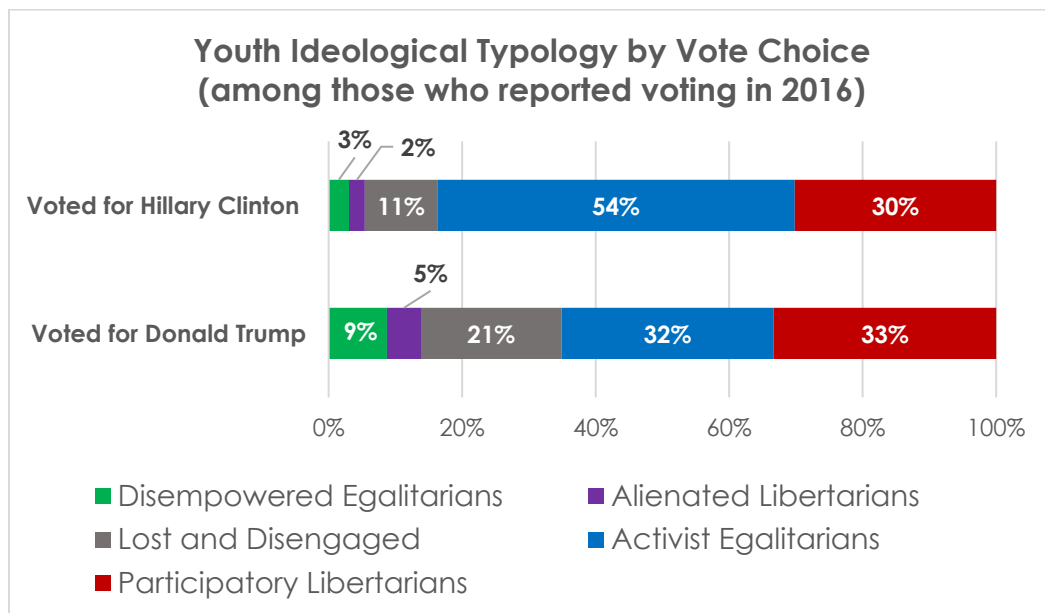
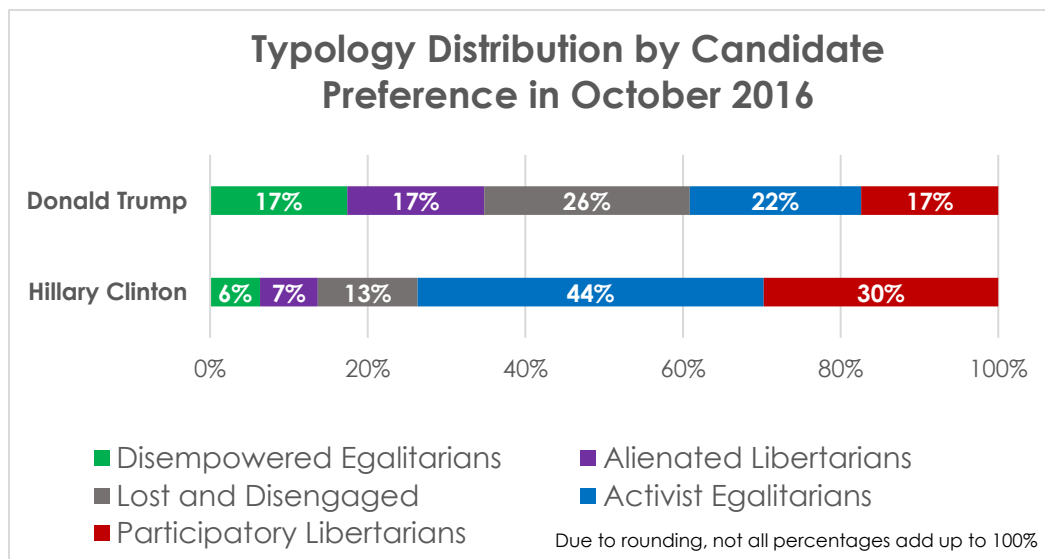
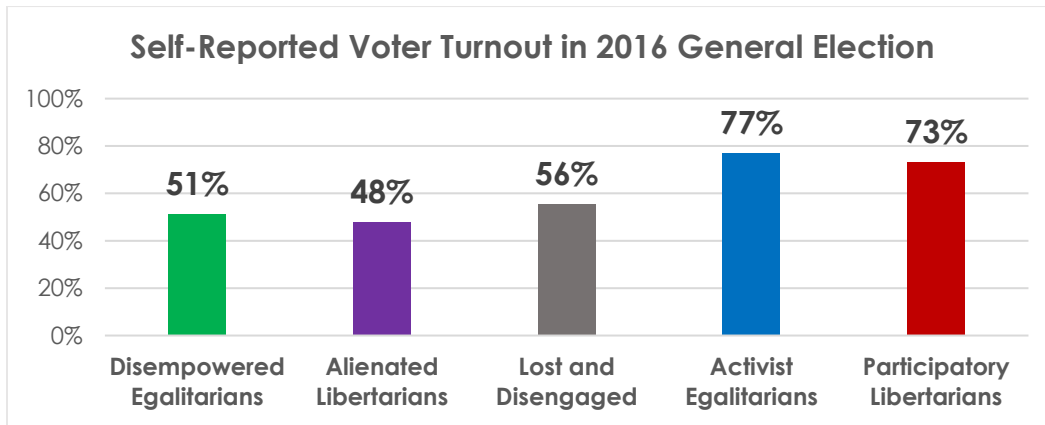
This typology derives from CIRCLE's nationally representative survey of 1,605 Millennials (ages 18-34) conducted in October 2016. Of the total sample, 1,101 Millennials were re-contacted in January 2017. The survey asked many questions about issues, activities, and values. Responses allow us to arrange individuals on the two continua. Dots on the graph represent individuals' placement on this grid.

