



## Opinion Science Podcast

*Hosted by Andy Luttrell*

### Polling Young Voters with Kristen Soltis Anderson

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#### **Andy Luttrell:**

I have a confession to make. I'm a millennial. Oh, it feels good to admit it. I'm a millennial. We're a weird generation. Some people still scoff at us, still seeming to think that millennial means entitled young person, but you're a millennial if you're 39 years old. And younger people see us as overly nostalgic old people. Apparently, they make fun of us on TikTok, but what the heck is TikTok even, am I right? Just like any generation, we're defined by the environment we grew up in, and political experts want to know: how do we vote? If we look back at Barack Obama's campaigns for presidency, we see big support from millennials. This generation overwhelmingly leans toward voting for Democrats, but why? Is it just a young person thing? Is it about how we grew up? Is it about how the parties were operating at the time?

We'll talk about all of that stuff in this episode, but it's worth realizing how important it is to understand the politics of today's young adults. The values and opinions that are forged at this time have a huge effect on people's opinions over their lifetimes. In the 1930s, the psychologist Theodore Newcomb surveyed the opinions of students at Bennington College. Bennington was an all-women's college and the students mostly came from quite conservative, affluent families. But the environment at the college was marked by quite liberal social activism. Newcomb found that throughout their time at Bennington, these women tended to become more liberal in their views. But maybe the most intriguing aspect of this is that they were able to follow up with these women up to 50 years later and they generally found that the attitudes these women left Bennington with were remarkably consistent over the rest of their lives.

So, what do today's millennials' and Gen Z'ers' more liberal leanings mean for the future? And why should Republicans be paying attention? You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell and this week I'm super excited to talk with Kristen Soltis Anderson. She's the co-founder of the polling firm Echelon Insights. For five years, she co-hosted the podcast The Pollsters, and you may have heard her talking about the latest polls on her Sirius XM show, The Trendline, her show on Fox Nation, What Are The Odds, or her other appearances on MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, and other outlets.

In 2014, she was a resident fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics, and in 2015, she released her first book, *The Selfie Vote: Where Millennials Are Leading America (And How Republicans Can Keep Up)*. As another big election looms in this country, I was happy to talk to Kristen about her

work in polling, about how young people think about politics, and what it all means for the 2020 election.

Okay. Well, first things first, how is your dog, Wally?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Wally is wonderful. He's very sad that I've just come upstairs and left him down there, but I did give him breakfast, so I've at least checked that box off his list for the day.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I had no idea when I followed you on Twitter a year ago that I would be getting intimately involved with your dog. So yeah, so I'm curious in general. You've talked about how you came up interested in politics from a very young age and how that sort of led you to where you are now, but I was wondering if you could sort of give a brief retrospective of what it was that got you to what you do now and what you see sort of as your primary job these days?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Sure. So, I got interested in politics when I was in middle school, I was the kid running for class president. When I got to high school, I was the kid on the debate team. And really around the election in the year 2000, that's when I got focused on national politics, policy. I grew up in Central Florida and you may have heard that Florida played a pretty key role in the election in 2000, so it was hard to escape the world of electoral politics, and if you were at all interested, there was plenty to dig into.

So, I went to college at the University of Florida. I studied political science. I decided I did not want to take that and go to law school. I really wanted to get to Washington. I watched too much West Wing. I had been totally brainwashed by Aaron Sorkin and so I came up to D.C. in the spring of 2005 all excited to dive into the world of real politics. And what I didn't realize at the time was that showing up right after an election is actually a little bit of a lousy time to come to D.C. to learn the world of politics, because that's a bit when things go into hibernation and frankly folks are just trying to raise money. I did an internship at the NRCC, which is the Republican group that sort of supports all of the House members, all of the races for House of Representatives on the Republican side, and at that point you don't even have candidates in a lot of races. They are just trying to raise money that they can spend 18 months later.

So, I learned a lot about campaign finance. I learned that I probably didn't ever want to run for office because it seems like you have to spend a lot of time fundraising, which is not what I saw on the West Wing, is not the Aaron Sorkin picture of how politics works. But I did realize that I was comfortable with data, and numbers, and spreadsheets, and I had a lot of quantitative questions about how politics works. So, members who were raising certain amounts of money, is it that they're on certain committees? That they have certain levels of seniority? Is it that they're in more or less competitive districts? These are questions that data can help you answer, and I just got curious in looking at politics through that kind of lens.

