

Elite Failure Has Brought Americans to the Edge of an Existential Crisis

The nuclear family, God, and national pride are a holy trinity of the American identity. What would happen if a generation gave up on all three?

Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic*



In 1998, *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC News asked several hundred young Americans to name their most important values. Work ethic led the way—naturally. After that, large majorities picked patriotism, religion, and having children.

Twenty-one years later, the same pollsters asked the same questions of today's 18-to-38-year-olds—members of the Millennial and Z generations. The results, published last week in *The Wall Street Journal*, showed a major value shift among young adults. Today's respondents were 10 percentage points less likely to value having children and 20 points less likely to highly prize patriotism or religion. The nuclear family, religious fealty, and national pride—family, God, and country—are a holy trinity of American traditionalism. The fact that allegiance to all three is in precipitous decline tells us something important about the evolution of the American identity.

One interpretation of this poll is that it's mostly about the erosion of traditional Western faith. People under 30 in the U.S. account for more than one-third of this nation's worshippers in only three major religions: Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. This reflects both the increase in non-European immigration since the 1970s and the decline of larger Christian denominations in the latter half of the 20th century. It also reflects the

sheer increase in atheism: Millennials are nearly three times more likely than Boomers to say they don't believe in God—6 percent versus 16 percent. If you think that Judeo-Christian values are an irreplaceable keystone in the moral arc of Western society, these facts will disturb you; if you don't, they won't. A second interpretation of this poll is that it's mostly about politics. Youthful disinterest in patriotism, babies, and God might be a mere proxy for young people's distaste for traditional conservatism. For decades, the Republican Party sat high on the three-legged stool of Reaganism, which called for "traditional" family values (combining religiosity with the primacy of the nuclear family), military might (with all its conspicuous patriotism), and limited government. Millennials and Gen Zers have turned hard against all these values; arguably, their intermittently monogamous, free-spending Republican president has, too. Young voters are far to the left of not only today's older Americans, but also past generations of younger Americans. Based on their votes since 2012, they have the lowest support for the GOP of any group in at least half a century. So it's possible that Millennials are simply throwing babies out with the Republican bathwater.

But it looks like something bigger is going on. Millennials and Gen Z are not only unlikely to

call themselves Protestants and patriots, but also less likely to call themselves Democrats or Republicans. They seem most comfortable with unaffiliation, even anti-affiliation. They are less likely than preceding generations to identify as “environmentalists,” less likely to be loyal to specific brands, and less likely to trust authorities, or companies, or institutions. Less than one-third of them say they have “a lot of confidence” in unions, or Silicon Valley, or the federal government, or the news, or the justice system. And don’t even get them started on the banks. This blanket distrust of institutions of authority—especially those dominated by the upper class—is reasonable, even rational, considering the economic fortunes of these groups were pinched in the Great Recession and further squeezed in the Not-So-Great Recovery. Pundits may dismiss their anxiety and rage as the by-products of college-campus coddling, but it flows from a realistic appraisal of their economic impotency. Young people today commit crimes at historically low rates and have attended college at historically high rates. *They have done everything right*, sprinting at full speed while staying between the white lines, and their reward for historic conscientiousness is this: less ownership, more debt, and an age of existential catastrophe. The typical Millennial awakens many mornings to discover that some new pillar of the worldorder, or the literal world, has crumbled overnight. And while she is afforded little power to do anything about it, society has outfitted her with a digital megaphone to amplify her mordant frustrations. Why in the name of family, God, or country would such a person lust for ancient affiliations? As the kids say, *#BurnItAllDown*. But this new American skepticism doesn’t only affect the relatively young, and it isn’t confined to the overeducated yet underemployed, either.

