Rationally Speaking #245: Are Boomers to blame for Millennials’ struggles?

Julia Galef: Welcome back to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I’m your host, Julia Galef, and in today’s episode, we’ll be putting the Baby Boomer generation on trial for their alleged economic crimes against the Millennials.

So to back up, I’m sure you know the terms Boomer and Millennial, but people tend to think of the word Millennial as synonymous with a “youth.” It actually refers to people born between roughly 1981 and ‘96, which by this point includes people who are pushing 40. So that’s a common misconception. Boomers, meanwhile, are the Americans born after World War II, so between 1945 and 1964.

You’re probably familiar with some of the intergenerational sniping between Boomers and Millennials. It started years ago with Boomers accusing Millennials of being lazy and thinking of ourselves as special snowflakes who deserve participation trophies, and buy too much avocado toast so we can’t save for the future. Things like that.

And then more recently, there have been responses from a number of Millennials saying, "Don’t blame us. We are in a much tougher economic situation than you Boomers were when you were our age. Our wages have stagnated for decades. We have way more student loan debt. Healthcare is more expensive. Rent is more expensive. And these problems that we’re facing are largely the result of policy choices that your generation made."

So this is the claim that I’ve heard bandied about a lot in the last few years. And it just got me curious about, how true is it? To what extent are Boomers responsible for the economic struggles faced by Millennials today?

So that’s what this episode is about. And rather than being an interview with one guest, it’s actually a series of three conversations that I had as I attempted to explore this question. The first two are with two different authors, each of whom wrote a book essentially blaming Boomers -- although the two authors have very different takes from each other about what exactly the Boomers did wrong, which is interesting. And then the third conversation is with a political scientist who I called to try to follow up on some of the questions that arose in the first two conversations.

So interview number one is with Jill Filipovic. She is a journalist writing for the New York Times, CNN, Cosmopolitan, and she recently published a book titled, OK Boomer, Let’s Talk: How My Generation Got Left Behind. So here is Jill Filipovic.

Jill Filipovic: So what you’ve seen is, for the past several generations in American history, kind of a steady growth towards something better. You saw wealth building generation to generation. You saw more people buying homes. You saw more people going to college and achieving higher levels of education. You saw people living longer. All of these markers of development and betterment you saw building on each other, right? So Baby Boomers did better than their parents, and Baby Boomers’ parents had done better than their parents.
With Millennials, you see a lot of those trends reversing. Not all of them. Millennials, for example, are the best educated adults in America. So the educational trends, we've built on. But on a lot of other markers, we've slipped. So we're going to be the first generation that doesn't do as well as our parents, and we frankly may not do as well as our grandparents. So we're less likely, even comparing apples to apples, of where Boomers were when they were about the same age that Millennials are now, Millennials are less likely to own our homes. We are more in debt. We're less healthy. There are all kinds of ways in which we have really, really fallen behind compared to where Baby Boomers were when they were young adults.

And one of the statistics that I'd found sort of the most shocking is that when Baby Boomers were roughly the same age Millennials are now, kind of on average a couple of years older, but not by much, they held about 20% of American wealth, and Millennials hold 3%. And the oldest Millennials are turning 40 this year. So, you know, I don't think we're going to be catching up anytime soon.

So I don't want to give the impression that I think every other generation had it easy, right? Because of course they didn't. But there were certain political choices made before Millennials were born, and the same was true for Boomers, before they were born, and when they were young adults, that did allow them to have certain often invisible advantages. And for Millennials, the same thing happened, but those political choices were different. And I think it put us in a much less advantageous position.

Julia Galef: You know, as I was reading your book, it's kind of explicitly framed as being about a generational clash -- I don't know if clash is the right word, but it's a generational framing, about how Boomers have made things harder for Millennials.

But a lot of the examples that you give, especially in the economic parts of the book, are about ways that conservatives have made things harder for Millennials. Ignoring climate change, cutting taxes, or cutting various important social programs, blocking universal healthcare. So I kept wondering, to what extent is this actually a book about critiquing Boomers, versus a book critiquing conservatives?

Jill Filipovic: Yeah. I think that's a fair question. Obviously not every Boomer is at fault for the decisions of either Boomer politicians, or politicians who were elected by a majority of Baby Boomers. And Boomers are pretty cleanly split down the middle between liberals and conservatives.

But one thing that I think is interesting about the Boomer generation is that it seems like, while the progressive Boomers very much won the culture, conservative Boomers won the power, and won in the political realm.

So it's not that I necessarily blame all Baby Boomers for the ills that Millennials now face. But when you look at who are the people in positions of political power who are making these choices, today they are overwhelmingly Baby Boomers. And given that until very recently, Baby Boomers were the largest adult generation in America, for more or less
my entire life, it's been Baby Boomers who have been either making political decisions or a plurality of the electorate ushering those folks into office.