But I had come to Washington originally hoping to be in the communications side. Again, I'd been a debate kid. I wanted to be a press secretary, or a speech writer, or something like that. And I got

nudged into an entry-level job at a polling firm on the grounds that polling was the intersection of those two disciplines. That if you were competent when it came to math and interested in the quantitative side of understanding the world around us, but you had a passion for language, and messaging, and the verbal side of things, polling is both of those disciplines combined. And so, I began working answering phones at a polling firm in 2005 and never looked back. Worked for the same firm for eight years. Took a little time off to work on my book, *The Selfie Vote*, and then eventually just was too bored not being fully in the mix. I started up my own firm, which is where I work today. Echelon Insights.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And a lot of your work, too, is as I understand it kind of conveying polls to the public, as well. So, through podcasts and other sorts of media you're sort of embedded in this world, so I'm curious how that part came about, right? So, plenty of people who have inclinations like my own would be happy to just sort of bury their heads in the data and never look up, but you've gone another direction, as well, right? Maintaining that sort of analytical part of it, but also doing some advocacy work in terms of just conveying the information to people.

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Yeah. Well, and this has been a really interesting change in the polling world in the last 15 years or so. When I first started off in the industry, if you talked about a pollster who went on TV, you were probably talking about Frank Luntz or Kellyanne Conway, or maybe you were talking about Larry Sabato and kind of lumping him in, but the idea of people going on TV and talking about what research was showing voters were thinking... It wasn't as robust an industry. And frankly, around that time I had dabbled in possibly wanting to apply to graduate school and was kind of told that that path was frowned upon, that if you went into academia, that going out and trying to promote your analysis in the media was just not completely loved.

So, I thought, "Well, you know..." I liked that piece of it. I like being able to go on and explain to a wider audience what I think the polls are showing. Because in a way, you can argue that being a pollster is like being America's press secretary. If the job of the White House Press Secretary is to say, "This is what the president thinks and this is how the president intends to act," the job of a pollster is to say, "This is what America thinks. This is how America intends to act." So, I like that piece of it and it really... I think it can point to a couple of key moments when the world of polling analysis became ever more present in our media landscape.

The first is the dawn of Pollster.com and the subsequent buying of Pollster.com by the Huffington Post. So, a Democratic pollster named Mark Blumenthal had really loved... He was mystery pollster. He loved writing about polling analysis and did so at Pollster.com and it became this little interesting niche of the blogosphere back when blogs were just flourishing, that predated even 538 and Nate Silver and gave a lot of pollsters a place to write. That was the first place that I ever wrote something. I took a chunk of my master's thesis about young voters and fashioned it into a piece for Pollster.com. And it got mentioned on CNN by James Carville and I freaked out. I was so excited. He butchers the pronunciation of my name in the segment, but this like... I felt like I had arrived. I was so excited.

You know, I didn't know who read Pollster.com, if it was 100 people or a million people. I suspected it was closer to 100, but if it was the right 100 people, maybe that's all I needed to get my message out there about... at that time I was really focused on young voters.

I think the second big inflection point in all this was the dawn of 538 and the great deal of interest people suddenly paid in the way of data journalism, and you had the Vox.coms, and then 538 spinning off, and then New York Times launching The Upshot. And suddenly an interest in consuming news about polling and consuming this kind of analysis went from niche hobby of political junkies to a much more widespread thing, which suddenly meant there was more demand for people in my profession to go out and tell what we were finding to the public.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. I'm curious to get your take on why the public is interested, right? Because in some ways, you could see polling and historically that's what it was, as sort of a tool of campaigns, and developing ideas and whatever, sort of testing them out and seeing what people think, but there's part of me that goes like, "Well, gosh. Why do people really care that much about what other people think about an issue?" So, I'm curious. I mean, obviously there must be interest, because that's what you're doing, and so I wonder what you think sort of people are gaining from sort of understanding, or if it's just sort of a curiosity?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Well, I think that people wanting to understand what other people think is very fundamental to human nature. It doesn't just happen in politics. Think about the whole world of women's magazines, fashion magazines, people wanting to know what do other people think is going to be trendy this coming season? Or listening to sports radio. What do other people think is going to happen with this sports team? Consuming other people's opinions is not just about polls. People are just curious about what do others think and am I in line with the mainstream or am I way out on the fringe? Polls are one way that people can sort of situate themselves in our broader discussion and figure out, "Okay, am I really going crazy that I think X, Y and Z? Or do lots of people agree with me? Am I not alone on this?"

