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We're starting to see movement on student debt relief

The revolution to end the burden of student debt continues. Following the Democratic wave, which was [driven in part by a surge of youth turnout](#), it's more important than ever for Democrats to embrace an ambitious progressive agenda aimed at benefiting the rising American electorate. An ideal policy would be student debt cancellation.

From January 25 to 29, 2019, Data for Progress fielded a survey of 1,282 US voters with YouGov Blue. On that survey we asked voters about student debt relief, based on a proposal that was introduced by Jared Polis in the 115th Congress. Specifically, we asked voters,

> *Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?*
> *<1> Strongly support*
> *<2> Somewhat support*
> *<3> Neither support nor oppose*
> *<4> Somewhat oppose*
> *<5> Strongly oppose*
> *<6 fixed> Not sure*

Across the full sample, 47 percent of respondents supported and 36 percent of respondents opposed the proposal. Contrary to Republican hopes, not only are Trump's corporate tax handouts unpopular generally, they are especially so when voters are given the chance to cancel them in favor of a major national debt cancellation program! Perhaps surprisingly, we found that only 18 percent of respondents were either undecided or unsure, which is much lower than many progressive policy ideas we've written about elsewhere.

Support for Student Debt Relief
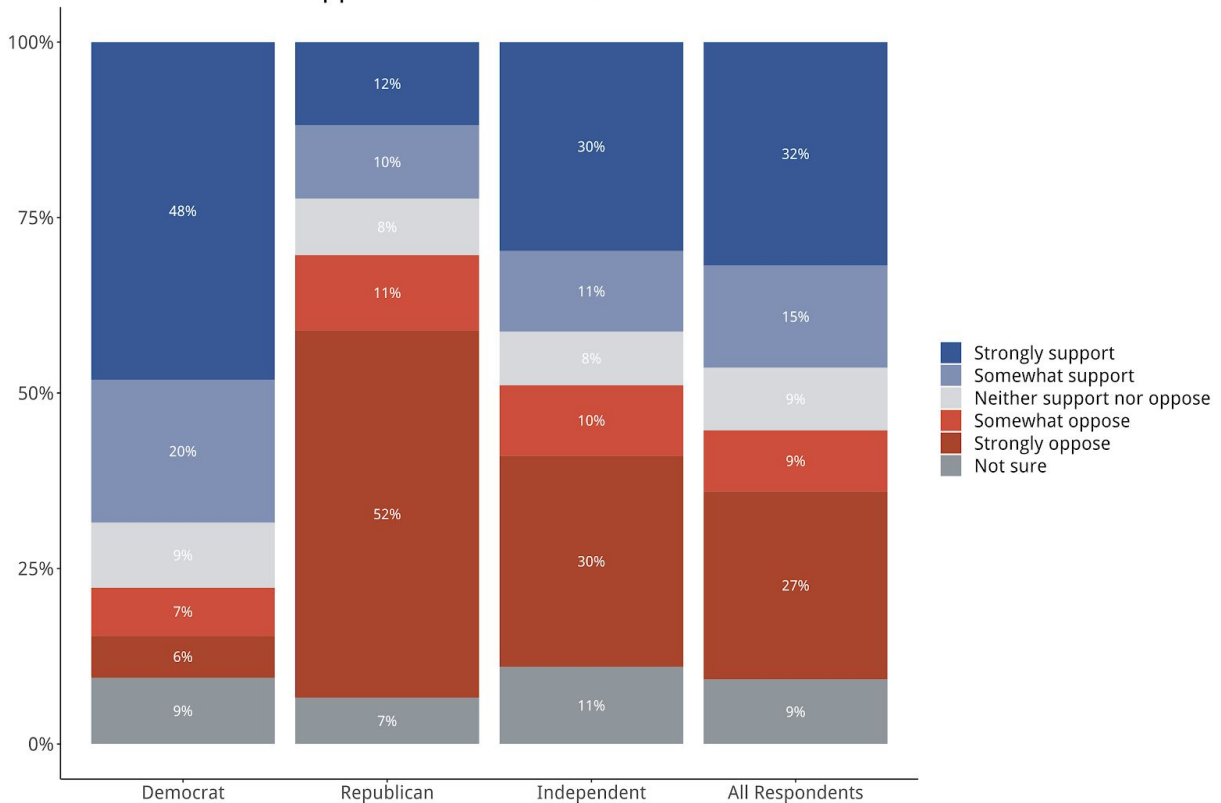
"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"
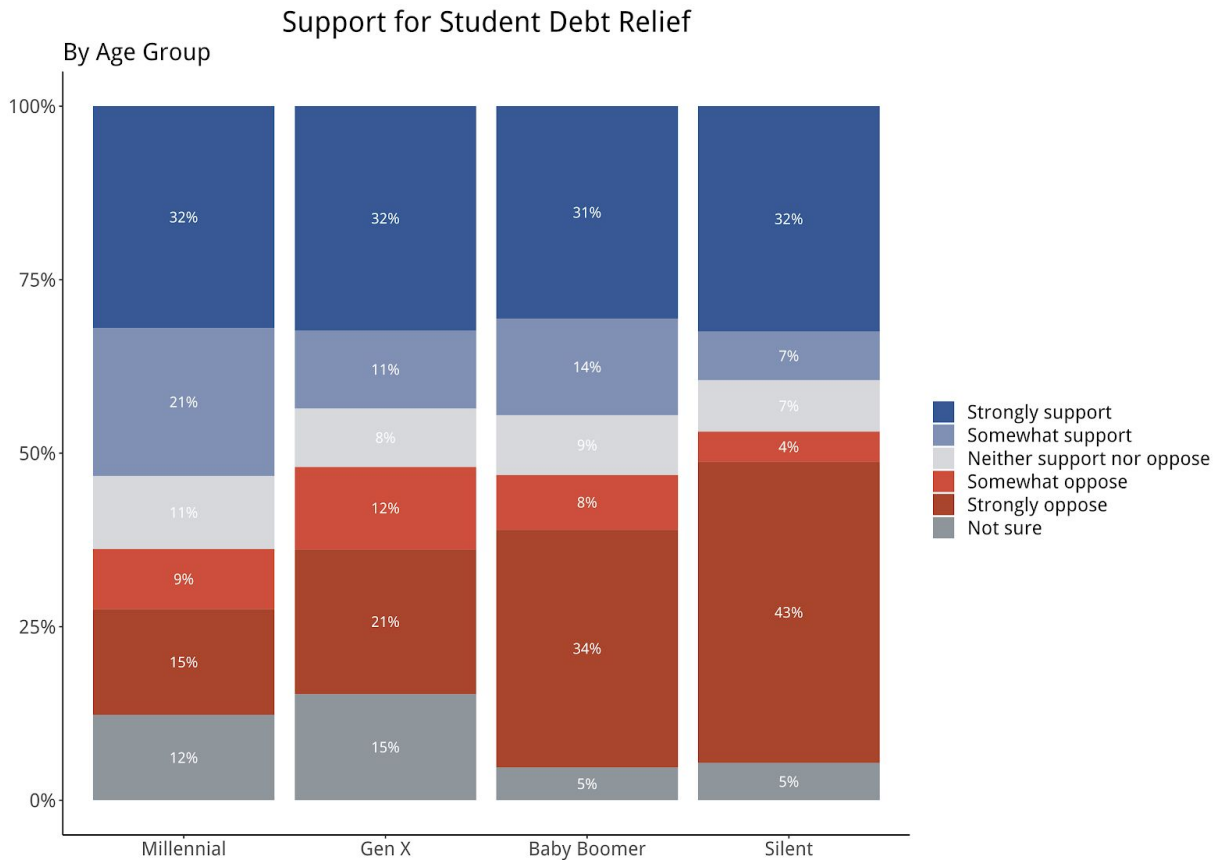
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Also unsurprisingly, there are clear partisan divides on the item, no small amount of which is likely attributable to the partisan cues explicit in canceling Trump's tax handouts in favor of helping ordinary people burdened by debt. Democrats support the policy by a 68-13 margin , and Republicans oppose it by a 63-22 margin. Independents are statistically tied, narrowly supporting the policy by a 41-40 margin.