Julia Galef: Well, this brings me to a related question I had, which is: When you say that Boomers were a “plurality of the electorate” -- that they were the largest adult generation during all of these years in which politicians were elected and passed laws that ended up hurting Millennials -- it doesn't follow for me that it then makes sense to blame Boomers for ushering those politicians into office.

Because in many or most of those years in which these politicians were elected, it wasn't like Boomers were disproportionately supporting these politicians more than other generations were. For example, we were talking about Reaganism earlier, and Reagan was elected in 1980 and '84. And it's true that Boomers supported Reagan, but they didn't support him more than average. Reagan was popular across the board. And in fact, his largest support came from people who were older than Boomers, the Silent Generation, the Greatest Generation.

And so I just don't understand why we're putting blame on Boomers, when they weren't disproportionately supporting the politicians who passed the laws that we're complaining about.

Jill Filipovic: Yeah. I mean, of course it's not just Baby Boomers who I think are kind of at fault for a lot of this, nor do I think it is fair to blame an entire generation. Part of the point of the book was not to say, "Okay, everything is the fault of Baby Boomers and Baby Boomers alone." It was to look at the fact that there is a tension, that I hear, I'm a Millennial, and I certainly hear from many members of my cohort that they do blame Baby Boomers. That they are frustrated with the hand they've been dealt.

And then I hear many Boomers complaining about what they perceive as kind of Millennial whining or excesses, or whatever. There are whole Fox News segments blaming Millennials for literally everything. So the generational tension exists. Whether that's fair or not, it's happening.

And so what I was trying to do with the book was to outline for Boomers, "Here's how Millennials are seeing things. Here's why we're so frustrated. Here are all of the decisions that were made, that whether or not your cohort is 100% responsible for them, you were partly responsible for them, that have put us in a really, really unfavorable position." And then trying to look back at, "Okay, what were the political choices that were made? Who made them? How did we get here?"

And then for Millennials, on the other hand, I did try in the book to kind of emphasize, "Not all Boomers." This is not the fault of every single Baby Boomer out there, and that many of these decisions certainly predate Baby Boomers as well. So I'm certainly not trying to kind of send a message that all Boomers are bad and they've uniquely screwed Millennials. It's more trying to look at, "Well, why are Millennials ... Why do we feel so unstable? Why do we feel like we are kind of always on the precipice of total disaster? And who was accountable for that, and in what ways?"
Julia Galef: You talk in the book about the political disenfranchisement of Millennials. For example, you wrote that, "Millennials haven't enjoyed our fair share of political influence, which means that we haven't seen the kind of investments that we need," end quote.

And my reaction to that is, isn't this kind of our fault? The framing makes it sound like political influence is this good that's being hoarded by older generations. That they're not giving us our fair share. But Millennials, we notoriously vote at much lower rates than older generations. We don't run for office as much. So how is it not our responsibility to take our fair share of political influence? And we're not doing that.

Jill Filipovic: Yeah. I love this question, because I get it a lot, and there's a couple of things. One is that Millennials don't vote any less than previous generations of young people did, right? So it's not that Millennials don't vote. It's that young people don't vote. And that was true when Boomers were young as well.

I think a few things are different now. One of those things is that Millennials face barriers to voting that Boomers did not. And I'm overstating that a little bit, but Boomers, when they were young adults, were and continue to be a very white generation. So Boomers of color face barriers to voting, but Boomers of color were a much smaller percentage of the Boomer generation, right? So you didn't see that effect as broadly as you see it with voter disenfranchisement among Millennials. That we know there have been concerted efforts to block particularly the Black vote in the United States, but also the Latino vote as well. And a much larger share of Millennials are people of color. So race-based voter disenfranchisement is going to affect us more than it affected Boomers when they were young folks.

We know that since Boomers were young adults, incarceration rates have skyrocketed. So Millennials, the rate of juvenile incarceration peaked when Millennials were children. The rate of adult incarceration, it's sort of hard to tell who's the most incarcerated generation: Gen Xers or Millennials.

Julia Galef: I thought it was Gen X? I thought the incarceration rate had gone down since like 2000.

Jill Filipovic: It hasn't gone down since 2000 -- I'd have to look this up, but I think it's gone down since more like 2007 or 2008. Which means that it peaked when Gen Xers were young adults, but it went up much quicker than it's going down. So the incarceration rate has a really, really, really long tail, and it's going to be like 100 years or something before, if it keeps decreasing at the rate it's going, it'll be 100 years or so before we hit where we were in 1980. And so that long tail is scooping up a whole lot of Millennials. So we just don't know yet who kind of got hit the worst by that. That's one that's bad for everybody.

Julia Galef: What you're suggesting, then, is that if we looked just at white, non-incarcerated Millennials, their voting rate, we wouldn't expect that to be all that different from the voting rate of white, non-incarcerated Boomers?
Jill Filipovic:  I would guess that. I mean, I don't know. I don't think anybody's ever actually addressed that. My point is that there are a variety of barriers that are making it harder for Millennials to vote. Not that they didn't exist for Baby Boomers, but that they impacted a far smaller proportion of Baby Boomers. So, that's one thing.

