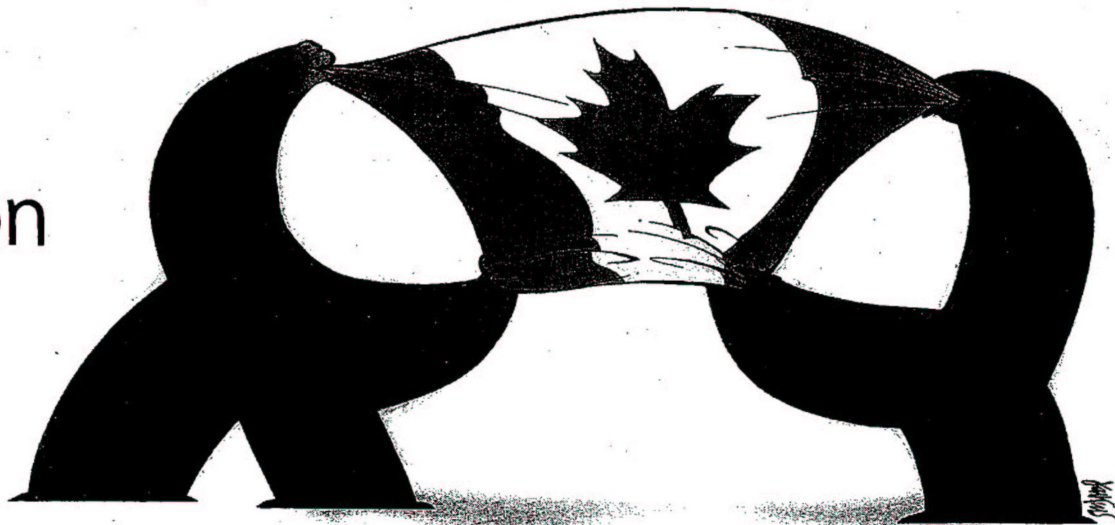


Canada: The next generation

Who will succeed
Canada's boomers?
'Open Cosmopolitans'
or 'Continental
Conservatives'?



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As Canadians jealously watch the dramatic U.S. presidential primaries, they are struck by excitement and dynamism associated with that contest. They contrast this to the apparent gridlock and torpor that characterize national politics in Canada today. And yet, beneath the surface, historical changes are afoot here at home.

The country as we know it is undergoing a quiet, but profound, transformation. The protracted period of political hegemony exerted by Canada's unusually large baby-boom cohort is about to be disrupted. Although by no means a monolith, the boomers tend to be more complacent, cautious and cranky in their outlook than the cohorts coming up behind them. The successful champion to depose the boomer stranglehold is uncertain, but two competing visions for the future of Canada are coming into sharper focus.

Before considering these competing visions, it's worth noting one important overall shift that has been under way here for at least the last decade.

One of the best proxy indicators of broader value orienta-

tions that Ekos Research monitors is self-identified ideology. For the past 15 years or so, we have asked both Canadians and Americans whether they see themselves as small "l" liberals or small "c" conservatives or "neither." The question explicitly asks for overall outlook, not party identification. We have found self-identified ideology to be, by far, the single best predictor of broader value orientations. For example, small "c" conservatives tend to stress hard work, self-reliance and ethics, whereas small "l" liberals tend to stress social equality, human rights and statism.

Historically, Canadians have leaned more to small "l" liberalism. But in recent years, some major changes have occurred. For the first time ever, our most recent sounding showed that a small "c" outlook was slightly more popular than a small "l" outlook. This is reinforced by other indicators such as a clear belief that Canada is becoming less pacifist, declining support for a single-payer, public health-care system, and a general weakening of positive views of federalism.

So why the modest, but significant shift, to the right and what does it mean for the future? Three potential hypotheses are available. First, the unusually deep Canadian baby boom has exerted a pervasive

influence on our political and social values. And as the erstwhile Woodstock generation morphed from Yuppies to Grumpies (grown-up mature professionals), they shifted the public agenda to their preoccupations, and thus to a more pessimistic and fearful view of the world, unsurprising perhaps, as those in pre-retirement ponder their shrinking vital capital. Second, the shock of 9/11 and the ensuing focus on security reinforced the tendency to focus on fear rather than hope. Finally, political parties have shrewdly responded to and encouraged these forces in order to increase their own political prospects.

If fear and hope operate in cycles – much like the business cycle – then we should anticipate a shift back to a more optimistic, hopeful outlook. It may well be that the wave of support for Barack Obama, for example, is an expression of the security era's limits. Citizens, particularly younger citizens, are fatigued by the security-infused outlook of seniors and boomers. Crime, ethics, and terror are not abiding concerns of the post-boomer cohorts. In fact, from the fiscal retrenchment of the 1990s to the current agenda of ethics and security, the federal government has not been a key part of the lives of post-boomers.

Interestingly, in-depth stat-

istical analysis reveals a significant split among the cohorts following the boomers. Although the boundaries are murky, we see two post-boomer segments competing for future political terrain. Neither of these groups are a prominent part of the current public debate and each is more strongly (but not exclusively) linked to different portions of post-boomer Canada.

The first, an "Open Cosmopolitan" segment, contains an overrepresentation of Generation X, while the second, a "Continental Conservative" segment, contains an overrepresentation of Generation Y or Generation Next (i.e. the under-30 group).

The Open Cosmopolitan group is extremely receptive to diversity, immigration and the external world. They are highly optimistic, very well educated and progressive in their views. They tend to be much more blasé about risk and security and somewhat critical of our national direction, particularly with respect to foreign policy. The core values and interests of this group show little connection to the current national agenda (although this is by no means an alienated or fundamentally disaffected group).

The other contender wanting to wrest control from the boomers is quite different. The Continental Conservative

group is also very optimistic (unlike older conservatives). Strong subscribers to the "war on terror," they see Canada's future more closely aligned to an (upper) North American partnership. They are Web-savvy and economically secure. This group is extremely comfortable with the current national direction, particularly, for instance, the mission in Afghanistan.

It will be fascinating to see which of these contenders proves ultimately successful. But one thing is clear: No matter who triumphs, neither resembles the "old Canada." That is to say, there is no apparent heir to the Pearson-Trudeau model of progressive, strong federalism.

While the Open Cosmopolitans are more progressive in character, their relative disconnect from government and politics and looser post-nationalism suggest quite a departure, especially on matters of diversity, trade and globalization. Likewise, the Continental Conservatives represent a surprising future model of conservatism that blends traditional concerns about family and order with a more continental and optimistic orientation.

Whichever outcome we witness, be prepared for a very different and more loosely united Canada.