So, I think that's part of the appeal. I also think that, and this is more about the last... I guess I'd say four maybe to six years, the politics has become ever more a part of people's identities. In a way that I'm not sure I think is completely healthy, but you now have 80% of America that thinks... of Biden voters that think if Trump wins it's a crisis for the country. And you have close to that many Trump voters that think the same thing about Biden. And so, when you feel like the stakes are so incredibly high, it's almost like... I remember growing up in Central Florida and before you had the internet, if a hurricane was headed your way you would tune into the Weather Channel or the local news every three hours or so and they'd give you updated latitude and longitude of the eye of the hurricane. You could plot it on a little map that you pick up from the grocery store, comes in the newspaper at the start of hurricane season, and you can track that data of is this hurricane headed for me or not.

Right now, I think a lot of Americans are trying to figure out is there a hurricane headed for me in a political sense, and they want to track that and prepare themselves for it. And frankly, that function of wanting to prepare yourself for an outcome is why you see so few people right now in

polls where you say, “Who do you think is gonna win the election,” saying they think Joe Biden is gonna win, because Republicans think Trump is gonna shock the world again and Democrats don’t want to let themselves believe that their candidate might have a chance of winning because they don’t want to feel like they did four years earlier.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. And you know, I wonder if some of this... if there’s any evidence that these polls change people’s positions, right? Because there was some concern with the last election with forecasting that maybe as people saw like, “Oh, as far as I can tell the pollings say the election’s already decided, and so why would I even do anything?” I don’t know how much that we know that that actually happened, but in a more general sense, do we have any sense that people are being affected by polls?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

I think on the... There’s two vectors on which someone’s mind can change about an election. It can change in terms of will I vote, or won’t I vote, and then once you decide yes I am voting, it’s for whom will I vote. And I think that polling can change that first vector, but not the second one as much. So, if an election is supposed to be very close and it seems more like every vote might count, I believe there’s some evidence to support that that can increase turnout, where if you... If a race is effectively going to be decided by an 80-20 margin, you might think, “Well, my vote doesn’t really matter,” and feel less interested in turning out. The perception that your vote might actually matter I believe does have some effect on turnout likelihood.

But I don’t necessarily buy that it dramatically affects for whom someone will vote. So, I have heard and I have never seen the papers behind this, but I have heard that sometimes campaigns will release polls that show favorable results to themselves because there is a bit of a frontrunner effect, that if you are perceived as most likely to win, that’s worth a point or two on election day. But I could not dig through JStor and find you the paper that says that. This is like a... Maybe it’s like an old wives’ tale that circulates around the political world.

Now, what can matter is if that turnout impact is different across supporters of different candidates. If, for instance, it makes Donald Trump voters go, “Gosh, we seem unlikely to win. He really needs someone like me to turn out to help push him over the finish line,” versus a Hillary Clinton supporter might see it and go, “Eh, you know what? She’s probably got this in the bag. I can stay home.” But I think that really is only having an effect on the very margins and among the voters who already have the lowest turnout propensity, and this time around might be a counter to that because the polls all say pretty clearly that Joe Biden is well, well, well out in front, yet we’re also on track to have one of the highest turnout elections ever, if not the highest turnout election ever in the United States.

So, that could be a counterargument. The polls do not show this as a close race and yet turnout is extremely high for other reasons.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, speaking of turnout and what people think, we can sort of talk about young voters in particular, sort of a demographic you’ve spent a long time thinking about and writing about, and so the

premise of your book is that... The Selfie Vote, which is now... I'll be curious also to update anything, because as I was reading it I was like, "Well, gosh. This was..." It was 2015, right? Is that when the book came out?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Oh yes. It came out within a week of Trump going down the escalator, so you'll notice his name does not appear in the book anywhere.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Exactly. I did notice that. And I'm curious to see what that means, but we can sort of start just from the basic premise, which is that when you look at data today, you see that younger voters were kind of overwhelmingly voting Democrat, right? And so, the book then talks a little bit about like, "Well, how do we know that that's the case? How is that different from before?" But then most of the book is kind of like, "Well, why? What is it about this time that produces this kind of bias?" And so, just from the very beginning just to sort of set the groundwork, could you describe a little bit about what the basic finding is about where young voters are leaning and how we know that that's the case?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

So, as somebody who works in Republican politics, I am often met with the mistaken concept of, "Oh. Well, young voters, they get more conservative as they get older, so it doesn't matter that they vote very progressive. They're always voting for Democrats. It's no big deal, they'll become Republicans once they grow up, they buy a home, and get married. They'll figure it out and they'll be our voters at the time in life when they're most likely to vote, so it's no big deal." And this all was something I would hear a lot around the beginning of Barack Obama's presidency. This is when I was... You know, I had been in the polling industry for a couple years at that point and was really focused on this topic.