The other issue that I think is really unaddressed is that especially, I think among progressives -- and this I do think is changing now, although slowly -- there has been much less of an effort to cultivate and move up the chain, young talent. And Boomers, understandably, are staying in these positions much longer.

So, we have Joe Biden -- who's not a Boomer, he's a member of the silent generation -- but he took his Senate seat when he was 30, and he was kind of this obviously a very, very young talent. But there are several Baby Boomers senators, including Russ Feingold, including Rick Santorum, who took their seats when they were in their thirties. There's never been a millennial in the Senate, despite the fact that as I said, the oldest of us are turning 40 this year. Josh Hawley is the closest and he's the youngest possible Gen Xer.

Julia Galef: Are you saying that that's because Millennials have tried to build political careers and get into the Senate, but Boomers who are in power have made it hard for them?

Jill Filipovic: I would say it's a couple of things. I would say that Boomers are not seating power. So you're getting Boomers who are in Congress, whether they're in the Senate or the house for decades and decades. So not necessarily kind of stepping aside and making room, which is why you see when folks like AOC get elected, it is often by kind of elbowing their way in. So I think that's --

Julia Galef: But is that a thing? It seems like it would be noble for older generations to willingly step down so that younger generations could take their political positions, but I guess I'd be surprised if that was a thing that any generation ever did. I assume that everyone would just, if they're in power and they like being a politician, they're going to stay in power, and they're not going to sacrifice that to make room for younger generations. And so it's kind of the responsibility of younger generations to run for office, and make the case that people should replace the older generations with them.

Jill Filipovic: Sure. And of course, but again, Boomers are the longest living adults in American history. So there's just many more years for them to be in those positions of power.

And then there's the fact that when Boomers were young adults, had many of the markers of stable adulthood, that once they're in place, create this kind of steady base from which to grow from. Boomers had those things in place much earlier. So they were much less likely to have educational debt, they were much more likely to own their homes, they married younger.
Millennials, I look around and I think, "Okay, well, why don't the people that I know who are bright and politically engaged, why aren't they running for office?" And it's a couple of things.

One is that, which is I think the biggest one, is financial. That so many of us even well into our thirties, and surely into our forties are carrying high levels of educational debt, especially those of us who have gone to graduate school, gone to law school, which is one of the kind of traditional paths into politics. So you have huge levels of educational debt. We're less likely to own our homes. We're less likely to be married. Certainly if we are married, we're likely in two earner families.

And so you don't have that dynamic that many boomer men had, which is, "I don't have debt. I could own a house. And I have a wife who kind of takes care of the rest of my life. Making it much easier for me to then run for office." That's not the life that Millennials have, right? So when you already have five or six figure student loan debt, the idea of then running for office, I think seems impossible.

And then when you add on to that, okay, well whether I'm male or female, I'm probably working a full-time job. Many Millennials have kids I'm trying to be a present, equal parent in my home. I would like to maybe buy a home some day. So I'm trying to save for that. The idea of, okay, well, I'm going to add this other thing onto it -- something that is very time consuming and expensive and challenging -- I think for a lot of Millennials, looking around at every other kind of instability in our lives, that just feels like far, far too much.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: That was Jill Filipovic, the author of Okay, Boomer, Let's Talk: How My Generation Got Left Behind.

After I finished reading Jill's book and speaking with her, I wanted to get another take on the issue, and so I picked up The Theft of a Decade: How the Baby Boomers Stole the Millennials Economic Future. This is a book by Joseph Sternberg, who is a member of the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal and writes their political economics column. Here is interview number two, with Joseph Sternberg.

Joseph Sternberg: So I think that one thing that Baby Boomers have tended to get wrong in a big way, that is really negatively affecting their millennial children, is this general way that they think about productivity, and how to stimulate it, and the way that they rely on monetary policy to do that.

So if you go back to the 2008 financial crisis, half of the headlines would be about things that the Federal Reserve was doing. And there was a certain important role for the Fed in just stabilizing the financial system in the depth of the crisis. That's what we have a central bank for.

But Baby Boomers tended to lean on monetary policy, and this notion that you could cut interest rates as a way of stimulating investment, so that you could get the employment picture running again. Or more recently,
that you could do things like quantitative easing, that you could buy large quantities of bonds as a way of pushing more cash into the economy -- again, to stimulate more risk-taking and investment. Boomers leaned very heavily on that.

And I tell a story in the book about how that actually turned out to be counterproductive. That did not stimulate investment in the economy, the way that you really needed to, in order to trigger the recovery.

And that feeds directly into the second major mistake that the Boomers made, which was encouraging Millennials to go to college. Because then you have this problem, where if the economy is not investing properly -- if your policymakers are not encouraging the right kind of productive investment, capital expenditure on the part of companies, that is going to stimulate job growth, innovation, productivity gains -- then you’re going to have to do something else.