The **Activist Egalitarians** fit an influential stereotype of Millennials, and we find that they are the single-largest group. However, they number less than two-fifths (39%) of all Millennials, and many in this group are only *somewhat* egalitarian and only *somewhat* activist.

In our 2016 survey, 65% of Clinton voters under age 35 said that "racial discrimination is a fundamental aspect of the United States," which is a characteristic egalitarian position. However, 72% of the Millennials who voted for Trump agreed that we must "protect traditional American values from outside influences," and just 18% of all respondents agreed with both of those positions. This report places such differences in a broader context.

## Political Engagement

Young people in these groups preferred different candidates before the election. Trump attracted the most support from **Disempowered Egalitarians**, the **Lost and Disengaged**, and **Alienated Libertarians**, while Clinton's strongest supporters were **Activist Egalitarians** and **Participatory Libertarians**. However, because these last two groups voted at much higher rates than the others in 2016, both Trump and Clinton drew a majority of their support from **Activist Egalitarians** and **Participatory Libertarians**. That said, Trump's voters were more evenly distributed across all five categories while more than half (54%) of Clinton's Millennial voters came from a single group: **Activist Egalitarians**.



Of the **Activist Egalitarians**, 28% see themselves as liberal or extremely liberal, but some (14%) see themselves as conservative or extremely conservative. Almost half say they are registered Democrats and 19% say they are registered Republicans. Still, it is important to note that only about a third (37%) of **Activist Egalitarians** actually say that they trust the Democratic Party “at least somewhat,” and more than one in four (27%) say that they distrust the Party. Still, in the November 2016 presidential election, they overwhelmingly favored Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump: 60% to 24%.

The **Participatory Libertarians** are fairly evenly divided in terms of party registration: 35% Republicans, 30% Independents, and 30% Democrats (with 5% identifying as Libertarian Party members). Although many consider themselves Democrats, they are more fiscally conservative than the **Activist Egalitarians**. For instance, before the election, this group expressed the most explicit opposition to raising taxes for the very wealthy and were far less supportive of raising the minimum wage. However, the GOP advantage vanishes when we ask about support for parties rather than voter registration. Just about the same proportions of **Participatory Libertarians** say they are Republicans (28%) and Democrats (27%). About 17% identify as conservative or extremely conservative, while 22% consider themselves liberal or extremely liberal. They did favor Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump by 13 points (47% vs. 34%).

