

Why embracing immigrants works for Conservatives

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In many countries, conservative political parties are seen as hostile to immigrants. Right-of-centre parties in the United States and Europe tend to be more nationalistic than their left-leaning counterparts, and this pride in country can sometimes manifest itself in xenophobia.

This pattern would suggest that, in the average OECD country, the election of a right-of-centre government would mean minimal immigrant representation in the legislature.

That's certainly not the case in Canada. All Canadian parties, including the Conservatives, attract not only immigrant votes but successful immigrant candidates. Of the 307 MPs who took their seats in Parliament last month, 42 were born outside Canada. Of those 42 immigrant MPs, 18 belong to the 166-member Conservative caucus. Of 102 NDP members (103 were elected, one being the late Jack Layton), 18 are foreign-born. The decimated Liberals now have only 34 MPs; four of these are immigrants. The Bloc Québécois, reduced to four seats, has one foreign-born MP. Even the Green Party has immigrant representation: Its leader and lone elected MP, Elizabeth May, was born in Hartford, Conn.

The 2006 census found 19 per cent of the Canadian population was made up of immigrants. For Parliament to mirror the population, we would need 59 foreign-born MPs. Although Canada doesn't reach that standard of parity with society, we come closer than any of our usual comparator countries (including the U.S., U.K. and Australia). Some might ask whether our immigrant MPs really reflect the diversity of Canadian society, or whether they're mainly acculturated Brits and Americans. No, our foreign-born MPs are genuinely diverse: We have representation from every continent: 15 from Europe, 11 each from Asia and the Americas (including the Caribbean), and five from Africa.

And all this with a right-of-centre majority government. So why's Canada doing comparatively well at attracting immigrants to public life, right across the political spectrum?

The first step is citizenship: 85 per cent of immigrants become citizens, making Canada one of the most successful countries at encouraging newcomers to make the first move toward political belonging and participation. Immigrants in Canada are more likely than those elsewhere to have this basic qualification, both to run for office and to vote.

Another factor is that, although immigrants face plenty of challenges in the economy and beyond, when it comes to official political discourse in Canada, overt xenophobia is not accepted. (Eruptions have occurred, but the perpetrators, most memorably former Parti Québécois leader Jacques Parizeau, have been pilloried.) Far from courting anti-immigrant sentiment, the federal Conservatives have made the strategic decision to beat the Liberals and NDP at their own game by trying to become the party of choice for new Canadians.

Why do Canadian Conservatives – who embrace some standard fare of right-of-centre parties, including our colonial and military traditions – differ from conservatives elsewhere by welcoming newcomers?

A combination of demographics and values makes this position sensible. Our low birth rate suggests that, as long as our economy remains robust, we'll continue to accept as many as 250,000 immigrants a year. As for values, polling by the Environics Institute finds that Canadians see multiculturalism as a defining feature of our national identity and see immigration as a net economic benefit.

In Canada, there are more votes in courting immigrants and celebrating social diversity than in doing the opposite.

This current phase in Conservative Party history should not surprise students of Canada's past. Anglo-Protestant Conservatives reached out to Catholic French Quebeckers to found the country. Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government enacted the Multiculturalism Act in 1985. Now Stephen Harper is determined to make his Conservatives Canada's natural governing party by making it the party of new Canadians and their children. We don't know how far this strategy will take the Conservatives, but we know it's helped them achieve more success than many thought possible.

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