

The seeds of electoral realignment - The urban-rural divide is overtaking region as a predictor of how Canadians will vote

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Last week's federal by-elections represent the most recent chapter in a narrative that has been unfolding in this country for decades: the divergence of urban and rural Canada. As in the United States, where Democratic districts are overwhelmingly urban and Republican ones overwhelmingly rural, the urban-rural dimension in Canada is overtaking region as a predictor of how people will cast their votes.

In the last federal election, Stephen Harper's Conservatives did not win a single seat in any of Canada's three largest cities. Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver belonged to the Liberals, the NDP and the Bloc Québécois. In last week's by-elections, prominent Liberals sailed to victory in two Toronto ridings while a Tory took a seat in rural Saskatchewan. In Vancouver Quadra, the Conservative candidate came remarkably close to edging out Liberal Joyce Murray, but this outcome speaks more to the departure of a popular Liberal incumbent, Stephen Owen, and to surging Greens than to a strong embrace of the Tories.

It is not surprising that Canada's cities and rural areas vote differently; they are very different places. The 2006 census reveals significant demographic disparities between people living in our 33 census metropolitan areas (CMAs), places with 100,000 people or more and now home to 80 per cent of Canadians, and those living elsewhere in the country.

To begin with, urban Canadians are younger. More than a third of urban dwellers (35.7 per cent) are between 20 and 44. In rural areas, just over a quarter (27.7 per cent) fall into this age group. With fewer residents in the prime of adulthood, rural areas have higher proportions of their

Much of the youth and vitality of Canada's cities comes from the steady inflow of immigrants from elsewhere (the average age of immigrants to Canada is 30). Seven in 10 newcomers settle in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal. The rest head for other urban areas, increasingly booming Western cities such as Calgary. According to Statistics Canada, only 3 per cent of newcomers who arrived between 2001 and 2006 settled in rural areas.

Immigrants, of course, are most often drawn by the promise of economic opportunity - and incomes in urban and rural Canada tell them where to go. In federal electoral ridings within CMAs, the average household income is nearly \$79,000. In ridings outside CMAs, incomes are just over \$63,000.

The differences between urban and rural Canada do not stop at demography: Strong psychographic differences emerge when we examine the social values of Canadians. Not surprisingly, given the concentration of immigrants in cities, urban Canadians are more likely to

report a sense of global citizenship and feelings of connectedness with people and events in other countries. By contrast, rural Canadians tend to identify more strongly with their own regions.

Urban Canadians register greater comfort with change and complexity, reporting that, when they think about the changes happening around them, they see more opportunities than threats. They say they love seizing on new technologies, they enjoy mixing with people of different backgrounds, and they think diversity - whether in family models or ethnocultural backgrounds - enriches society.

Rural Canadians say they are not so sure about all this change: They are less eager to buy and learn about new technology. They express greater wariness of social changes, whether related to immigration or growing sexual permissiveness. They are more likely than other Canadians to say that religion is an important part of their life, that they prize family bonds above all else, and that they are heavily involved in their local communities.

These divergent attitudes are surely reinforced by the economic outlooks in each milieu: People in cities generally have a lot to look forward to, situated as they are in places that are relatively vibrant both economically and culturally.

Some rural Canadians are living idyllic existences in intimate small towns, but many are clinging to relatively isolated communities where economic opportunity seems to be waning and morale is going with it. Intermittent resource booms like those in Newfoundland and Alberta will keep spirits up in some pockets, but many of the family farms and local resource jobs and manufacturing plants that once yielded small-town self-sufficiency are fading away.

If current trends continue, these two Canadas will be even more different in 2017 (our 150th birthday) than they are today. One result of this divergence will be growing pressure for electoral reform that would allow the two Canadas to be more accurately represented in federal politics. Currently, while 80 per cent of Canadians live in CMAs, only 68 per cent of federal ridings fall within CMAs. Sparsely populated rural ridings - such as Prince Edward Island's Egmont (population: 35,747) or Labrador (26,928) - send MPs to Ottawa who have no less voice or influence than ridings with many times the population.

This arrangement might have made sense when Canada was a rural country and a riding meant a riding - as in a candidate riding on horseback to meet constituents. In a Canada where four out of five people live in densely populated urban constituencies, it makes much less sense. And with municipal budget crises and other jurisdictional irritants, it may not be long before city dwellers join their politicians and begin to cry foul.

It used to be difficult for urbanites to push for more electoral influence because the struggle would often be cast as rich city folk who already hold too much power trying to steal whatever meagre influence good country people exerted. Today, though, with increasing proportions of Canada's cities made up of immigrants, the narrative might be very different: Should eighth-generation *pure laine* WASPS in rural ridings hold more sway than immigrant citizens struggling to build new lives in cities? It almost has the whiff of a Charter of Rights case about it.

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