And I think that the thing that Baby Boomers have tended to fall back on is trying to invest in human capital. The theory is that, somehow, if you can get everyone to go to college, if you can just educate people the right way, the jobs will follow. Sort of like the boomer philosophy has always been “Educate them and then the income will come.” And you can see that in terms of the much larger numbers of Millennials that went to college compared to previous generations, and the much larger amounts of debt that we took on in order to do so.

And you can tell that this hasn’t worked because we’re all struggling to pay off the debt. If going to college, if getting that four year degree was actually an economic solution to anything for large numbers of people, then the student debt crisis wouldn’t actually be a crisis. The logic behind student borrowing is that you expect that you will over time be able to earn back enough money that you can repay the loans. Now, if people are struggling to do that, that is a sign that probably college was a bad investment for them. Boomers never stopped to think about that part of it.

Julia Galef: Great. And in addition to these misguided strategies of relying on education and monetary policy to boost growth, you also talk in your book about how for a long time, Boomers have been focused on the wrong kind of growth. That it’s been, as you say, a kind of “sugar high” growth, an empty calories approach. Could you explain what that means? And also, what time period are we talking about here?

Joseph Sternberg: I situate it in the 80s, but particularly into the 90s and early 2000s. And I should point out that means that this is bipartisan. And this was something that kind of surprised me -- because I was 18, just showing up at college for my freshman year in 2000, when we had that bruising election fight in Florida. And it seemed like the stakes, depending on whether the Republicans or the Democrats would win, were so high.

One of the things I discovered as I was actually looking at what policy makers did, instead of a bunch of their rhetoric, is that actually a lot of these Boomers -- whether it was Bill Clinton, who was a boomer, or
whether it was George W. Bush, who was a boomer -- on a lot of these
economic issues, they traveled in a relatively narrow path. And they might
use different rhetoric to talk about what they were doing, but the
consensus was really strong.

And that tended to focus on things like assuming that if you were stimulating more
activity on Wall Street, that was a sign that things were happening, that
everything would be going right in the broader economy as well. The
Boomers tended to really obsess over the stock market. Which I think is
something that the current boomer occupant of the White House still
does, to a certain extent. That kind of misdirected focus is a policy error.
Because if you’re only looking at things like asset prices, you’re going to
miss a lot of more important developments in the economy.

And I think that the Boomers tended to focus a lot on the sugar high that
would come from stimulating the housing market and home ownership.
To a surprising degree, both Republican and Democratic Boomers always
thought that if you stimulated the housing market, everything else would
follow. And what we discovered is that if you stimulate the housing
market, you’re just going to end up getting a financial bubble in the
mortgage market that’s going to burst.

Julia Galef: So the story that Millennials are struggling because Boomers have failed to boost
productivity or GDP growth in the right way -- I feel like this is not going
to be convincing to many Millennials. Because from what I’ve seen,
Millennials who are dissatisfied with their position in society today tend
to compare the US unfavorably to other places like Scandinavia -- which
has also not had booming productivity growth in the last few decades, but
still seems to many people to be doing better than we are, on the
dimensions of equality between classes, and equality between
generations. And that doesn’t really fit with the story that our problem is
slow productivity growth.

So what do you think Millennials are wrong to admire about Scandinavia
compared to the US?

Joseph Sternberg: So two issues. First off, I no longer assume that they’re getting it right.
Although I once did.

Julia Galef: What changed?

Joseph Sternberg: Well, I visited Denmark three weeks ago. So when you write a book like
this, you occasionally get invited to speak various places. Not just in the
US, but I think that there is a lot of interest in these issues around the
world.

And I was rather surprised when I was invited to speak about the
problems of Millennials in Denmark. Because looking at the Danish
economy on an aggregate basis, I had thought, much as I think a lot of
people do -- well, it looks pretty good. There’s sort of some problems in
the housing market here, which are creating some intergenerational
unrest, but in general, they seem to have a good handle on it.
And yet here was this sort of the equivalent of the Aspen Ideas Festival, but sort of the Danish version of that, flying me over from London to talk about intergenerational injustice. So, the first thing is, I think you should always take that kind of signal seriously. If they’re curious to hear about this, there’s probably a reason for that.

Julia Galef: Yeah, but they might have a much lower threshold for what counts as intergenerational injustice, if they’re better than us in general.

Joseph Sternberg: Well, but I got over there and just discovered that the sense of urgency that Danish Millennials seem to feel about a lot of these problems is completely out of proportion to what I would have expected.

So, they really have a sense that the housing market is going wrong for them. And in fact, they might have reason for that. I think that the number of first time home buyers is only recently recovered to its pre 2008 level. And certainly first time home buyers in Denmark are trending older than they used to. So, something is going wrong in the housing market there.