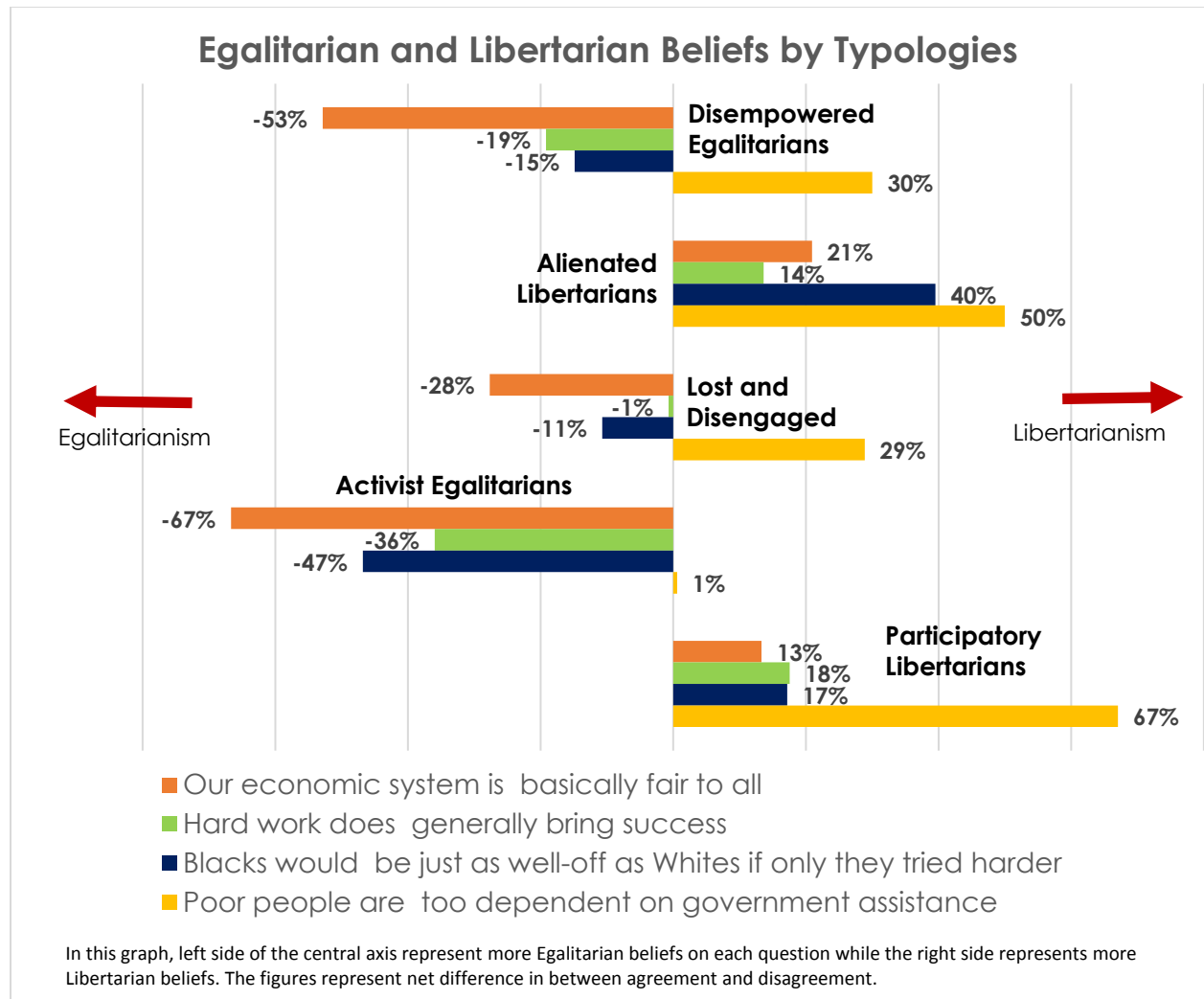
**Disempowered Egalitarians** had the second-lowest voter turnout among all groups (51%). Though their concerns about inequality might suggest otherwise, they preferred Donald Trump by a nearly 2-to-1 margin. In fact, more Millennials in this group identify as conservative (22%) than liberal (18%), but they are more moderate conservatives who seem concerned with preserving tradition. More than half of them somewhat or completely agree with the need to protect American values from change and influence.

The **Alienated Libertarians** are a small conservative group in terms of their beliefs about economic policies and the role of government in ensuring economic security of all Americans, but relatively few identify themselves as partisan, or ideologically “conservative.” They had the lowest self-reported turnout (48%), favored President Trump by a sizable margin, and are the most likely to say that they are “tired of being politically correct.” Only one in five say that politics requires compromise to get things done. However, they also report the lowest voter turnout and lowest level of attention to the presidential election.