In addition to a clear partisan divide, we found a strong and perhaps unsurprising generational divide in whether respondents supported or opposed canceling the tax cuts to eliminate student debt. Following the Pew Research Center's coding of generations, we coded our respondents into groups by age as follows:

- Respondents between the ages of 18-37 were grouped as "Millennials,"
- Respondents between the ages of 38-53 were grouped as "Generation X,"
- Respondents between the ages of 54-72 were grouped as "Baby Boomers," and
- Respondents over the age of 72 were grouped as "Silent Generation"

Overall, Millennials support the policy by a 53-24 margin. Generation X respondents back it by a 43-33 margin. Baby Boomers are narrowly split, supporting the policy by a 45-42 margin. Only
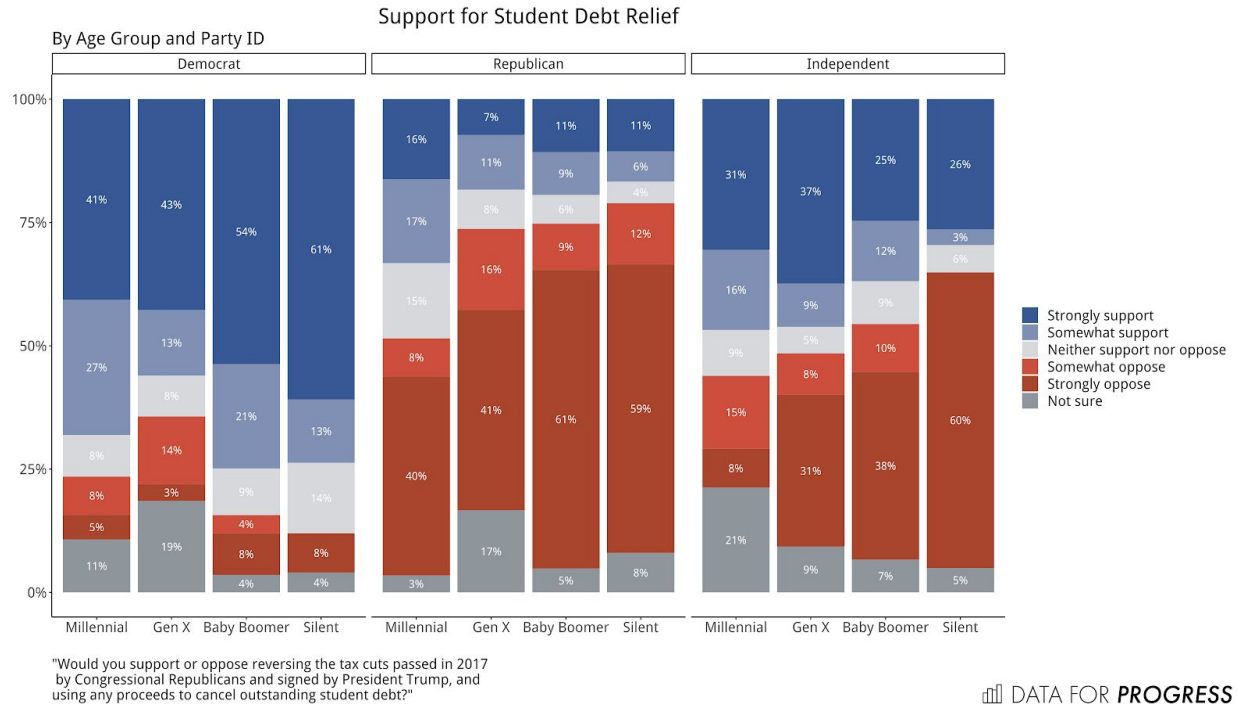
Silent Generation respondents opposed the policy, by a 39-47 margin. Respondents who are closer in age to the college experience, are more likely to support assistance with student debt, as one might expect.

