

VULNERABILITY SCENARIOS

Driver Forecasts #7: Cultural, Social, & Generational Change

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Background

The future of vulnerability will in many ways be determined by how Americans feel about it. As retired Republican Senator Mark Hatfield has said, “We stand by as children starve by the millions because we lack the will to eliminate hunger.” Reducing vulnerability over the next two decades would require a combination of understanding, tools, and the will to use them. To some extent, social values regarding vulnerability are changing. For example, the proportion of Americans agreeing with the statement that “government should care for those who can’t care for themselves” has risen to 69% in 2007 from its nadir of 57% in 1994.¹

But public sentiment is not monolithic. This forecast will address the racial, gender, and generational dimensions that could be significant for social values about vulnerability over the coming two decades. Generations differ in values in part because the same events affect them differently depending on where they are in their lives. One theory suggests that American history has cycled through four distinct generational “archetypes”: *Civic* cohorts (e.g., “G.I.’s,” born 1901-1924) build new institutions, often after a great secular crisis. *Adaptive* cohorts (e.g., “Silents,” born 1925-1942) spend their youth emulating their elders and their later years emulating the self-indulgent *idealist* cohorts behind them (e.g., “Baby Boomers,” born 1943-1960). *Reactive* cohorts (e.g., “Gen X,” born 1961-1981) adopt a more practical approach to life by striving for material wealth. This cyclical pattern has held in all but one cycle – the Civil War era, where the tremendous toll of war deflated any would-be enthusiasm for remaking the world. The would-be *civics* who came of age during that war became the *adaptive* “Progressive” generation (born 1843-1859) – moderate in their attempts to make the world a better place.²

There has been widespread speculation that the rising “Millennials” (born 1982-2003) will fit the *civic* model predicted by this theory. Polling shows that the values of these young people differ from those of older generations, as indicated above. Notably, this generation voted 2-to-1 for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election, leans more to the political left than older generations, and is significantly more tolerant of homosexuality. A recent study even found that the same proportion (43%) of Americans aged 18-29 responded positively to the word “socialism” as to the word “capitalism,” compared with a difference of 29% to 52% in the general population.³ These young people have grown

¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2007), *Trends in political values and core attitudes: 1987-2007*, Washington, DC, accessed on June 8, 2010 at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/312.pdf>

² Strauss, W. and Howe, N. (1991), *Generations: The history of America’s future, 1584-2069*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York.

³ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2010), “‘Socialism’ not so negative, ‘capitalism’ not so positive: A political rhetoric test”, accessed on June 8, 2010 at <http://people-press.org/report/610/socialism-capitalism>

up with Earth Day⁴, “Will and Grace”⁵, and the Internet. Although the financial crisis of 2008 has hurt their short-term job prospects, Millennials are generally optimistic about their economic futures.⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that a full 79% of Americans reported that there is a gap in values between younger people and older people – even higher than the 74% measured in 1969.⁷

How Baby Boomers age will be as important in shaping social values as how Millennials come of age. Recent evidence suggests that Baby Boomers are more likely than younger cohorts to favor voting incumbents out of political office. In a recent study, nearly one-third of voters aged 65 and older reported that they would be more likely to vote for a congressional candidate that had never held elected office.⁸ This may correspond to the emotional fervor of the healthcare reform debate on 2009-2010, which featured allegations of setting up “death panels” to “kill Granny.” At the same time, some experts have forecast a shift among Baby Boomers from “greedy geezers” to a wise generation that addresses the needs of future generations.⁹ While they represent a smaller generation than the Boomers and the Millennials, Gen Xers may play an important role as pragmatic crisis managers as generational transition prompts a significant shift in the values of society.

Shifts in the role of gender may also prompt major changes in social values around vulnerability. This may come through an increase in the number of women in political office, which may raise to prominence social issues that tend to be important to women voters and candidates. It is interesting to note that prior to 1991, women were underrepresented in testing on new drugs conducted by the National Institutes of Health; as Rep. Louise Slaughter has noted, “It wasn't until we had a critical mass of women here [in Congress] that said this will not do for more than half the population of the United States”¹⁰ that legislation was enacted to correct the deficiency. The power balance between the genders may shift toward women more generally given that women have been less hard-hit than men in the Great Recession.

Many thought leaders see these changes as part of a larger transformation in global society. As early as the 1970's, Jonas Salk saw in declining birth rates a coming inflection point after which human population would stabilize at some higher level. This inflection point, in Salk's estimation, could only come through a shift from a value of growth to a new value set, as yet undetermined, that would

⁴ The first Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970.

⁵ “Will and Grace” was a prime-time sitcom in which several main characters are gay; the show aired on NBC from 1998-2006.