While the **Lost and Disengaged** are the least informed and most unsure about politics, their 56% turnout rate was slightly higher than that of two other groups, which suggest they are not completely disinterested in the political process. Though they split their votes for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton evenly (36% for both), more than a fifth of Donald Trump's Millennial votes came from this group (compared to one in ten Clinton votes). Twenty percent identify as conservative, and 13% as liberal.

## Differences in Opinion

Individuals can take eclectic positions on issues that defy ideological labeling. Still, the five groups tend to differ on questions about racial and economic inequality. Here we show the difference between those who agree and those who disagree about four questions: the economic fairness of our current economy, whether hard work suffices for success, whether African Americans would obtain equal wealth if they worked as hard as Whites, and whether poor people get too much help from government.

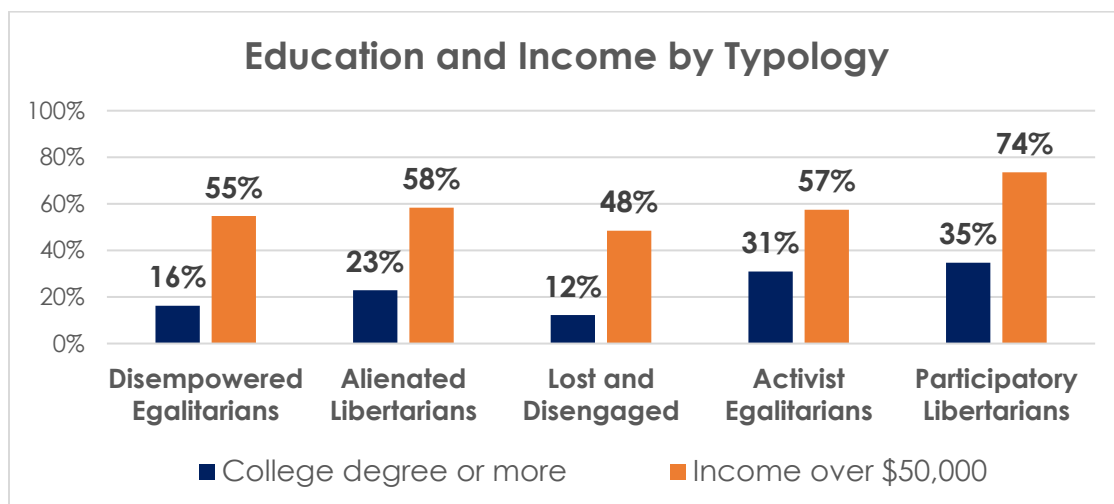


The **Activist Egalitarians** and **Disempowered Egalitarians** are consistently egalitarian, though they have a mixed perception about poor people's "dependency on government assistance." The **Participatory Libertarians** and **Alienated Libertarians** consistently take the opposite side on those questions. The opinions of the **Lost and Disengaged** appear more mixed. However, Millennials in this group stand out most for their lack of explicit opinions on most issues. Close to three quarters say they neither disagree nor agree with many responses we offered. For instance, we asked whether

“the best agents of social change are people acting on their own, not organizations or parties” or whether “selecting good leaders through elections is the best way to improve society.” (These are usually assumed to be opposing choices.) More than 75% of the **Lost and Disengaged** neither agree nor disagree with *both* statements. Even though they are relatively disadvantaged in regards to education and income, a majority have no explicit opinions on issues that would affect them directly, such as raising taxes or the minimum wage.

## Social Circumstances and Civic Opportunities

Members of these groups show different demographic makeups and are experiencing disparate social circumstances, which also relate to gaps in civic opportunities. Education and income are particularly strong differences. For example, the **Participatory Libertarians** are almost three times as likely to have a college degree as the **Lost and Disengaged**. Among the two Egalitarian groups, the Activists are almost twice as likely to have completed college as the **Disempowered Egalitarians**, more than half of whom have no college experience at all.