Support for Student Debt Relief
By Age Group

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"
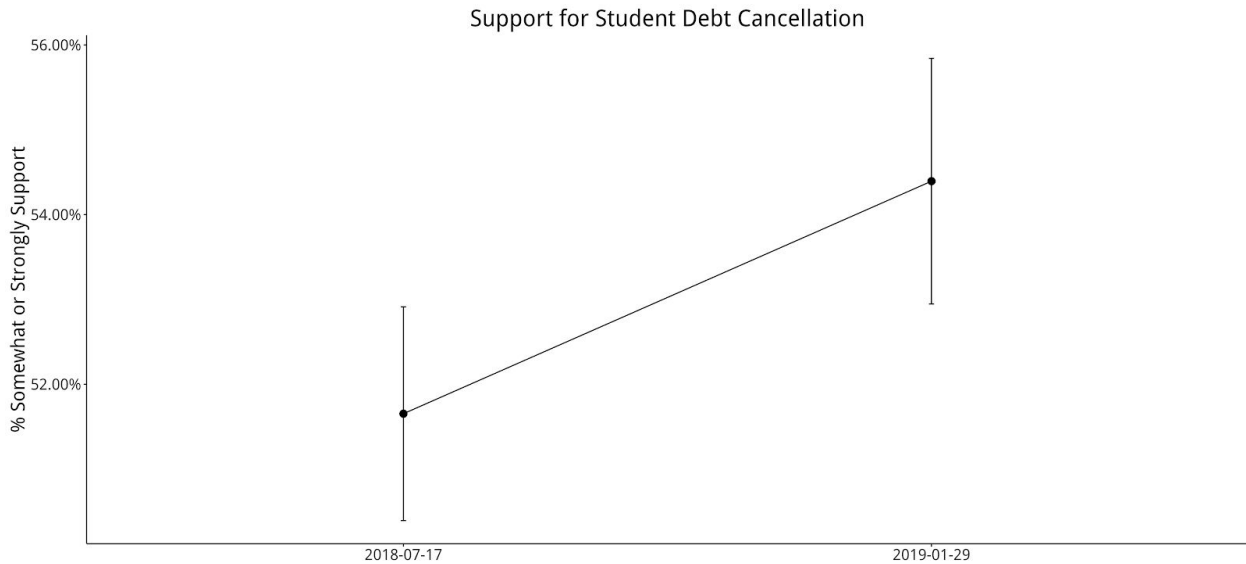
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The generational divide is stronger among Republicans and Independents than Democrats, however. The net margin of support for student debt relief is similar across generations among Democrats - 68-13 for Millennials, 58-17 for Gen X, 75-12 for Boomers, and 74-8 for Silent Generation Democrats. Republicans of all ages clearly oppose the policy on net. But the level of opposition is much lower for Millennial Republicans, who opposed it 33-48, than it is for other generations, who on net oppose the policy by 40-50 points. Independents follow a clear generational divide as well, with Millennial and Gen X Independents on net supporting the policy, and Boomer and Silent Generation Independents on net opposing.

Support for Student Debt Relief

By Age Group and Party ID

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"

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In July of 2018, we fielded a survey containing the same item. The survey was conducted from July 15-17, 2018 and included 1,515 US voters -- a slightly larger sample, and not the same people that we asked in January 2019, but with the same wording of the question. In July of 2018, we found overall that 51.6 +/- 1.2 percent of voters supported student debt cancellation. At the end of January 2019 we found that 54.3 +/- 1.4 percent of voters supported student debt cancellation.

In statistical terms, this result is significant: the top of the 95 percent confidence interval for the July 2018 estimate is 52.8 percent, and the bottom of the 95 percent confidence interval for the January 2019 estimate is 52.9 percent. The difference achieves "statistical significance" by the conventional definition in that there is a less than 5 percent chance that the result arose by chance, but the difference-in-means estimate just barely makes that traditional cutoff point for statistical significance. However, it's enough for us to be warrant studying the question over the long term with repeat polling. Observing statistically detectable change in a policy attitude in less than a year is a relatively infrequent occurrence, and the drivers of that change are consistent with reasonable theories of why voters might move on the question of student debt relief.

Support for Student Debt Cancellation

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"