⁶ Taylor, P. and Keeter, S. (eds.) (2010), *Millennials: A portrait of generation next*, Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, accessed on June 8, 2010 at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>

⁷ Taylor, P., Morin, R., Parker, K., Cohn, D., and Wang, W. (2009), *Growing old in America: Expectations vs. reality*, Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, accessed on June 8, 2010 at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/Getting-Old-in-America.pdf>

⁸ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2010), “Seniors are Strongest Advocates for Change in 2010”, June 3, accessed on June 18, 2010 at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1615/seniors-negative-congress-incumbents-older-gop-anti-compromise>

⁹ Peck, J. (2004), *Institutional change in health care: Opportunities in the coming crisis*, Institute for Alternative Futures, Alexandria, VA.

¹⁰ Slaughter, L. (2010), Transcript of White House Health Summit, February 25, accessed June 23, 2010 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/25/AR2010022503133.html>

characterize “phase B” of human evolution.¹¹ Duane Elgin has described the potential that humanity may shift from its adolescence to adulthood.¹² Jeremy Rifkin has chronicled human history as a constant struggle between empathy and entropy, suggesting that humanity is on the verge of an epic shift to an Age of Empathy.¹³ Themes that appear consistently across these visions and many others include “empathy,” “compassion,” “equity,” and “sustainability,” which can be seen in the greater pressure on corporations to improve their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and in the rise of civic engagement and activism. Paul Hawken has written that the proliferating nonprofits of the world constitute an unprecedented worldwide social movement aimed at the betterment of humanity.¹⁴ These visions present a future where a focus on empathy, equity, and sustainability would make vulnerability intolerable to society.

Forecasts

The Alpha forecasts represent expectable or “most likely” futures, the Beta forecasts envision challenging possibilities (e.g., what could go wrong), and the Delta forecasts represent visionary or surprisingly successful futures that would have a positive impact on reducing vulnerability.

Alpha Forecast – Cultural, Social, and Generational Change 2030

The crises of the 2000’s promoted new thinking about the economy, the environment, and other important issues. Fiscal difficulties at state and national levels forced policy makers to look for new solutions to reduce the costs of problems associated with vulnerability, such as crime, unemployment, and health care. While the structures for job creation and social services remained largely the same, demonstration projects at the margins provided laboratories for new paradigms and approaches.

The development of some of these new paradigms accelerated throughout the 2010’s as Millennials entered the workforce and the electorate in increasing numbers. These young people were more open to new ideas and more willing to consider opposing perspectives in search of better solutions.¹⁵ This willingness to see beyond ideology reduced tensions along a variety of fault lines that had long divided Americans. By 2020, gay marriage was legal in more than half of the states¹⁶, abortion had receded as a defining political issue, and young evangelicals were as concerned about climate change as those on the

¹¹ Salk, J. (1973), *Survival of the Wisest*, Harper and Row, New York.

¹² Elgin, D. (2000), *Promise ahead: A vision of hope and action for humanity’s future*, William Morrow, New York.

¹³ Rifkin, J. (2009), *The empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*, J.P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York.

¹⁴ Hawken, P. (2007), *Blessed unrest: How the largest social movement in history is restoring grace, justice, and beauty to the world*, Penguin Group, New York.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2010), *Seniors are strongest advocates for change in 2010*, Washington, DC, accessed on June 9, 2010 at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1615/seniors-negative-congress-incumbents-older-gop-anti-compromise>

¹⁶ Younger cohorts are already much more supportive of gay marriage than older generations, and a majority of young people (aged 18-29) explicitly support same-sex marriage in 38 states. See Lax, J.R. and Phillips, J.H. (2009), “Gay rights in the states: Public opinion and policy responsiveness”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 103 (3).

left. In public discourse, this cohort expressed a deep desire to leverage technology to create a society that worked for all. Companies courted these consumers by expanding their corporate social responsibility initiatives, recovering some of the public trust lost in the scandals of the 2000's. Similarly, many politicians entered office on a platform of social justice and environmentalism.

Baby Boomers continued to exert great influence on the political process into the 2020's. Baby Boomers continued the political divide that had characterized their generation since the 1960's, with some fighting to protect entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security while other sought to reduce the budget deficit and create a foundation for the prosperity of future generations. Many retiring Baby Boomers became involved in their communities or in volunteer work, providing a resource of wise leadership in solving important social issues.

Race and gender distinctions became far less significant in mainstream discourse, particularly after the election of an African-American president in 2008 and a woman president in 2024. Also, companies increasingly reached out to the growing base of Latino consumers, making Spanish more commonly heard and more widely accepted. Ethnic strife at the margins – particularly around the issues of immigration and crime – forced national reforms to integrate minority populations into American social and economic life. Throughout the 2020's, policy makers came to feel that the health and wealth disparities endured by many of these populations are both inhumane and preventable. By 2030, there is greater support for raising the floor through policies like a “living wage,” and 83% of Americans say that the government should help those who cannot help themselves.