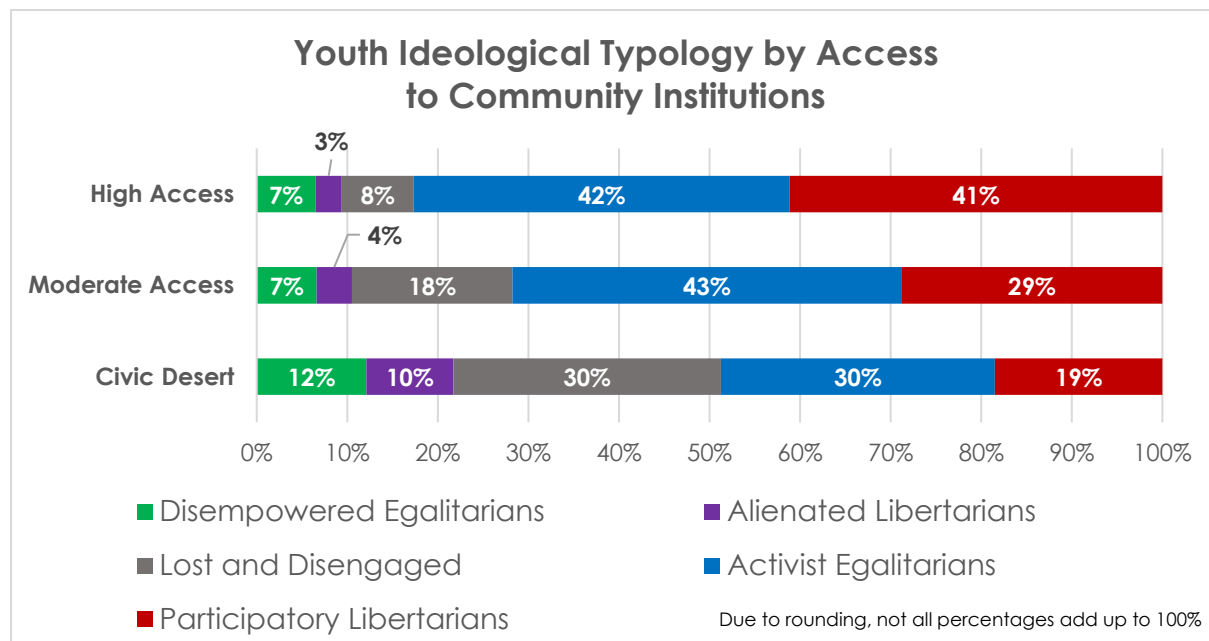


In addition, nearly three quarters of **Participatory Libertarians** report having an income of over \$50,000; that's true of less than half of the **Lost and Disengaged**. Many **Disempowered Egalitarians** say they wish the minimum wage would go up.

These groups differ somewhat in terms of race and ethnicity, but the gaps are likely explained as correlates of income and education. **Participatory Libertarians**, who are the most well-off in those two areas, have the highest proportion of White youth (64%) among all five groups. The **Lost and Disengaged**, who reports the lowest income, includes the most youth of color (49%) though the difference is small. In fact, when looking only at Millennials whose household income is \$50,000 or more, the difference in typology distribution between White youth and youth of color disappears entirely.

Adding gender to the equation does reveal some more significant differences. More than a third of young White men (36%), and less than a fourth of young women of color (23%) are **Participatory Libertarians**. Young women of color are more likely to be in the **Lost and Disengaged** cluster than other demographic groups.

Depending on their backgrounds and locations, young Americans also perceive very different opportunities to be engaged and involved in politics, their communities, and civic life. Some see lots of organizations that they can join and many places where they can discuss issues and work on community problems. Others see almost no such opportunities. We have previously named places with few evident opportunities for civic engagement "[civic deserts](#)."<sup>1</sup> Some youth from all backgrounds report living in civic deserts, but our research shows that this is particularly common for rural youth.

