Introduction

Millennials, one of six living generations, are the largest generational cohort in American history. Typically characterized as those born between 1980 and 1997, millennials reached an important milestone by the end of 2015: for the first time, all 80 million were of voting age. By every measure they stand to have an enormous impact on the nation.

The millennial generation is distinct from the others for several reasons: Those born before 1990 came of age in an economy that seemed to have no limits while those born later came of age during the worst economic crisis the nation has seen since the Great Depression. However, all millennials came of age in an America in which racial and gender equality are the norms and where technological advancements have fundamentally altered the ways in which we live, work and interact with the world around us.

Even before reaching full generational strength, millennials had transformed the body politic, serving as the driving force behind seismic shifts in public opinion on issues such as gay marriage and marijuana policy. They anchored the new coalition of Virginia voters that, in 2008, helped elect Barack Obama as America’s first African American president in history and the first Democratic presidential candidate to win Virginia since 1964. Millennials remained instrumental in keeping Virginia blue for Obama’s reelection four years later in 2012.

Several questions now arise regarding the influence of Virginia millennials in the 2016 presidential election: Are millennials as truly apathetic as commonly portrayed, or will they show up to vote again in 2016 as they did in 2008 and 2012? What does Virginia’s millennial electorate look like in terms of partisanship and candidate preference? Drawing on data from two Wason Center for Public Policy studies of Virginia millennials conducted in 2014 and 2015, we examine economic and financial concerns millennials bring to the 2016 ballot box, as well as their political behavior in the 2012 presidential election. We then use that data, combined with more recent Wason Center polling conducted during the 2016 presidential primaries, to gain insight into what we might expect from this key voting group in the upcoming presidential election.
Political Participation
Nationally, millennials are not pleased with the direction of the nation, and Virginia millennials are no different. A recent study of millennial Americans by Harvard’s Institute of Politics shows disapproval over approval by a 3-to-1 margin, with 47% of respondents saying things in the nation were headed on the wrong track and only 15% saying things were generally headed in the right direction.\(^2\) As Figure 1 indicates, the 2014 Wason Center Millennial study found that 55% of Virginia millennials said they thought things in the United States were headed in the wrong direction, while 32% said things were headed in the right direction. In their assessment of President Obama’s performance, Virginia millennials were evenly split with 45% approving the way President Obama was handling his job and 46% disapproving.\(^3\)

Like Virginians generally, the Commonwealth’s millennials continue to feel the strain of a post-Great Recession economy that has been slow to recover. Millennials just entering the economy see an enormous obstacle to economic and financial stability—a mountain many of them worry they will never summit. They are apprehensive about their financial future, especially the burden of student loan debt. Because they have come of age at a time of heightened political polarization and gridlock in Washington, they don’t hold much hope that politics can provide solutions to many of the ills they, and the nation, face. Instead they have turned inward, expressing more confidence in themselves and in nonpolitical engagement for solutions to issues facing the state and the country.

Economic Sources of Anxiety
According to the Harvard Institute of Politics study, millennials across the country are most concerned about the economy, jobs, economic equality, and personal money issues. (Collectively these are the top issues of 23% of millennials nationally.)\(^4\) Virginia millennials identify similar top concerns, with 31% saying they view the economy and jobs as the most important issues facing the nation.\(^\) When it comes to their own personal financial situation, twice as many Virginia millennials say they are behind where they thought they would be at this stage in life as those who say they are ahead of expectations: 43% to 19%. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the financial strain is felt more acutely by millennial women than men, with 52% of women saying their personal financial situation is behind where they thought it would be at this stage in life compared to only 34% of men. The financial strain is also felt unevenly by region: a larger percentage of millennials in South-Southwest Virginia and Richmond-Central Virginia consider themselves behind where they thought they would be in contrast with their peers in Northern Virginia or Hampton Roads. This disparity suggests that some regions of the state have outpaced others in terms of economic growth and opportunity for young Virginians.

Virginia millennials do not feel alone in their personal financial struggles and seem to recognize that systemic issues lie at the heart of their economic concerns. Just over four in ten (43%) say that they are about where their peers are in terms of their personal financial situation, while just over a quarter (27%) say they are behind their peers. Still, nearly a third (31%) say they are ahead of their peers. Education seems to be a key factor...
about the future and say that they expect their personal financial situation to get better in the next five years (73%) rather than get worse (5%) or stay the same. Men and women share this optimism, although women are slightly more optimistic. Despite spending their formative years in the Great Recession, younger millennials (ages 18–27) are slightly more optimistic about their economic prospects than older millennials (ages 28–36). This outlook may be a product of their having been sheltered from the worst effects of the recession by their parents, whereas older millennials braved the recession on their own and, as such, bear deeper scars.