And I got hints that there is a lot of unease or discontent in the labor market, which is maybe not fully expressed if you just look at unemployment data, because that won’t necessarily capture the extent to which Millennials feel like they are not in the jobs that they would want to be doing if they had the choice.

Julia Galef: But couldn’t you always find anecdotal evidence of dissatisfaction? And shouldn’t we limit ourselves to just looking at the stats, to compare whether Scandinavian countries are doing better?

Joseph Sternberg: Well, it depends on which statistic you’re going to look at. I tend to be -- actually, this is one of my many heretical views. I tend to be a little skeptical about economics statistics, because I think that we actually have a lot of trouble measuring something precisely that is as complex as a modern economy.

Julia Galef: Oh, I actually agree with that too. I just don’t think that anecdotes are going to be better.

Joseph Sternberg: So I think that there is sort of a halfway point, which is if you kind of look at ... I’m on record in a book review I wrote for the Wall Street Journal a few years ago, arguing that the only two economic data that mean anything are prices and votes. And I do think that you can take anecdote seriously from the perspective of sort of voting behavior, and certain of the signals that you get from people in terms of their interest in talking about some of these issues. That’s an important economic data point on its own, because it will signal to you that maybe there is something that the aggregate data aren’t telling you.

I mean, I definitely think that this is true in the US, where an argument that I have with a lot of my co-religionists on the political and economic right is: there’s a certain amount of skepticism to my argument there, because you can look at aggregate data, especially over the past few years,
and think that Millennials are really starting to recover. The employment picture is a lot better than it was before, home ownership rates are finally starting to rise a little bit.

But the argument that I make is that yeah, I mean, that's sort of true, but Millennials are still voting like they are people in crisis. And we should take that seriously. We should be curious about, are there dynamics that are going on in their household economy, that we are missing when we look at aggregate data?

And I think that a good example of that in terms of employment and earnings, is that: Yes, I mean, it's true that Millennials' earnings are starting to increase and we finally found our footing in the job market, and our unemployment rate is back to more of the historical norm now. But then you discover all of this economic research suggesting that... we had been set back for many years, and perhaps our entire lives, in terms of our earnings power, because we entered the labor market under such terrible conditions [after the recession].

And so we have a sense that we're struggling to make up that ground. And we might be able to see in our daily lives, that we haven't quite caught up to the level of economic security that our parents might have expected when they were our age. And that kind of dynamic is very important, but it's also not necessarily easy to capture in economic data.

So I think that, going back to your question about Scandinavia, I think that the first thing is that we should ask ourselves how happy are those Millennials? If we do... The numbers suggest that they probably are not as poorly off as Americans or even British Millennials or French Millennials. But don't necessarily assume that they found the economic fountain of youth here, that they've solved all of these problems.

Julia Galef: Okay. So let's just assume you're completely right about the policy choices that caused Millennials to struggle today. Even so, I'm still left with this big question about how much it makes sense to blame Boomers for those policy choices. And the reason is that it doesn't seem to me that Boomers supported the politicians who made those choices at any greater rates than other generations did.

So for example, in the '80s, Reagan's greatest support came not from Boomers, but from the generations that were older than Boomers -- the Greatest generation, the Silent generation. And then in the '90s, Clinton's greatest support came from Gen X -- and I think from people who are over sixty in '92, who were not Boomers. And then Obama, who was in charge after the 2008 crisis that you were talking about earlier, his greatest support came, again, not from Boomers, but from Gen X and Millennials.

And so, I can see how you could make the argument that our political leaders have made bad choices in the last few decades, but I don't understand why it would make sense to blame Boomers in particular for those policy choices. Does that make sense?
Joseph Sternberg: Yeah, I mean look, I guess one point I would make is that we tend to think about these things in terms of the President. And I have fallen into that trap myself a couple of times in this conversation. But you have to remember that that is only one policymaker out of many, especially in the American system. And so you also have to look at what was going on for example, in the Congress and in State Legislatures and Governorships.

And the thing that I find most noticeable here, which is why I think it is sort of fair to talk about this as being a “boomer attitude,” is first off, the policymakers who were making these decisions were Boomers themselves. And then who were the Boomers voting for? I mean, by and large, they were still also voting for a lot of politicians who were going to ratify a lot of these decisions.

And in fact, I think that on a lot of the core issues -- and we haven't talked a lot about fiscal policy, but I think that this is most pronounced when you talk about things like entitlement reform. That has become a major boomer issue. This resistance to trying to put the old age entitlements on a more sustainable fiscal footing before the Boomers start retiring, so that the Millennials have some hope of paying for those benefits. That's an example of where it was boomer politicians who always sort of were leading the pushback against sort of reforming these things, with a certain amount of electoral support from Boomers. And so I think that it is fair to talk about a lot of these issues in generational terms.

I mean, I can understand that in some specific cases, it might seem more like a shorthand. Or you can argue about a particular politician or a particular election. But I think that if you look at the fact that a lot of the [decisions] I talk about in the book were made during times when Boomers were particularly prominent in the electorate, because there were so many of them when we were enacting policy on the basis of various ideas that that generation had about the right way to make a policy.