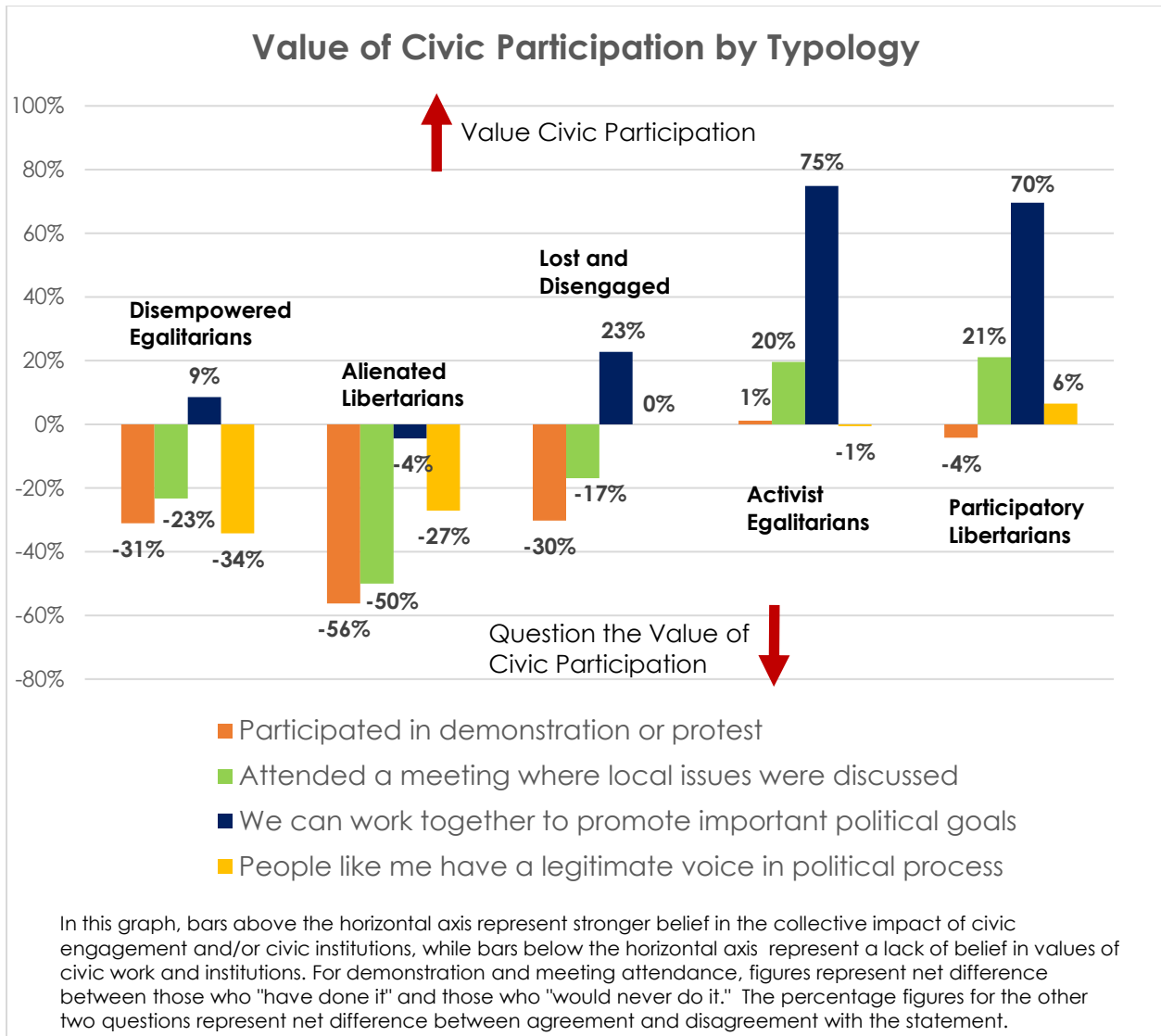


In this analysis, we find that Millennials who live in civic deserts are far more likely to fit into the groups that place relatively low value on civic and political engagement or civic institutions, while Millennials with greater access to civic institutions are more likely to show confidence in civic and political engagement. Young people in these groups also express different levels of civic and political action, as well as different beliefs about whether people can work together to accomplish something important and whether they personally have a legitimate voice in political process.

The **Activist Egalitarians** and the **Participatory Libertarians** tend to see opportunities to be engaged: only about one in four of each group live in civic deserts. The other groups see far fewer opportunities and, perhaps as a result, are less likely to believe civic engagement is valuable.

<sup>1</sup> Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg & Felicia Sullivan, "Study: 60 percent of rural millennials lack access to a political life," *The Conversation*, March 26, 2017.