Civic and Political Behavior

The Wason Center’s 2015 analysis of Virginia millennials reveals that the vast majority (70%) have volunteered or performed community service at some point in their life, with nearly 40% citing passion for an issue or cause as the motivating factor. Civic participation rates are

Down, but Not Out

Oscar Wilde once said, “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.” Despite being anxious over the state of their personal economic situation, Virginia millennials are bullish on their future. As Figure 3 indicates, Virginia millennials, by a wide margin, are optimistic about the future and say that they expect their personal financial situation to get better in the next five years (73%) rather than get worse (5%) or stay the same. Men and women share this optimism, although women are slightly more optimistic. Despite spending their formative years in the Great Recession, younger millennials (ages 18–27) are slightly more optimistic about their economic prospects than older millennials (ages 28–36). This outlook may be a product of their having been sheltered from the worst effects of the recession by their parents, whereas older millennials braved the recession on their own and, as such, bear deeper scars.

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slightly higher among younger Virginia millennials (ages 18–27), which may reflect increased emphasis on service learning in high schools over the past decade. Peer influence appears to have a significant effect on millennial civic engagement. A strong majority of millennials surveyed (84%) said they would be likely to volunteer or engage in community service if prompted by a friend to do so. In the area of politics, the response was less robust. A majority of Virginia millennials said they would consider attending a political event (62%) or volunteering to work on a political campaign (52%) if prompted by a friend. As Figure 4 reveals, Virginia millennials see community volunteerism as a more effective means of solving important issues facing the country than political engagement (33% compared to 11%), although a plurality (38%) identify a combination of the two as the most effective means of affecting change.

The 2012 Election
In the 2012 election, Virginia millennials varied widely in their rates of registration and voting patterns. Although, as Figure 5 shows, 66% of Virginia’s millennials were registered to vote, older millennials (ages 28–36) were significantly more likely to be registered to vote than younger ones (78% compared to 52%). On the other hand, registration rates were similar for men and women. With respect to actual turnout, though, 61% of Virginia millennials reported casting a ballot in the 2012 election. Of that group, 66% of millennial males reported voting, compared to 56% of their female counterparts (Figure 6). The gap between older and younger millennials is even more pronounced. Although 74% of those ages 28 to 36 indicated they had cast a ballot, only 47% of those ages 18–27 reported having voted. Looking ahead, 73% of Virginia millennials indicated that they plan to vote in the 2016 election.

In terms of party identification, 36% of Virginia millennials identified themselves in

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**Figure 4: What is the Best Method to Solve Issues Facing Country?**

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**Figure 5: Virginia Millennial 2012 Voter Registration**

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December as Democrats, 32% as independents, and 23% as Republicans, revealing a significant advantage for the Democratic candidates (Figure 7). Like their counterparts nationwide, Virginia millennials supported President Obama over Mitt Romney in 2012 by 60% to 30%, with virtually no difference between men and women. Given the significant party-identification advantage enjoyed by the Democrats, the 30-point gap between Obama and Romney in 2012 is not surprising. Millennials were also surveyed for their opinion on several political issues. Analysis reveals that Virginia millennials overwhelmingly support decriminalizing marijuana (74%), legalizing medical marijuana (78%), instituting term limits for members of Congress (79%), and limiting the amount of money individuals or groups can spend to influence the outcome of elections (79%).

The 2016 Elections
The data regarding the political behavior of Virginia millennials in the 2012 election, combined with new data collected during the 2016 primary elections, allow us to develop a picture of Virginia millennials heading into this fall's election cycle. According to exit polling conducted by the National Election Pool (NEP), millennials made up 12% of the Virginia Republican primary electorate and 16% of the Democratic primary electorate. In the Democratic primary, Virginia millennials strongly preferred Bernie Sanders to Hillary Clinton (68%—30%), which is similar to findings from other states. The Republican primary was far more competitive with 35% of Virginia millennials voting for Rubio and 30% for Trump.