This spring, the researchers Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson at Princeton University, Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins, and Robert Francis, now at Whitworth University, published a paper based on lengthy interviews conducted from 2000 to 2013 with older, low-income men without a college degree in black and white working-class neighborhoods in the Boston, Charleston, Chicago, and Philadelphia areas. At first blush, these men seem completely different from the younger, more liberal, more educated group in the WSJ/NBC survey. The white working class, in particular, is Trump’s bedrock, whereas Millennials and Gen Z form the heartwood of his opposition. But many of these men—having been disconnected from the stable, unionized, pension-paying jobs of their fathers—reject the diseased state of America’s institutions in ways that Millennials might find relatable. First, these low-income working-class men are turning away from organized religion even faster than Millennials and Gen Z. Since the 1970s, church attendance among white men without a college degree has fallen even more than among white college graduates, according to the paper. They remain deeply spiritual without being traditionally devout, avoiding church and preferring instead to browse the internet and libraries for makeshift pieces of a religious self. “They [are] attempting to renegotiate their relationship with religion by picking and choosing elements of various religious traditions they found appealing,” the authors write. Second, their detachment from religion flows from a feeling that elites have lost their credibility. “Mistrust of religious leaders was often cited as a reason for eschewing a childhood faith,” the authors write, and “some viewed clergy as little more than scam artists.” Francis told me that his research has uncovered a similar distrust among the working class for political elites—hardly a

surprise, given the fact that white members of this group broke hard for a president who delights in skewering elite sentiment.

Third, many poor working-class men now reject the nuclear family, in their own way. Their marriage rates have declined in lockstep with their church attendance. But the authors note that a number of these men were eager to have close relationships with their children, even when they had little relationship with their mothers. While many of them had given up on romance, they saw opportunities to have relationships with their kids as a way of fixing their own mistakes, thus giving back to their communities “in ways that they believe[d] can make the world a better place.” Finally, as the older working class and younger generations struggle to renegotiate their attachments to faith, family, and community, they face similar challenges with regard to their mental health. Anxiety, depression, and suicidality have increased to unprecedented levels among young people. Meanwhile, deaths from drugs and suicide—so-called deaths of despair, which are concentrated in the white working class—have soared in the past two decades, recently reaching the highest levels ever recorded by the federal government. Across generations, Americans seem to be suffering from, and dying of, new levels of loneliness in an age of crumbling institutions.

The older working-class men in the paper desperately want meaning in their lives, but they lack the social structures that have historically been the surest vehicles for meaning-making. They want to be fathers without nuclear families. They want spirituality without organized religion. They want psychic empowerment from work in an economy that has reduced their economic power. They want freedom from pain and misery at a time when the pharmaceutical solutions to those maladies are addictive and deadly. They want the same pride and esteem

and belonging that people have always wanted.

The ends of Millennials and Gen Z are similarly traditional. The WSJ/NBC poll found that, for all their institutional skepticism, this group was more likely than Gen Xers to value “community involvement” and more likely than all older groups to prize “tolerance for others.” This is not the picture of a generation that has fallen into hopelessness, but rather a group that is focused on building solidarity with other victims of economic and social injustice. Younger generations have been the force behind equality movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, #AbolishICE, and Medicare for All, not only because they’re liberal, and not only because they have the technological savvy to organize online, but also because their experience in this economy makes them exquisitely sensitive to institutional abuses of power, and doubly eager to correct it. What Americans young and old are abandoning is not so much the promise of family, faith, and national pride as the trust that America’s existing institutions can be relied on to provide for them.

The authors of the paper on working-class men note that, even as their subjects have suffered a shock, and even as they’re nostalgic for the lives of their fathers and grandfathers—the stable wages, the dependable pensions—there is a thin silver lining in the freedom to move beyond failed traditions. Those old manufacturing jobs were routine drudgery, those old churches failed their congregants, and traditional marriages subjugated the female half of the arrangement. “These men are showing signs of moving beyond such strictures,” the authors write. “Many will likely falter. Yet they are laying claim to a measure of autonomy and generativity in these spheres that were less often available in prior generations. *We must consider both the unmaking and remaking aspects of their stories.*”

And there is the brutal truth: *Many will likely falter*. They already are. Rising anxiety, suicide, and deaths of despair speak to a profound national disorder. But eventually, this stage of history may be recalled as a purgatory, a holding station between two eras: one of ostensibly strong, and quietly vulnerable, traditions that ultimately failed us, and something else, between the unmaking and the remaking.