Julia Galef: But even if they were the plurality of the electorate, surely if other demographics supported those same policies at even greater rates, then we shouldn't be blaming Boomers, even though they were more numerous.

Joseph Sternberg: Well, I mean, to what extent have the Boomers tried to push back on any of this? I mean, that's the other issue here. I mean, they also could have... it's not like you had the Boomers leading a charge for any improvement here.

So, I mean look, I think that you can have this argument in specific elections or with specific politicians about who had which percentage of support from which generation within the electorate. But I do still think that there was a particular boomer approach to policy-making that you can talk about. I mean, if someone who's listening to this wants to write a book about all of the policy mistakes that Gen X made, I think that, that would be something that people would probably want to buy alongside my book. I'm not arguing that Boomers have a monopoly on bad policy choices.

But I mean look, the bottom line is that you have to understand that we're
in this unusual situation where the Boomers are an enormous generation within the American population, and so are the Millennials. And we've never had the situation where you've had two adult generations of roughly equal size like this jostling around with each other for such a long time. And I think in that kind of scenario, you can't really argue that the Boomers have just somehow not manage to exercise an outsized political impact.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: That was Joseph Sternberg, the author of The Theft of A Decade, How The Baby Boomers Stole The Millennials' Economic Future.

It was interesting to read Jill's and Joseph's books back to back. Because the headline summary of the two books could be almost identical -- Millennials are struggling, and it's the fault of policy choices made by Boomers -- but the specifics of the two authors' arguments were very different. Jill's critique was more solidly liberal, critiquing conservative policies. While Joseph was speaking from a more free market perspective, and critiquing liberals and conservatives alike.

In fact, one specific example of the contrast, which I'm not sure came through in the interviews, was education policy. So Joseph, as you heard, blames Boomers for encouraging too many Millennials to go to college, when there weren't enough good jobs waiting for them after they graduated. Whereas Jill, in her book, critiques boomer-elected politicians for making it too hard for the younger generations to go to college, by cutting grants to higher education.

So that was one of a number of interesting contrasts between the two books. But still, after talking to both Jill and Joseph, I was left with the same central question afterwards, which was: How much does it really make sense to blame Boomer voters or Boomer policymakers for these policy choices?

So to help me figure that out, I called up a political scientist named Patrick Fisher. He's a professor at Seton Hall University, and he's written many journal articles and a number of books as well, including one titled Demographic Gaps in American Political Behavior. So here is my conversation with Patrick Fisher.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: Maybe a good place to start is just to ask, does “Baby Boomer” even make sense as a category, a natural category to draw? Are they a distinct block when it comes to attitudes, their voting patterns, et cetera?

Patrick Fisher: Right. I think actually that is a good place to start, because if you look at the generations, the one thing about the Baby Boomers is it actually makes sense demographically. Because the birth rates went up when they were born. So there is actually a demographic reason for the Baby Boomers to exist as a concept, okay? The other generations are somewhat arbitrary. The dates picked are not an exact science by any means. But
Baby Boomers are the generation that were born from 1946 to 1964 because during that time period, the birth rate went up significantly. It was much higher during that time period than it was before or after.

In terms of the political behavior of Baby Boomers, however, there is definitely a divide within Baby Boomers. And I think for people looking at the consequences of the baby boom generation politically, this is something that oftentimes gets ignored.

Older Baby Boomers are different than younger Baby Boomers politically. And it's not an exact science in terms of how you divide up older and younger. But if you pick roughly the halfway point of the Baby Boomers, in the early to mid 1950s, there is definitely a political divide.

Older Baby Boomers, those born in the late '40s, early '50s tend to be more liberal and more democratic than younger Baby Boomers. The older Baby Boomers are really the Vietnam War generation. Those who came of age during the Vietnam War. They tend to have not only more liberal policy preferences, but more anti-establishment as well. When I was a kid -- I'm Generation X, and my stereotype of Baby Boomers when I was growing up was hippies that were considerably to the left of, at least, the American public before the Baby Boomers.

But that's only really one small part of the baby boom generation. Those who were born in the early 1960s, however, they don't have any recollection of the Vietnam War really, or very little. So this was not something that was a major catalyst in their political development.

Younger Baby Boomers tend to be more conservative, especially on economic issues, and more Republican. And for younger Baby Boomers, the key catalyst was really, I think, the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan Presidencies. The unpopularity of the Democrat, Jimmy Carter, and the relative popularity of a Republican Ronald Reagan, made this generation gravitate towards the Republicans at a key part of their political socialization.

Julia Galef: So it sounds like you're saying that the political or economic conditions at the time that people are first becoming voters, that those shape the political attitudes of that cohort? And those political attitudes kind of remain consistent throughout that cohort's life?

