



# **The Next West Generation**

**Young Adults, Identity and Democracy**

**Jason Bristow, Ph.D.**

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**Canada***West*  
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## THE NEXT WEST PROJECT

The next two decades will see BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba go through a variety of economic, generational, and community transformations. The best way to deal with this changing climate is not to react to changes as they happen, but to foresee what the changes will be and get ourselves ahead of the curve. This is the goal of *The NEXT West Project*.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The Next West Generation: Young Adults, Identity and Democracy* profiles the psychological traits, civic engagement, and political identities of western Canada's young adults. The purpose is to understand how the arrival of a new generation will transform western Canada and, by extension, Canada. Dubbed the "the Next West Generation," this group encompasses those born from 1970 onward.

Caricatured in popular culture, Generation X and Generation Y remain partially described and poorly analyzed. After widening the focus to reveal the traits its members have in common, this study ultimately characterizes the Next West Generation as "fiscally conservative, socially progressive, and radically individual."

Based on primary and secondary research, this report incorporates existing research as well as the results of focus groups with western Canadians age 21 to 36 in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. The focus groups took place in February and March of 2007 and brought together a cross-section of young adults from non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal backgrounds.

### KEY FINDINGS

- The Next West Generation votes less than young adults did in the past. A cluster of attitudes consistent with the rise of individualism explains the largest portion of the drop in voter turnout. While the concept is abstract, individualism can be observed across a range of behaviours such as the decline of rule following and the tendency to view things as choices rather than obligations. As a broad societal force, this trend implies that democracy and its institutions must accommodate rising individualism—not the other way around.
- What does an increasing number of non-voters mean for (western) Canadian democracy? On one hand, representative government becomes less representative for every vote not cast. Democracy can aggregate the preferences of a smaller sample to generate representative policies and governance. A tipping point does exist, however, where the non-voter sample will be too large, and the voters will comprise too small a share for the representative effect to hold. Second, to *not* vote is to predict the absence of other actions—to *not* join a political party, to *not* communicate with elected representatives—that are necessary for the civic fabric to remain strong in Canada. Not voting is the tip of an iceberg.
- Identification with Canada is relatively strong. The Next West Generation expresses feelings of patriotism and nationalism that are surprisingly robust, given the predictions of declining nationalism in general and weakening Canadian identity in particular.
- The Aboriginal focus groups generated somewhat different answers for identity, with a fair number of participants providing answers related to their Aboriginal status such as "Ojibway," "Mohawk Six Nations," or "Métis."
- The Next West Generation has strong feelings about Canada-US relations. Focus group participants emphasized Canada-US societal differences, rather than similarities. They expressed reluctance for further economic integration, based in part on an aversion to President George Bush and the perceived unfairness of how the US acts toward Canada on, for example, softwood lumber.
- The Next West Generation's view toward Quebec and national unity is more indifferent than passionate. Aboriginal focus group participants, however, expressed a competitive spirit toward Quebec with many arguing that, if the Quebecois are recognized as a nation within a united Canada, then their nations should also be recognized.

## PREFACE

Kudos to the Canada West Foundation for undertaking its Next West Project, which is probing the economic, generational and community forces shaping the four western Canadian provinces. I am especially pleased to commend this report on young westerners. It illuminates our understanding of their political identities, attitudes, views, expectations, hopes and concerns for Canada's future. Equally important, the study identifies and invites the reader to think about important public policy implications, challenges and opportunities (for all of Canada) that flow from the worldviews and behaviour of Generation X and Y.

Combining a literature review and synthesis of current research findings related to the democratic behaviours of young adults with the results of 14 focus groups with 119 western Canadians in their 20s and 30s, the report makes a strong contribution to empirical research on this subject. A key conclusion of this report—that young people are politically alert and democratically engaged, but the ideas that matter most to them have been so far expressed outside the sphere of politics as usual—is strongly echoed in a recent Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) report entitled *Lost in Translation: (Mis)Understanding Youth Engagement*.