Party Defection
A Wason Center for Public Policy survey administered after the 2016 Virginia presidential primary in March asked Republican primary participants who did not vote for Trump and Democratic primary participants who did not vote for Clinton about their intentions for the fall general election. Specifically, these respondents were asked if they planned to support the party’s nominee despite not having supported them in the primary and were given several options: voting for the nominee, voting for the other party’s nominee, voting for a third party candidate, or not voting in...
the election (Figure 8). A strong majority (84%) of Virginia millennials who voted for a candidate other than Clinton in the Democratic primary indicated they would cast their ballots for Clinton if she became the nominee. However, only 56% of Virginia millennials who voted for a candidate other than Trump in the Republican primary said they would vote for him if he became the party nominee. In fact, 21% said they would vote for the Democratic nominee and another 16% said they would opt for a third-party candidate, creating a combined millennial defection rate of 37%.

In our first measurement of the Clinton/Trump head-to-head in this fall’s general election, Clinton carried the Virginia millennial vote 47%-28%. It is clear that Trump will have to make considerable inroads among Virginia millennials in order to address that 19% gap. Still, this difference is more modest than the 30-point gap in the 2012 election between Romney and Obama. It is possible that Trump’s celebrity status will help him with millennials. Clinton has struggled to win young voters in the primary, losing their vote to Sanders by wide margins. That being said, it is not likely that young voters will abandon the Democratic candidate unless Trump can position himself better than Romney did in 2012.

The Wason Center survey also asked respondents whether Trump’s support of a temporary ban on Muslims entering the United States or Bernie Sanders’s identification as a democratic socialist made it more or less likely that they could support the candidates. Interestingly, the vast majority (80%) of Virginia millennials said Sanders’s identity as a democratic socialist would make them more likely rather than less likely to support him. Of course, it should be noted that the millennial generation is the first post-Cold War generation. Theirs is a generation in which international terrorism, rather than the spread of communism, has been the dominant foreign policy paradigm. In addition, their experience with capitalism includes the Great Recession and years in which income inequality has been increasing significantly. As such, it is possible that millennials have a more favorable or, at least, less unfavorable impression of socialism than do older generations.

Regarding the proposed Muslim ban, although 42% of Virginia millennials said it would make them less likely to support Trump, a plurality (47%) said that it would make no difference in their vote.

Conclusion
Millennials are fully enfranchised as of 2015, which means the formidable political weight of the millennial voter could be fully felt for the first time in the 2016 presidential election. In Virginia, millennial voters have been scarred by the economic turbulence of the past decade but remain optimistic about the future. They see civic engagement as important, even if they disagree on the best method of affecting change. The influence of Virginia’s youngest generation of voters will no doubt factor heavily into the political strategies of the Trump and Clinton campaigns. The candidate who can best articulate a message that capitalizes on the economic anxieties of young Virginians may have the upper hand. The political behavior of millennials in the 2012 presidential election and data drawn from the 2016 presidential primaries clearly show that the Republican Party needs to make inroads with this important cohort if it hopes to carry their vote in the general election this fall.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
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Figure 8: Virginia Millennial Intent to Defect in the 2016 General Election

Source: Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, “If Trump is Nominee, Many VA Republicans will Defect; Clinton Suffers no Such “Loyalty Gap” Among Democrats,” April 7, 2016.
of Georgia in 2015, and her B.S. from the University of Oregon in 2009. Her research focuses on political campaigns and elections, political behavior, and public opinion.

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Endnotes
1 There are no “official” start and end dates for generational cohorts. The U.S. Census Bureau does not define generations. The millennial generation is generally characterized by scholars as starting as early as 1978 and ending as late as 2004. The most commonly used starting year for the millennial generation is 1980, which is the year we use.
3 Ibid.
4 Wason Center for Public Policy, Christopher Newport University, “Virginia Millennial voters solidly favor Warner and put Libertarian Sarvis second to Gillespie.” October 23, 2014.
5 Ibid.
7 By comparison, according to the Corporation for National & Community Service, 30.1% of all Virginia residents reported volunteering in 2014, the most recent year available for statewide data on volunteering. See: https://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/VA
8 As a point of comparison, according to the 2012 Virginia Exit Poll, 39% of all voters identified as Democrats, 32% as Republicans, and 29% as independents. Barack Obama won Virginia, 51% to 47%.
9 National Election Pool, conducted by Edison Research, March 1, 2016. Republicans N=1523 Democrats N=1413
10 It is expected that the actual defection rate will be lower. The Wason Center will be conducting a follow-up survey after the election in late November 2016 to find out how many defectors actually followed through on the stated intention to defect and to test for differences on defection rates between millennial voters and other Virginia voters.

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