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First, the change in overall opinion is likely driven by Millennials, who are growing as a share of the electorate and are the voters most directly affected by the burden of student loans. Their mean level of support for student debt relief rose from 57% to 63% from July, 2018 to January, 2019. At the same time, Generation X was flat at 55% in both time periods. Support for student debt relief increased by 3 points among Boomers and Silent Generation voters each, from 47% to 50% for Boomers and from 42% to 45% for Silent Generation voters. In other words, the movement among Millennials was twice that of older generations.
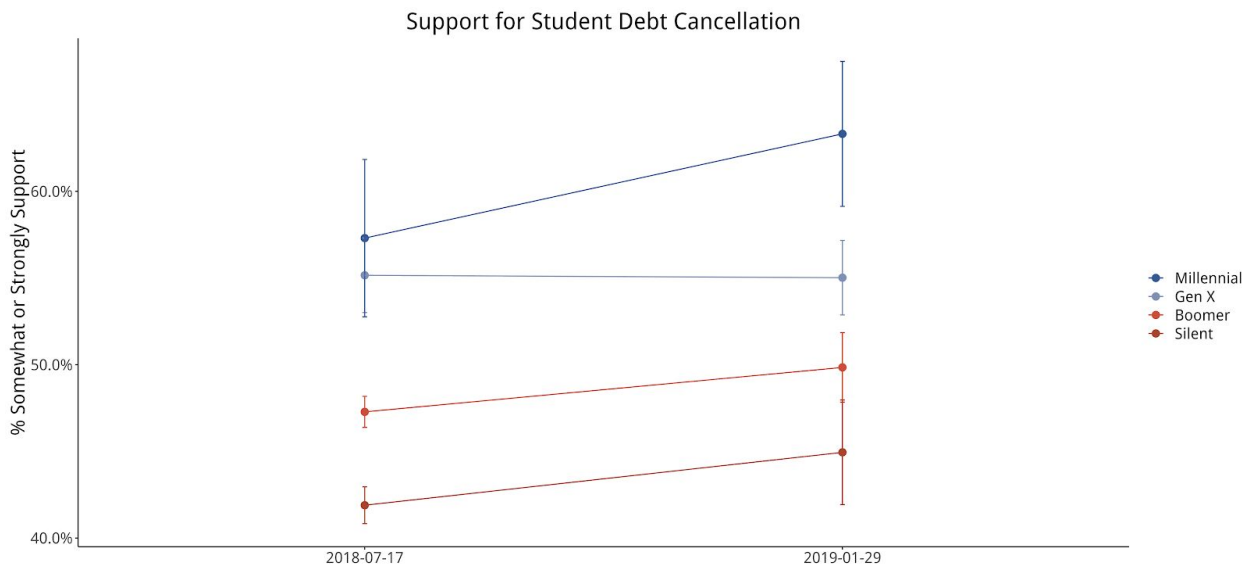
Support for Student Debt Cancellation

Millennial
Gen X
Boomer
Silent

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"

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Additionally, we some evidence that there has been change among Republican voters. In July, 2018, 24.3 +/- 1.2 percent of Republican voters supported student debt cancellation. In January, 2019, 28.3 +/- 1.3 percent of Republican voters supported it. As the old adage goes, a conservative is just a liberal who has not yet been bitten by a loan receipt. Indeed, positive movement among Republican voters is the only significant change among respondents by party ID in our sample.