I am struck as well by another strong parallel, which is not quite so positive. CPRN's dialogues and research on youth engagement clearly reveal serious disconnects between young adults, public policy and formal politics. Both CPRN's reports and this Canada West Foundation study note that many people, especially young adults, are increasingly turned off by the game of partisan politics and increasingly refuse to learn or apply the rules. Both organizations find this to be problematic given the pervasive influence of public policy on our everyday lives. This raises questions about the extent to which public policies actually reflect the preferences of citizens.

Another fascinating aspect of the report is its discussion of the strong (non-hyphenated) Canadian identity exhibited by young westerners (this resonates with CPRN's research) and the implications that flow from that for our relationships with the United States.

*The Next West Generation* should be compulsory reading for those who believe that today's young adults are apathetic, disengaged, shallow, and indifferent to Canada's future.

Mary Pat MacKinnon  
Senior Fellow, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs  
University of Ottawa

## 1. Introduction

This report aims to understand how Generation X and Generation Y, what we call “the Next West Generation,” will influence Canadian democracy in the years ahead. The report examines two key issues: 1) voter turnout and civic engagement; and 2) political identity. In addition to harvesting information from existing studies, the Canada West Foundation conducted 14 focus groups in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg with 119 young adults in their 20s and 30s in the spring of 2007.

As the sketch of the Next West Generation that is presented in Section 2 indicates, the members of the Next West Generation tend to be materialistic, socially tolerant, and have grand expectations for their life paths. More than anything, they are profoundly individualistic, and this one trait colours and reshapes, like the beam from a lighthouse cutting through surrounding fog, a range of professional, personal, and social attitudes.

Much has been written about the supposed apathy and cynicism of today’s young adults. Sections 3 and 4 argue that this is a misperception. Today’s young adults are less likely to join political parties, but they do join non-governmental organizations. Many believe in protest politics and consumer activism, not in status quo politics. They are, however, less likely to vote than young adults in the past and many do not plan to start voting.

But (and this is a big but) they tend to be less cynical than the Baby Boomers. Many retain a temperament for democracy, but express their civic commitment in different ways. They generally do not get excited about “politics as usual.” However, as western Canadians look south at the American primary process, it is clear that a message of change can resonate with young adults as Senator Barack Obama’s campaign draws support from a historically high share of young Americans.

It is important to stress that the Next West Generation has not turned entirely away from civic life. However, what it wants from the public sphere, and the way it engages with that sphere, are different from the norms established by previous generations. This shift is often mistaken for apathy on the part of the Next West Generation.

As Section 5 reveals, the Next West Generation has a fresh perception of patriotism and nationalism. The decline of nationalism, and the end of national identity, are supposedly in the offing. As with civic engagement, this report challenges these pessimistic predictions. Identity and loyalty are often hard to pin down because they are intangible and shifting, but the constructed identity of the Next West Generation has recognizable patterns, along with a few surprises: the bedrock of national identity seems to be changing from a negative definition—“I’m Canadian because I’m not American”—to a positive one. This is interesting, but the jury is still out on what this may mean for Canada’s national identity in the years ahead.

It is also possible to see the faint glimmer of post-partisan views: going beyond policy preferences predicated on a predictable left and right ideological spectrum. This glimmer was evident at a conference held by the Canada West Foundation in October 2007. As 52 young western Canadian business leaders voiced their concerns on a variety of “big picture” topics, nothing was more noticeable than the absence of cookie-cutter ideological solutions and traditional left-right perspectives.

No survey of a new generation on the cusp of greater and greater influence would be complete without soliciting their feelings on the existential conditions of Canada: Canadian unity, Quebec nationalism, and Canada-US relations. These issues pose simultaneous threats and opportunities for each new generation and are explored in Section 6.