And so, I wanted to dig into the research behind, "Okay, what drives young people's political views and then how much do they change over the course of their lifetime?" Is it the case that generations start off progressive and become conservative? And what I found was that that is somewhat what happened to the baby boomers. The baby boomers sort of started off progressive, kind of pushed that direction by Nixon, and Vietnam, and all that, and then through the Reagan years and Clinton years and then Bush years, steadily became more and more of a Republican group of voters. But, and with no offense intended to boomers, the assumption that just because it happened to you means that it's going to happen to everyone else is a flawed assumption. Not everyone is like you guys, the baby boomers.

You find that Generation X, which came of age more during the Reagan era, that they tend to be slightly more conservative these days, and a similar effect is likely to happen with the millennials, who came of age during the Obama presidency. And there are a whole bunch of issues, LGBT rights, climate change, that are drivers of this, but the most important takeaway that I have been shouting from the rooftops, especially at Republicans, for as long as now I can remember, is that there is no guarantee young voters will become conservative as they get older. And in fact, we continue to have mounting evidence that young voters, or those who were young 10 years ago, they're now approaching 40 years old. They're buying homes. They're having kids. They're doing

all of those things that were supposed to make them more Republican and they are still voting just as Democratically as they were a decade or a decade and a half ago.

There is nothing that the Republican Party has done during their early political life to have brought them back and there is now... It's like a habit-forming behavior. They've now voted for Democrats habitually in multiple elections. Breaking that pattern is gonna be infinitely harder for Republicans at this point versus trying to win someone when they're young and still trying to figure out their place in politics.

So, when I wrote *The Selfie Vote*, I was writing it to send up a warning signal to Republicans that they were gonna lose a generation. I would say a couple of years later, I almost worry that there are large swaths of the millennial generation at the older end that may be somewhat lost to the GOP, that they've just... They have voted for Democrats so many times and have shown no sign of moving to become more conservative that focusing on Generation Z, who by the way seems to even have more progressive politics at this point, may be the best bet.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And also, when you look at the... I was curious, the finding that even prior to Obama you were seeing this split in young voters that was bigger than it had ever been before. Is that right? That it's not like, "Oh, always young voters are showing this kind of pattern where they're voting for Democrats more than Republicans." It's that maybe that pattern has always been there, but it's never been as big as it is these days. Is that right?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Yes. Well, and I can use as a great example the election of 2000, where we had George W. Bush versus Al Gore, and if you looked in that election, Al Gore won young voters by I believe it was two or three points and he won senior citizens by about two or three points, and George W. Bush won middle-aged voters by about two or three points, and that was enough. You know, there was almost no generational gap in that election. If you walked out of a polling place and told me your age, it would give me almost no information about who you voted for.

Nowadays, if you walk out of a polling place and tell me your age, it tells me a lot about who you might vote for, or at least that was the case before Donald Trump started losing seniors in huge numbers, but let's table that conversation for a moment. You know, there have been plenty of times in modern American history when young voters have broken for Republicans, when young voters have voted about the same way as seniors, when there hasn't been generational polarization, so the result of an election like in 2008 with young voters breaking two to one for Obama, that was historic.

And the other thing that I would hear from Republican consultants a lot around that time was, "Well, this is just an Obama effect. They're just really excited because it's a young president who seems to represent this future that they're excited about, but that doesn't mean that they're Democrats. It just means that they're Obama voters. It doesn't mean that they're progressive or anything else." But as you mentioned, in *The Selfie Vote* I trace it back before Obama was even really on the scene, that midterm in 2006, which is when Pelosi became Speaker for the first time, if you look at the exit polls from that you see young voters breaking for Democratic candidates by

I believe it was close to 20 points if I'm remembering correctly. And if you looked back at exit polls as far back as I could find the history of exit polls in any kind of election, midterm or regular, looking at the House race national vote, I could not find an election where young voters had... where there had been such a big generation divide. Where young voters had broken so heavily for one candidate.

And that to me suggested that again, this was beginning. It wasn't just about Obama. He kind of was able to ride the wave, but millennials fracture with the GOP was beginning early in... around the time of the Bush administration, around the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those were issues that were beginning some of this fracture.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And so, now I'm curious what things look like these days. So, that was the big elephant in the room reading the book is like, "Okay. Well, I'm just..." I have no idea what things look like for younger voters for the 2016 election and what things look like now, right? This will come out just before the election, so I'll be curious to kind of get your insight on the rumblings of this demographic right now.