Support for Student Debt Cancellation

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"
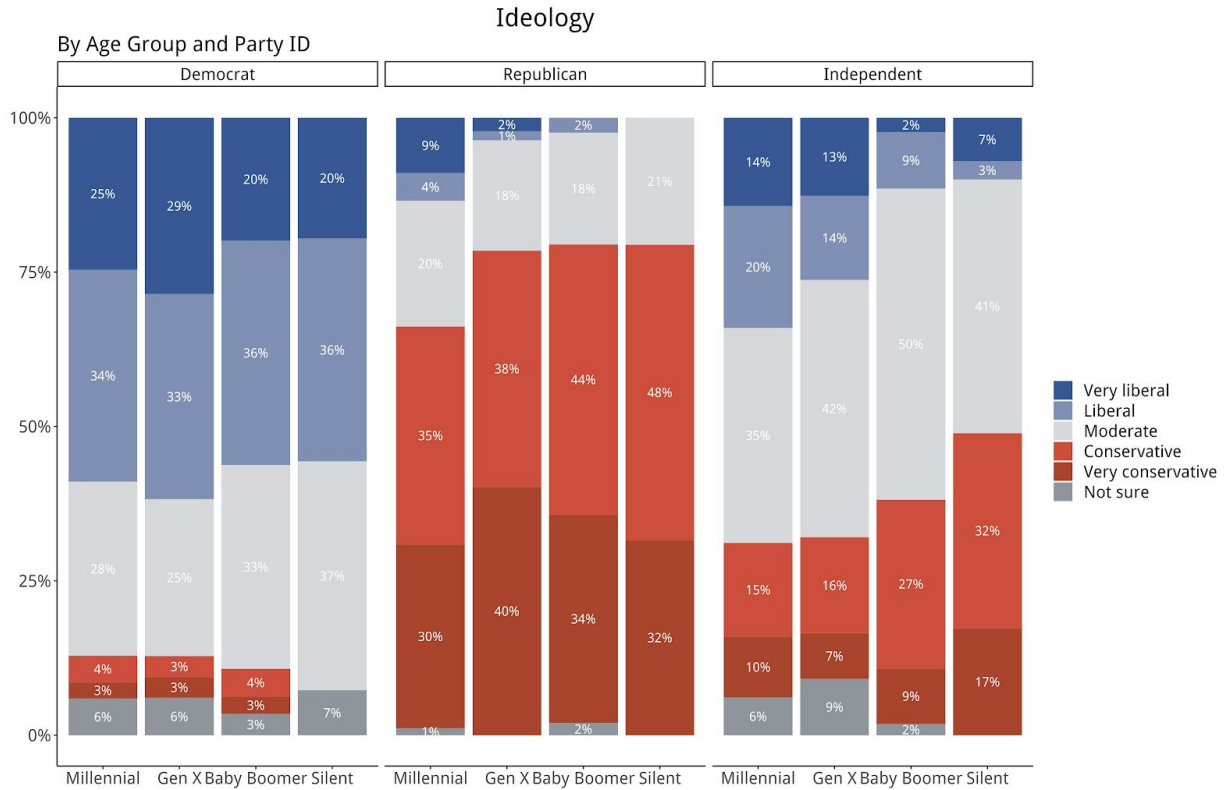
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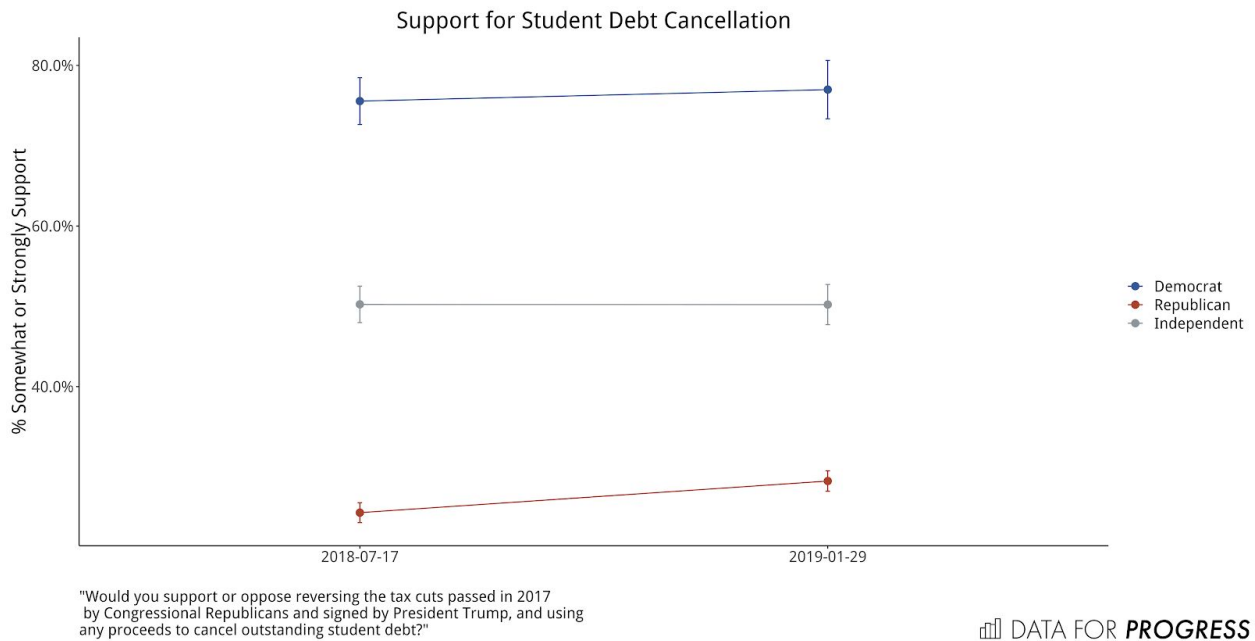
That said, we only find a marginal role for age in predicting overall support for student debt relief. We constructed an ordinary least squares model where the dependent variable is support for student loan debt relief (ranging from zero, strongly opposed, to five, strongly supporting), and the independent variables include demographic "usual suspects" like age, race, ethnicity, sex, education, ideology, party ID, and household income. We also present results including independent variables based on items asking respondents if they had loans of their own, a savings account, or payments due on a car, though the results are not sensitive to the inclusion or exclusion of those variables. We scaled the coefficients of the results to be directly comparable.