Beta Forecast – Cultural, Social, and Generational Change 2030

In the early 2010's, the rebound of wealthy and white-collar Americans from the Great Recession shifted media attention away from unemployment to the search for the “next big thing.” Unemployment, which held steady around 8% after 2012, was seen as the “new normal,” and in any case was lower than that in most European countries. However, this statistic masked widespread disparities, with some areas seeing up to 25% unemployment well into the 2010's. African-Americans, Latinos, and rural whites bore most of this burden.

Another group not participating in the recovery was the Millennial generation, who – in a job market crowded with Baby Boomers lacking the resources or desire to retire – were forced to take low-paying jobs to repay loans and pay for health care. Many created new businesses or non-profits to improve society, but the target customers of these initiatives – other Millennials – lacked the income to provide a sustainable market. Millennials looked for other arenas to put their energy in and found their calling in the increasingly developing “virtual worlds.” Most of them used these worlds as a mean to build their own version of the desired society, a fact that further alienated them from their own societies. As they entered the 2020's, many Millennials felt that they were just waiting for the Baby Boomers to die.

Throughout the 2020's, the struggle for jobs and resources intensified tribal distinctions by generational cohort, race, and ethnicity, and alienated vulnerable populations from one another. Gaps in values and attitudes continued to widen within racial groups,¹⁷ with successful blacks – for example – attacking the

¹⁷ Pew Research Center (2007), *Optimism about black progress declines: Blacks see growing values gap between poor and middle class*, Washington, DC, accessed on June 9, 2010 at <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/Race.pdf>

“cultures of poverty” that existed within their own communities. By 2030, those “cultures of poverty” have become society’s excuse for ignoring – and simply trying to co-exist with – vulnerability on an unprecedented scale. “CSR fatigue” has exhausted corporate appetites for community work, while many individual donors no longer see the point. The failure of vulnerable populations to respond to innovative “welfare to work” reforms has weakened the government’s resolve and political momentum to end poverty. Gang violence, broken families, unwed pregnancy, and substance abuse are broadly accepted as community attributes that society – despite its best efforts over a series of decades – has been unable to eradicate. This narrative has undermined Americans’ willingness to help others to such an extent that in 2030 less than 48% believe that government should help those who cannot help themselves; this figure is lower than the actual number in need of that help.

Delta Forecast – Cultural, Social, and Generational Change 2030

The crises of the 2000’s in the economy, the environment, and the public’s trust in institutions made clear to many that the way American society had ordered its priorities for the previous three decades, often placing private interest ahead of the common good, was unsustainable. Through the political cycles of the 2010’s, public discourse slowly shifted from specific policy disagreements to the larger question of what a humane, just, and equitable American society would look like. This emerging conversation helped bridge the values divide that had existed between generations. For example, Baby Boomers entering elderhood shifted their focus from preserving their own government benefits to thinking about the legacy they would leave for their grandchildren. Millennials were eager to change a system that in their view exploited the environment and the vulnerable for the benefit of the few. Gen X business leaders provided the practical solutions to manage the crises and pave the way for a new system that worked for all.

In thinking about vulnerability, policy makers came to see the “culture of poverty” as a developmental stage common in environments that lack the basic requirements for human growth and thriving. Collaborations among government agencies and nonprofits in different areas highlighted the myriad factors that hinder this thriving, and the linkages between them. This more holistic view of vulnerability allowed people to see past the definition of poverty as a lack of employment and income. At the same time, multiple natural disasters that disproportionately affected the poor gave lie to the American myth of “individual responsibility” for one’s success or failure.

In the late 2010’s, this insight provided a range of new policies to reduce vulnerability, such as the elimination of exploitative “pay-day” lending and state-run lotteries, which were seen as both economically and developmentally regressive taxes. Childcare and early childhood education were provided to all American children based on the understanding that these years were essential to a productive and fulfilling life. Regulatory agencies levied severe fines on companies for marketing hazardous or unhealthy products to the young or vulnerable. While cigarettes remain legal, tobacco companies find it increasingly difficult to recruit new employees willing to take on the stigma of Big Tobacco.

Public willingness to pay taxes increased, as did support for policies such as a “negative income tax.” At the same time, government program efficiency has increased with technology-driven transparency. While the private sector continues to play an important role in the progress of society, it is no longer assumed that what is good for business is good for society; rather, what is good for society is also good for business.

Over the decades to 2030, vulnerability has been redefined as the absence of economic, social, ecological, educational, and spiritual environments conducive to growth and thriving. Poverty, which is seen as a waste of human potential that society can ill afford, is no longer tolerated. By 2030, the question of whether or not government should help those who cannot help themselves is rarely asked. When it is, the likely response is, “Why wouldn’t it?” Americans feel that it is the responsibility of all within a society to help put those who cannot help themselves on a pathway to optimize their full potential.