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Yeah. So, young voters right now, the generational divide in this election has been really fascinating, because it actually doesn't look like it did exactly in 2016 in two ways. One is that Trump is doing even worse among young voters in general. He won, or he lost young voters by about 19 points in 2016. I would expect he's gonna lose them closer to Obama of 2008 level, I mean like a two to one kind of margin, which is extra fascinating because Joe Biden was not the candidate of young people in the Democratic primary. He's not Bernie Sanders, and yet he's also crucially not Donald Trump for purposes of why young voters are breaking this way.

Seniors, on the other hand, Republicans have been able to sustain these big losses with young voters because they're still winning seniors maybe by a touchdown or two, and seniors vote. They turnout to vote in huge numbers, so as long as you're still hanging onto seniors and later middle-aged voters, you can sustain big losses on college campuses. But Joe Biden's also winning amongst seniors now, and by quite a bit depending on which poll you look at, and that's not just about COVID-19, although it's part about it. But some of this began even before the pandemic really took root. Some of it's just about Joe Biden's ability to win older voters. He's just... He's got more of that old-time sensibility. He had a bus that said, "No Malarkey" on it. Nobody under the age of 40... Nobody under the age of 70 uses the word malarkey, but Joe Biden does sometimes.

So, he has kind of scrambled things in that Joe Biden's still doing well among young voters, but he's also doing really well among seniors, and it's you can tell this is not just fake news polling. Trump must know this is happening because he put out that video on Twitter saying, "Hey, everybody. You may not know this, but I'm a senior. Seniors, you're my favorite people." Trump doesn't put that video out unless he's seeing the exact same kind of polling numbers that I am.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, it raises this question that I had in terms of thinking about where these generational divides come from, and especially like you say, at the sort of heel turn that seniors are showing on this,



like how quickly that is changing. Makes me wonder how much of this is about ideology and about people's preferences for how... like what they want to see in politics, versus more of a partisan thing, sort of an identity brand, or like a... Yeah, party brand thing. So, if you were to break down kind of where these splits are coming from, are they stemming mostly from sort of thoughts about sort of ideals and ideology? Or are they stemming mostly from sort of just what the party appears to be?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

I mean, I think this election is all about Donald Trump, so I don't think it's even about... I mean, there are huge policy divides in America and there are big ideological divides, but this election seems to be driven more by do you approve of how Donald Trump has handled his job as president or not? And that's had interesting implications for one, if Democrats win, do they have a mandate for a particular policy agenda or ideological approach, or is it merely, "You weren't Donald Trump, so congratulations. Here's the White House." There's some polling that suggests voters are not just voting against Trump, but they actually are voting for Joe Biden, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're voting for the Green New Deal. Even Biden himself has been a little cagey on whether he... what type of... he says he doesn't support Medicare For All, and he doesn't support the Green New Deal. He kind of plays footsie with it a little bit.

It's not clear to me what policy agenda Joe Biden is being elected to implement. He's just being elected to not be Donald Trump. On the other hand, if Donald Trump is elected, it's unclear what a fourth, four more years of him would be besides four more years of the same. He has gotten actually blasted by some of his conservative media allies because he gets asked softball questions about what would you do with a second term and he goes off on a tangent, he doesn't actually answer what he would do with a second term.

So, it is unclear to me what clear policy agenda or even ideological approach either of these candidates is being elected to implement. I think instead it is about do we want more wrecking ball-style change and someone who's gonna be a fighter and fight for me, versus I want someone who's going to bring back decency, and normalcy, and try to unite the country. Those to me seem to be the bigger driving factors in this election beyond demographics being pulled one way by ideology or policy.

**Andy Luttrell:**

You mentioned that there's evidence that people... that there is sort of a push of people voting for Biden and not just against Trump, and I'm just kind of curious, what does that... Where does that evidence come from? What kind of questions would you ask someone to know that?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Sure. So, there's question you can ask where you say, "For whom are you voting?" And you give your options. And then especially if you're doing an online survey it's easy to do this, but you can do it on phone too, where you say, "You've said you are going for Donald Trump. Is your vote more a vote in favor of Donald Trump or do you consider your vote more a vote against Joe Biden?" And that's how that question is framed and Trump, to his credit, a lot of his voters vote because they're voting for Donald Trump. Biden is not this animating boogeyman. Frankly, that's why you saw for a brief spell so many Republican ads centered around the squad, or Pelosi, or

these other figures who are more polarizing, because Biden himself, Republicans just haven't been able to nail down as this particularly scary figure in and of himself.