Overall, we found that, besides partisanship and ideological position, self-reported household income predicted support for supporting student debt relief. That is, support for student debt relief was not necessarily driven by those who currently have loans of their own. If there is a driving, structural change in the electorate behind support for student debt relief, it is a function of party ID, ideology, and household income.

Demographic Predictors of Supporting Student Debt Relief
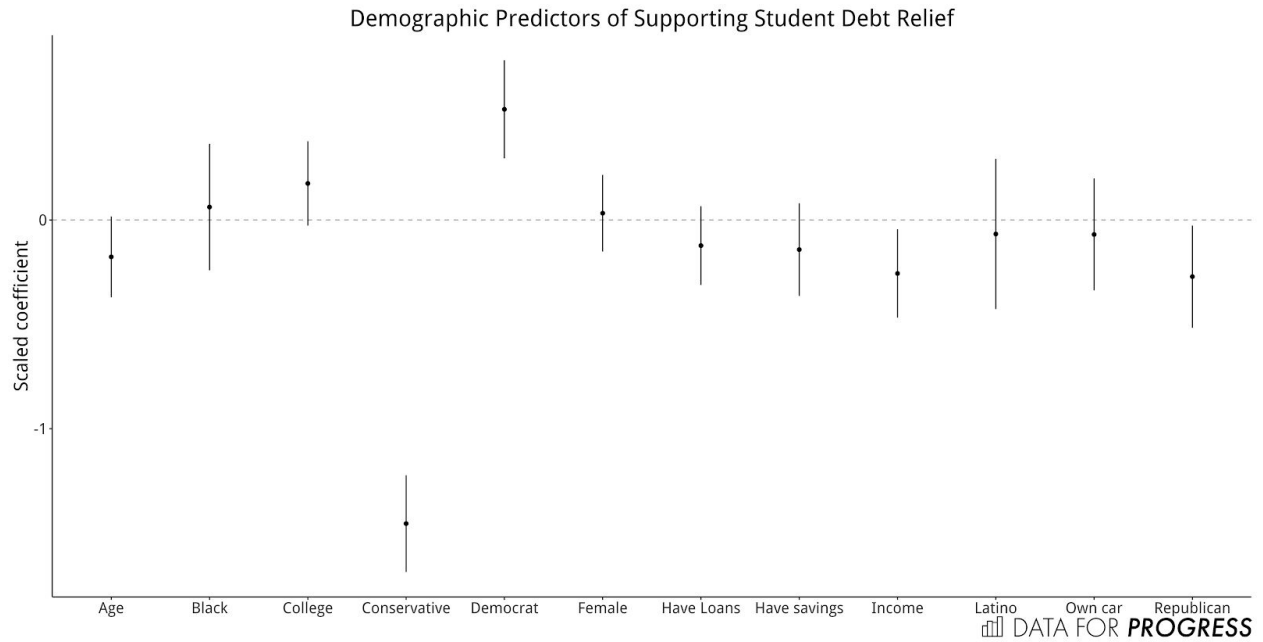
This would be good news for conservative Republicans, except that Millennial Republicans are significantly less likely to identify as conservative as are Gen X Republicans. At the same time, 34 percent of Independents identify as liberal, but just 27 percent of Gen X Independents identify as conservative, as do just 11 percent of Boomer Independents and ten percent of Silent Generation Independents. As younger voters of all parties continue to reject the toxic label of "conservatism," support for progressive policies grows.

Ideology

By Age Group and Party ID

| Democrat | Republican | Independent |

Very liberal / Liberal / Moderate / Conservative / Very conservative / Not sure

"Would you support or oppose reversing the tax cuts passed in 2017 by Congressional Republicans and signed by President Trump, and using any proceeds to cancel outstanding student debt?"

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We should expect growing support for this item for a few reasons: Younger voters of all political stripes are being exposed to the status quo student loan system. Younger voters are also less likely to accept the toxic brand of "conservatism." Because party ID and ideology are good predictors of support for student loan relief, and because party ID and ideology are clearly favorable to Democrats among the next generation of voters, we should be prepared to push the issue of student loan forgiveness.