Patrick Fisher: Yeah, it's actually pretty remarkable how stable people's political beliefs tend to be after they've reached kind of their early 20s. So with the baby boom, if you were reaching your early 20s in the late sixties, when the Vietnam War was the major issue -- well, that was pushing you definitely one way politically. As opposed to if you're reaching your 20s in the early '80s, with Ronald Reagan as President. Completely different political and economic context for those time periods.

Julia Galef: And can we compare the -- let's call them the early Boomers and the late Boomers -- can we compare them to surrounding generations? Like, the conservative late Boomers, how did they compare to, say, the silent generation? Or the greatest generation before them? And how did they
Patrick Fisher: Yeah, they're actually taking it in different directions. Because for older Baby Boomers, who tend to be relatively liberal, they came after the silent generation, which is a very conservative generation. The silent generation is definitely kind of an outlier in terms of its conservative politics and Republican leaning tendencies.

For younger Baby Boomers on the other hand, their politics tends to be a lot like older gen X-ers, those born in the late '60s, early '70s. Politically, they're very similar to younger Baby Boomers, and tend to be more Republican and conservative leaning.

Julia Galef: And what about the late gen X? Are they going back to more liberal?

Patrick Fisher: Yeah. And then if we get into late gen X, they are like Millennials. So there's actually, in gen X, there's a major divide, and it comes down to the birth year of 1973. So that's pretty much right in between, right halfway in between the gen X generation. Those born 1973 and after are considerably more liberal and democratic than gen X-ers born before 1973.

I find this interesting, I don't know if this is relevant for where you're planning on going, but just looking ahead to 2020 and looking at the age groups -- because as somebody who researches age and generational gaps, whenever I can find a poll on the 2020 election that has the cross tabs for age, I'm very curious as to how it looks like that might play out. And right now Biden looks to be doing much better than Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama among older Americans. This seems to be kind of a consensus of the polling so far, is Biden is definitely doing better among older Americans.

Part of that however, and this is rarely said, is because of generational replacement. That the oldest cohort -- generally, it's just 65 and older -- well, that's now kind of the older Baby Boomers, who are actually relatively liberal. And those people are replacing those of the silent generation, who are historically one of the most conservative age cohorts in American history.

Julia Galef: Let's shift gears at this point, to talking about political leaders. This is maybe a little bit less in your wheelhouse, but do you know if Baby Boomers have been overrepresented in Congress or the Senate? Or I don't know, in the leadership of the Republican or Democrat parties? Overrepresented even more than their numbers would justify.

Patrick Fisher: This is actually something I know. I have a book that I've written called Insufficient Representation, and one of the chapters is on the generational gap, that looks at how the generational dynamics of Congress are different from that of the population as a whole. And for Baby Boomers right now, they are vastly overrepresented in Congress. And they are, in Congress, tend to be more conservative than other generations in Congress.

Julia Galef: So they're overrepresented relative to -- the silent generation? Or --
Julia Galef: Right. Well, I guess more what I'm wondering is... What could be the case is that all generations are overrepresented in Congress when they're old.

Patrick Fisher: Right. Yeah.

Julia Galef: So if we looked at the '70s and '80s, the silent generation -- or I guess the greatest generation, at that point, would have been the older people -- they were overrepresented in the same way that Boomers are currently overrepresented. And if we look at the '90s, the silent generation would be the overrepresented ones in Congress.

So I'm just wondering if it's worse now than it was before.

Patrick Fisher: Right. It's just general life cycles. I absolutely agree with that. Inevitably, the way Congress is designed, it's going to be older Americans that are disproportionately in Congress.

What I've found actually is... The Baby Boomers are overrepresented, but also it makes sense in terms of where they are in their life cycle. What really surprised me when doing the research for that book chapter however, was the silent generation. That there are a number of very high profile... Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, for one, that are members of the silent generation. And they are shrinking as a percentage of the overall population. So they definitely have much larger numbers than you would expect.

Julia Galef: So if the case against Boomers relies on policy decisions made primarily in the '80s and '90s, would the political leaders at that time have been mostly silent and greatest generation folks? Or were Boomers overrepresented even then, when they were relatively younger?

Patrick Fisher: Yeah, it would have been the greatest generation and silent generation that was creating those policies.

And from a policy perspective, one that would be an obvious one to highlight is: Everybody saw the demographics, that we as a society were going to get older as the Baby Boomers retired. And politicians -- and it would have been the greatest generation and silent generation -- some proposed that we needed to do social security reform, just to prepare for the changing of demographics. And that potentially could have been done many decades before the Baby Boomers were actually getting their social security checks. But there wasn't quite enough political will to do that.

I think that was potentially a missed opportunity. But you can't actually blame the Baby Boomers for that because they weren't the ones that were actually making the political decisions.

Julia Galef: I suppose someone who wanted to blame Boomers could argue that that proposal never really got off the ground because politicians were worried that boomer voters would punish them politically for it.