So, but for Biden voters I think the assumption was, "Oh, he's kind of boring. He's not out on the trail that much. He's not firing people up." Maybe they're answering that question with like, "Oh, I'm just voting for Trump." But Biden's actually done a pretty good job at persuading voters to like him. The other question that I think is valuable on this front is the question of are you favorable or unfavorable to a candidate. This is kind of the most basic way, question that a pollster asks, to find out are you liked or not. And contrary to a lot of the conversation we have about the gender bias in the way we talk about politicians, I think sometimes too much gets made of gender bias on the question of likability, because we ask if men are likeable as well. So, I always push back against that, like it's totally... It's completely germane to the discussion to ask if a politician is likeable, and I believe we ask about it as men as well as women.

And we ask it every time we say, "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of person X?" Donald Trump's favorables have never been great. They have always been in the high 30s. They're pretty close to his job approval numbers. But for Joe Biden, his favorables are in positive territory. A majority of Americans feel favorably toward him. That's very different, by the way, than where Hillary Clinton stood four years earlier and is why I think this is a fundamentally different race than four years ago, and why anybody who's feeling a sense of déjà vu should feel a little more comforted.

If you're a Joe Biden supporter it doesn't mean that he's definitely gonna win, but there are things about this race that are fundamentally different and that's a big one.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, for sure, your insight I think seems right on to me that this race is about a particular person, but if we go back to sort of the partisan question, like okay, if we rewind mentally five years and we go, "Okay, let's survey the landscape as it was." The reasons why younger voters were leaning Democrat... In the book, you talk about all these kinds of factors that define this generation or these generations, and I wonder if there's sort of any one of them or sort of a theme that you would say this is like fundamentally what it means to be in this generation and it's why these voters are leaning Democrat so heavily.

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

There are a couple of issues that I think are really critical. The first are very obvious. They are the social issues. And into that bucket a lot of things get lumped, but don't all poll exactly the same. I think I note in *The Selfie Vote* that while young voters are very progressive on things like gay marriage, which has fallen off the radar after the Supreme Court sort of resolved that debate, that was a big, big, big issue back about a decade ago keeping young voters away from the GOP.

Other issues, like abortion, it's a little more up in the air how much of an effect that is. There are more pro-life young people than there are say anti-gay marriage young people, but when you get into issues like contraception, for instance, you wind up with a debate that just does not endear Republicans to young voters. So, there are things in the kind of social cultural issue bucket where there's just real friction between young voters and especially social conservatives, but it doesn't

end there. It's not as though if Republicans just changed their position on certain social issues that they would win over young voters, because there's also the question of economics and the role of government, that young voters are these days much more open to the idea that government can be a force for good, and they're less open to the idea that markets can be a force for good.

This is a generation that came of age in the midst of the financial crisis in 2008 and now sort of a second economic collapse. They're seeing lots of unemployment, people struggling to be able to access things like healthcare, to be able to afford housing. They're not wrong for looking around and going, "Hey, wait a minute. I'm struggling to make ends meet and I'm working hard. I did everything right. And yet the CEO of my company just got a multimillion dollar bonus even though they drove the company to the ground." I mean, it's an extreme example, but I think for a lot of young voters they do think that there's something a little bit fundamentally unfair about our economy. They don't mind the idea that someone who works really hard might make more money, or someone who invents something great, or is the best in their field might be rewarded for doing so, but they also sort of look around and they see examples of people who maybe aren't working very hard, but who nonetheless have millions of dollars and go on reality TV, or... There are enough examples of people who... where young voters might go, "I don't know that I think this economy is completely fair."

And Republicans for so long have been able to rely on having a lot of voters that did think markets were good and did think government was pretty inefficient and wasteful that they've not figured out how to make that type of a case to the next generation. And so, it goes again beyond just the social issues to things like, "Okay, how do you intend to solve climate change?" If you think that government is bad and you don't think that government should be pushing mandates and regulations to address climate change, what's your plan? How do you intend to have markets fix this? There is an answer to this question if Republicans would only embrace it and talk about it.

So, that's a big thesis of The Selfie Vote that I think still holds up and perhaps even more so in the Trump era.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And if we think about these generations now, we can sort of transition to this big new report that came out. Do you want to talk about those data that you just put out? What is it, a week ago or so?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Yes. So, just... Oh, go ahead. Sorry.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I was just saying, so in my mind it sort of connects to what you were saying about sort of people's ideals about how the market should work, and whether there are opportunities, and whether there's this chance to advance beyond your parents' generation, and so I'm just kind of curious if you could sort of boil down what this poll... I guess you would call it sort of a study, right? A collection of questions where that came from and what you think is the most interesting findings in it.