**Alienated Libertarians** are the most likely to live in civic deserts and are the least engaged in all aspects of civic life: associations, volunteering, helping neighbors, political engagement, religious membership, and secular groups alike. They hold the least positive attitudes about all forms of community and political engagement, even the value of personally helping others, and report the lowest average number of civic acts actually performed. Not a single young person in this quadrant says that he or she “completely agrees” that getting involved with an organization is the best way to effect social change.

**Disempowered Egalitarians** are less extreme than **Alienated Libertarians** in their view of civic life: it's not so much that they discount the value of civic engagement, but that they feel that politics can be too complicated and seem to doubt that they can effect change. Half of them (49%) disagree that people like them have a legitimate voice in the political process—only 15% agree—and only one in ten consider themselves to be

well-qualified to participate in politics. Few of them say that they would respond to various types of outreach efforts.

It is worth noting that young people in all groups engage much more frequently in “civic acts” (volunteering, helping neighbors, signing a petition, donating money, etc.) than in “political acts” (working on a campaign, following a candidate on social media, running for office, etc.), which may reflect a lack of opportunities and a dim view of politics as an avenue for social change. **Activist Egalitarians** are the most politically involved, significantly more so than their Participatory Libertarian peers. Their involvement in politics may stem from two sets of beliefs: that people working together can have political power, and that public officials need people to keep them accountable. In fact, 69% of **Activist Egalitarians** believe that public officials do not think much of what people like them say, and they seem to be most concerned about the future of American democracy. **Activist Egalitarians'** sense of urgency, combined with their belief in the power of civic engagement, may be driving them to action.

## Discussion, Online and Off

Today, people form and share political opinions and encourage others to engage by using both social media and more traditional face-to-face communication. The groups in our typology differ markedly in how they communicate.

The **Activist Egalitarians** stand out in how they get news about elections. They are more likely than other groups to report using Twitter (21%), Facebook (54%), and other forms of social media (18%). They use all these media more than the **Participatory Libertarians**, another informed group. They also listen to podcasts (42%) and consider family and friends to be news sources (59%) more than other groups.

Compared to any other cluster, the **Activist Egalitarians** are more likely to say that they seek out other perspectives or people who are not like themselves on social media. They are also more likely to disagree with the political content or opinions that their friends post. Forty-three percent of **Activist Egalitarians** say they at least occasionally disagree with what they see from friends, compared to just 14% among **Alienated Libertarians**. The ideological diversity of their networks may sometimes lead them to censor themselves: before the election, the **Activist Egalitarians** were more likely to avoid posting something political or related to a social issue because of the “drama it might create.”

The **Activist Egalitarians** are also the most likely say that they talked about the 2016 campaign before the election with friends and family at least occasionally (71%, compared to just 21% for the **Alienated Libertarians**). Likewise, these two groups are more likely than the others to talk about politics with coworkers and classmates. This means that they have multiple avenues to hear about politics, but **Participatory Libertarians** are more likely to be exposed to views similar to their own, often through traditional media. **Participatory Libertarians** are also more likely to get election

information from websites, and less so from social media or podcasts than **Activist Egalitarians**.

In fact, during the 2016 campaign, the **Disempowered Egalitarians** were somewhat more likely than other groups to rely completely on television for election-related news. However, more than two-thirds of them distrust the media: 41% say they distrust it somewhat, and 25% completely—far more than any other group. By contrast, **Participatory Libertarians** are the most likely to trust the media at least somewhat, and more than half of them believe that journalists provide fair coverage of elections at least some of the time (55%, compared to 45% overall).

The **Lost and Disengaged** are less involved in all forms of discussion. They are also notably uninformed. Quite a few said “I don’t know” to the basic political knowledge questions we asked, and many answered incorrectly. For instance, when asked which political party holds a majority in the House of Representatives: 50% said they don’t know, and 19% said the Democrats, meaning less than one third knew the right answer. As for the party that is more opposed to gun regulation, 47% said they don’t know and 24% said Democrats, leaving just 28% who were correct.

	Disempowered Egalitarians	Alienated Libertarians	Lost and Disengaged	Activist Egalitarians	Participatory Libertarians
Journalists provide fair coverage of elections (sometimes or more)	40%	24%	33%	47%	55%
Completely or somewhat trust major news media	1%	9%	5%	18%	24%
Disagreed with the political content or opinions my friends posted (occasionally or more)	24%	14%	26%	43%	33%
Talked about the election or politics with people who disagree with me	21%	30%	27%	42%	36%
Talked about the election with friends and family (occasionally or more)	35%	21%	39%	71%	68%
Talked about the election or politics with people who disagree with me (occasionally or more)	21%	30%	27%	42%	36%

## How to Reach Them

This typology offers guidance for people who seek to engage young people in politics and other civic activities. Strategies should differ for the various groups.