Patrick Fisher: Yeah. So just the size of the generation as a voter block, that they feared the electoral consequences of them. Yeah.
Julia Galef: Do we have any evidence on whether such a fear would have been justified? Like, in opinion polls, were Boomers at the time strongly against any kind of cut to their future benefits?

Patrick Fisher: Yeah. I can't point to any specific evidence, but just thinking of the divide among Baby Boomers themselves, I don't think that would have been the case. That they wouldn't have been organized around “save our social security” as a generation when they're in their thirties and forties.

Julia Galef: Okay. So if Millennials are underrepresented in political leadership, to what do we attribute that? Is that about Millennials choosing not to run for office as much as earlier generations did? Or is that about political leadership keeping out younger generations, and not being willing to support them or fund them, the way they had supported our funded people in the past?

Patrick Fisher: That's actually an argument I make in my book, that older generations aren't retiring like previous generations, that they're kind of sticking around a long time. And that's making it more difficult for Millennials and even gen X-ers to rise up in the political hierarchy.

Julia Galef: Is that happening at a greater rate than we would expect just from the fact that Boomers are living longer than other generations? Or can it just be explained by that?

Patrick Fisher: I would say it's more than just that, that certainly life expectancy has a role in it, but there are more members of Congress in their seventies, eighties, now even nineties than ever before. And that's obviously making it much more difficult for those in their thirties or forties to get elected.

You could potentially change the... Have term limits, other mechanisms like that. But given the advantages of incumbency, it makes it more difficult for younger generations to kind of get their foot in the door.

Julia Galef: And why do you think the older generations are not retiring as much as they used to?

Patrick Fisher: Yeah, that's a great question. They're definitely not thinking of it in terms of the need, that that's an important thing to do. And I would argue that generational replacement -- we need that in Congress and elected bodies. We need younger people involved in politics. And it's counterproductive. Older Americans need to think that it's time to pass the torch to newer generations.

Julia Galef: Well, is that an attitude that used to exist and doesn't anymore? That if we look at why people retired from Congress or political leadership in the '60s and '70s and '80s, were they doing it intentionally, because they thought it was important to pass the torch, or --

Patrick Fisher: Or just people are healthier, living longer now...

Julia Galef: Yeah. That's another thing -- not just longevity, but health in old age.
Patrick Fisher: Right. So, if older generations of Americans could have continued to serve in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, in terms of age -- would they have? Yeah, maybe.

I think, though, we as a society need to address that. That it's not necessarily that good to have Congress so much older than the American population.

Julia Galef: I agree with that pretty strongly. I've just been very fixated currently on figuring out how much blame Boomers as a generation deserve, and less focused on what should we encourage going forward. Which is a separate, but arguably more important, question than the assignment of blame.

[musical interlude]

Julia Galef: That was Patrick Fisher, professor of political science at Seton Hall University.

And after my conversation with Patrick, I still feel like it doesn't really make sense to blame Boomers disproportionately for our current economic woes. Boomer voters didn't, as far as I can tell, support any particular harmful policies at greater rates than other generations did. And then policy makers -- the ones who were actually in charge even during the period of time when Boomers were the largest share of the voting population -- the people in charge were, for the most part, older than Boomers. The silent generation, the greatest generation.

In fact, after my call with Patrick, I looked up the exact dates when the US Congress became majority boomer. And for the House that was 1998; for the Senate, it was 2008. So any law that was passed before those dates that you don't like, you can blame the silent and greatest generations, because they were in charge.

All of that said, however, I want to be fair to the authors here and acknowledge that I can kind of see why they frame their argument this way. Because these conversations are happening against the background of a discourse that has framed everything in terms of Boomers versus Millennials, and Boomers criticizing Millennials. And so given that context, it does kind of make sense to me why you would focus specifically on the culpability of Boomers, even if they weren't any more culpable than the generations before them or after them -- because they are the ones criticizing Millennials. So I get it.

And in any case, you don't need to buy the generational framing in order to agree with a lot of what Joseph and Jill say in their books. And it was certainly interesting to read them, especially as a pairing.

In fact, there were three books that I read criticizing Boomers for the current economy. The third one was by Bruce Cannon Gibney, and it's called A Generation of Sociopaths. If Jill's argument is that Boomers screwed up because they're too conservative, and Joseph's argument is that Boomers screwed up because they don't understand productivity, Bruce Gibney's argument would be that Boomers screwed up because they're just all terrible people.
I'm exaggerating, but only a little bit, really.

So I will link to *A Generation of Sociopaths* as well on the podcast page so you can have the full trilogy of “boomer blame” experience. And of course I will link to Jill Filipovic's *Okay, Boomer* and Joseph Sternberg’s *Theft of a Decade*. And to the two books that we were talking about in my conversation with Patrick Fisher, *Demographic Gaps in American Political Behavior* and *Insufficient Representation*.

That's all for this episode. I hope you'll join me next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.