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

So, I did the study on behalf of the Walton Family Foundation to try to understand where Generation Z and millennials stand in terms of opportunity and things like the American dream. That for an organization like the Walton Family Foundation, they focus on things like the environment, and education, and these are really important issues to young people, but you also, you know, if you ask Americans, “Do you think the next generation will be better or worse off?” A majority will tell you they think the next generation is gonna be worse off. And so, they wanted to see specifically is that what young people think about themselves? Do young Americans feel, for lack of a more elegant term, screwed?

And are there differences between millennials and Gen Z that are notable on this front? So, we started off the project with a survey of 2,000 millennials and 2,000 members of Generation Z, and that stretches all the way as young as 13 years old. We wanted to make sure we were capturing as fully as possible where this generation stands. What we found was actually quite a bit of optimism that really I think runs counter to this narrative of young people as “screwed.” We found that 81% of young Americans believe that if they work hard, they can succeed in life. About 7 in 10 believe that if they work hard, they can move up the economic ladder. Two thirds believe that they can access the American dream. These are all numbers that to me seemed a lot higher than you might have expected.

On the question of, “Are you going to be better off than your parents were?” The numbers are a little lower. It’s closer to 4 in 10 say yes to that, but only about 10% to 15% depending on which subgroup you’re looking at say, “Oh, I’m gonna be worse off than my parents. So, that’s just a pretty big divergence from what you might expect given the pessimism that gets talked about so much. Now, that’s not to say there aren’t barriers standing in millennials and Gen Z’s way. When we ask them, “What are the problems that you might face when it comes to accessing opportunity?” We find over 4 in 10 say the cost of higher education, or being able to access it, is a very or extremely big problem for them, or getting good healthcare, that having an education that has prepared for them success in life, that these are all challenges.

We also find there are things like racial inequality, where 6 in 10 Black millennials and Gen Z’ers see racial inequality as a very or extremely big problem that’s preventing them from accessing opportunity, so that it’s not to say the whole survey was sunshine and roses. There are real challenges out there. But I think there’s an optimism because younger Americans are determined that they’ll be able to fix some of these problems, that they will be able to bring about reforms, and that they will be able to overcome the challenges that have been laid in their path. And nowhere do I think that we get at that more effectively from the study than we did some open-ended questions and some deep-dive interviews with over 100 participants asking them about the things we asked about in the survey, and we asked about, “Okay, if you had to define your generation in one word, what would it be?”

And for millennials, it tended to be pragmatic, we are adaptable, entrepreneurial, basically we keep finding a way around the hurdles that the world puts up for us and keep just trying to get by and doing a pretty good job about it. That we’ve had a lot thrown at us, but we’re making it work and we’re persevering. For Generation Z, it was a little different. Instead of this idea of we’re gonna put our heads down and power through what the world throws at us, which was more the millennial

view, the Gen Z'ers were more we are very conscious, we are very innovative, and we are very open with our views, and we like using our voice and the technological tools at our fingertips to make our voice known.

In some ways, they're a little more combative in their politics. They did not come up in the Obama hope and change, let's all hold hands era. They've come of age in the Trump, politics-as-combat era, and that's reflected in their approach. But they're less so about, "Well, let me just put my head down and power through," and more about, "I'm gonna raise my voice and march in the streets and make noise and bring about change that way."

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned the interviews, because one thing I really like is that the report seems to combine qualitative and quantitative stuff. In the book you talk about doing all these focus groups combined with the polling data, so I'm curious, like what do you think the value is of sort of not doing just one or the other, quantitative or qualitative, but sort of using both in tandem?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

I love any project where I can do a little bit of both. Because if you do a survey, the good news is your results are a little more generalizable. You can say, "I talked to a representative sample of people. They said X, so X is probably right." But sometimes you don't get at the why. Why do people think X? It can be a little harder to get there. And in a survey, especially with questions that are closed ended, you're giving people a fixed set of options, or you're getting a false sense of what their views are. Not that it's unrepresentative, but let's say I do a survey and I ask people, "Are you favorable or unfavorable to the Iran nuclear deal?" I mean, I might find 60% or 70% of Americans say they're favorable, but if I asked them why, they couldn't answer, because it's not something that they've dug deeply into and they're like, "Oh. Well, deals with other countries seem like a good thing."

So, quantitative, sometimes it doesn't let you get at the why as effectively, and especially from a communications perspective, you don't always know what kind of language someone is using to talk about an issue if you're just doing quant. If you add in qual, the downside of qual is that especially if you're only doing say a focus group or two, you're hinging a lot of your analysis on the views of the eight people that showed up to your focus group that night, and that is nerve wracking, to be sure. You're putting a lot of stock in the idea that the voices you're hearing, if they're not statistically representative, are at least a wide enough array of views that you're capturing a lot of different ways that people think and talk about issues.