- **Activist Egalitarians:** This is the easiest group to reach, which is consistent with their relatively high turnout and attention to news during 2016. Since they report being open to a wider diversity of opinions than other groups, it may be possible to reach them with messages that persuade them to change their minds. They can be reached through many channels: various social media platforms, mass media, friends, families, and institutions.
- **Participatory Libertarians:** Outreach from friends and family may work best for engaging youth in this group; about one third say they would be more likely to vote if friends or family asked them. They may be somewhat receptive to messages from media, which they distrust relatively less than young people in other groups; they are also most likely to agree (60%) that “ordinary people” can decide what is true and what is not. At the same time, they are also most likely to say that people can't express what they know to be true because of political correctness (65% vs. 48% overall).
- **Disempowered Egalitarians:** This is the group that appears to be most resistant to outreach by organizations and social media. They seem to be skeptical of, and even hostile to, political dialogue and messaging. Relatively few have regular conversations about political issues with family and friends. Their media diet is somewhat limited compared to people in the Activist Egalitarian group, who take in news from several sources. Data suggest that their apparent lack of interest may have to do with a sense that they are “not qualified” to participate in political conversation. To get this group more engaged may require making politics seem a lot more accessible and creating an authentic sense of efficacy. It might help to strengthen civic education, to insert political conversations in venues that usually don't touch politics, and to be sensitive to their appreciation of traditions and relatively conservative values.
- **The Alienated Libertarians** are least engaged in associations but do seem to respond to outreach by family and friends, suggesting that they are not completely alienated but that their circle of trust is very small. They distrust many institutions and distrust people who are different from themselves. Members of this group appeared to be more pessimistic about the future of the United States than others before the election.
- **Lost and Disengaged:** It appears difficult, but not impossible, to successfully engage these Millennials. Nearly half did not see any political advertisements, from any source, during the 2016 election season. They said they would not be moved to vote if asked by a friend or an organization, although a quarter of them reported that they would be more receptive to outreach from family. Deeper and earlier investment in civic education and out-of-school programs may be necessary to engage youth in these circumstances.

## Conclusion

The demographic diversity of Millennials often dominates conversations about young people, while their ideological diversity is either overlooked or poorly understood. But as they become the largest voting bloc in the country and take the reins of American democracy, it becomes even more vital to understand how their values and beliefs will shape the nation's future for decades to come.

Our findings, as laid out in this typology, reinforce the need to look beyond vote choice and self-identified partisan affiliation to understand how Millennials conceive of their own political views, and how different candidates do and do not represent them. It helps to explain the apparent [shift away from traditional political parties](#) we have observed among youth over the last 10 years.

Most importantly, it underscores that achieving more equitable outcomes in youth participation will require breaking out of the left-right dichotomy and supporting young people's civic development in a way that takes into account their ideas and the social and economic circumstances that dictate their access to civic institutions and opportunities.

One of the primary takeaways from this analysis should be especially troubling: while a majority of young people feel that they have a voice and access to opportunities to make a difference through civic and political engagement, a sizable minority are unconvinced that they and their fellow citizens can effect change, and/or feel unqualified to contribute to civic life. That this lack of civic efficacy and confidence correlates with disparities in education and income only exacerbates political and social inequalities.

Engaging these young people will be challenging, but it is not impossible. For example, disempowered and alienated Millennials are more resistant to conventional outreach from campaigns and organizations, but they are more likely to listen to family and friends. That means it may be ineffective to simply try to "mobilize" youth when their votes are needed. Instead, we must implement multi-pronged, short- and long-term strategies for engagement that support all young people as they develop their civic and political identity. And we must ensure that Millennials have the resources and opportunities to express their identities with a loud and clear voice, and to turn that voice into effective action.

## Millennials' Diverse Political Views: A Typology of the Rising Generation

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) is a nonpartisan, independent, academic research center that studies young people in politics and presents detailed data on young voters in all 50 states. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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