And that can mislead you if you're not careful or if it's too sort of narrowly focused. So, if I do a focus group and I find seven out of eight people in that group all say, "Well, yeah. I like strawberry ice cream." That doesn't necessarily mean strawberry ice cream is the favorite flavor of seven out of eight Americans. So, I think having them both is good, because the quant gives you the generalizable concrete answer, and the qual helps you answer the why, and it helps give you the language to use to talk about why people feel the way they feel.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, looking to the future, if we are to sort of extrapolate from the trends you were seeing in 2015, and the data that you're seeing coming out now in terms of Gen Z-millennials, what does the future look like? How much do you think we will see changes in these kinds of gaps, in terms of Democrat-Republican allegiance among generations? Speculative, I know, but I'm just curious kind of how hopeful are you or how much do you see this trend persisting versus changing in the future?

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

I think if Donald Trump wins reelection, I think unless he changes course dramatically it's gonna further cement the sort of millennials in opposition to the GOP situation much more for the long haul. In part because my book came out right before Donald Trump ran for president, so he's not mentioned in the book. There's some things that he does that are things I recommend. He uses social media a lot. He at least in his convention speech the first time around took a slightly more nuanced position on LGBT issues. But there are lots of ways in which he does the opposite of what I would recommend in the book, whether it's the way he talks about things like climate change, the way he handles issues like race and gender, there are just huge gaps between Trumpism and millennials.

And if Trump wins reelection, then it becomes harder and harder to disentangle Trumpism from being a Republican. You can still at this point argue somewhat that Trump was a bit of a fluke. That he won because he carved out a very specific lane within an otherwise very divided Republican party. He won the Republican primary without winning a majority of Republican voters, and then he won the presidency without winning a majority of American voters, but things just all kind of broke his way, and if he's not reelected, can Republicans pick a new path forward?

But I'm also somewhat skeptical that a Tom Cotton Republican Party, or a Nikki Haley Republican Party, or a Marco Rubio Republican Party, those... Each of those might have some better opportunities with young voters, but some ways frankly that they might be less appealing, because quite honestly Trump as a disruptor is something that ought to be pretty appealing to some young voters. It's just the type of disruption he wants is very at odds with what a lot of young voters want.

So, I think it's hard for me to imagine Republicans winning young voters back. On the other hand, you look at someone like a Dan Crenshaw, member of Congress from Texas, who he talks a lot about foreign policy, but he also talks a lot about the perils of socialism. There's a chance that if Joe Biden wins and Democrats and progressives in the party feel like Joe Biden winning equals they've suddenly got a mandate to be extremely progressive and throw their weight around and be very assertive, and suddenly Republicans really begin to fight back against socialism, government's takeovers of healthcare, et cetera, if Republicans do that effectively there are ways to persuade young voters to come back on their side on questions of size and scope of government, et cetera.

But it's gonna take work. It won't just happen overnight. And I think if Donald Trump wins, whenever you win, there's less of an appetite for, "Hey, let's go back to the drawing board and figure out how to do things better." You just take your victory and go, "Hey, we won. We figured it out." And that's always risky in politics, and so there's... Republicans have to kind of hope that

that's what Democrats do if they win in this election. Go, "Oh hey, we won. There's nothing else we need to change." That would give Republicans an opportunity to play ball.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Well, we will see, I suppose. And Kristen, thanks for taking the time to talk about all this stuff. I think it's super interesting to see kind of the polling world from... I mean, outside of my academic perspective, but sort of on the ground polling work, and appreciate you taking the time to talk.

**Kristen Soltis Anderson:**

Oh, thank you so much.

**Andy Luttrell:**

All right, that'll do it for this episode of Opinion Science. Big thanks to Kristen Soltis Anderson for taking the time out of her busy schedule to talk about the work she does and the political situation that we find ourselves in. To learn more about Kristen, check out the show notes for links to her website, her book, and her new report on Generation Z and millennials. And be sure to follow her on Twitter, even if it's mostly for pictures of her friendly dog, Wally.

To learn more about this show, head on over to [OpinionSciencePodcast.com](http://OpinionSciencePodcast.com) and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @OpinionSciPod. You can also look to the show notes for a transcript of this episode. And hey, fire up Apple Podcasts, Spotify, whatever you use to listen to podcasts and subscribe to this one. Leave a review, rate the show, tell your friends, share a screenshot of yourself listening with your cat. I appreciate all the ways that people have supported this show so far. Okay, that's it for this week. If you haven't voted, go do that, and I'll see you back in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Bye-bye.