Overall, the Next West Generation brings with it a passion for Canada and a strong interest in public policy. It also brings a unique approach to both that we are only just beginning to understand. Gaining awareness of this generation’s qualities and perspectives will be essential for politicians and policy-makers charged with developing effective policies and engaging citizens—young, old and in between.

## 2. A Sketch of the Next West Generation

Generations X and Y are defined on the basis of demography and the received views of experts, and they are defined by the generation they follow, the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1960, are defined as the cohort where the number of births increased every year. Approximately 250,000 babies were born each year during the Second World War. By 1960, 480,000 babies were born annually. The Baby Boom ended in 1960 because after this point, annual births decreased.

The exact years of Generation X are open to debate, but this study assumes that it starts with people born in 1961 and extends to 1981. Although births fell for most of this period, Coupland, who popularized the term, insists that the defining characteristic of Gen X is not demography, but the different cultural icons, formative events, and ideas about upward mobility and status (Coupland 1995). Generation Y, the most recent cohort to be named, begins with people born in 1982. Since a generation is a group of people who have been shaped by formative events, it is understandable that the case could be made for economic conditions (booms or busts), geopolitical events (the disappearance of one enemy, the appearance of another threat), national schisms (assassinations, secessions, civil wars), and even transformative technology (the Internet) as at least partially defining a generation.

Generations X and Y, or what we are calling the Next West Generation, possess several characteristics in higher concentration, or as more pronounced tendencies, than in the Baby Boomers that went before them. Social commentators generally agree that this new group is more individualistic, more materialistic, more egalitarian and more socially tolerant. It believes in smaller government and it has high expectations about material wealth. The reasons for the emergence of this cluster of traits is complicated and has numerous sources. Nonetheless, these traits, intangible as they are, hang together into a coherent sociological type to generate a composite sketch of this generation as “fiscally conservative, socially progressive, and radically individual.”

Evidence for the rise of individualism comes from the decline of rules (Twenge 2006; Putnam 2000), measured in many situations. Consider some examples. In 1979, 29% of drivers failed to stop at a stop sign on a rural road, and this violation

increased to 97% by 1996 (Twenge, 26). The same study reports that from a level of 92% in the 1990s, only 28% of people paid the suggested amount to light a candle in a Catholic church by the early 2000s (*ibid.*). Grocery store managers report fewer people, over time, observing the “item limit” at the express checkout lanes, and teachers report an increased incidence of cheating (Twenge, 27).

Fewer people obey rules, whether the rules take a “hard” or “soft” form: laws of the state, punishable institutional codes of conduct, or non-punishable institutional guidelines. There is an inherent tension between individualism and social rules, where individualism is defined as “do what feels good for you, and ignore the rules of society” (Twenge 2006, 160). So the decline of rules implies a rise of individualism. Because it is a broad trend, increasing individualism will express itself in a variety of ways.

A second trait that is more pronounced in Generations X and Y than in past generations is materialism, which could be defined as “emphasis on money making” and “consumption” (Putnam 2000, 259-60). Putnam presents inter-generational evidence in the form of the Freshman Survey given to UCLA students. The students are asked to identify goals that are very important to them. In the 1960s and 1970s, 50% said “keeping up with news and politics” and “cleaning up the environment” were very important; 40% said “being financially well off” was very important. By 1998, “news and politics” and “environment” scored 26% and 19%, respectively, while “financially well off” scored 75% (Putnam, 259-60). Second, in a survey conducted among Generation Y Americans aged 18 to 25, the Pew Research Center reported that 81% said “getting rich” is their most, or second-most, important goal and 51% said “being famous” was their most, or second-most, important goal (Jayson 2007). In *American Backlash*, Adams describes an increase in “consumption” and a decrease in “saving on principle,” which are each social values constructed in response to several relevant questions (Adams 2005). The rise in materialism has led to a rise in expectations, sometimes wildly unrealistic expectations, about material acquisitions and life-style which will be returned to below.

A third trait common to this new generation is equality, expressed as equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome, and social tolerance. This trait is a legacy of the Civil Rights and Equal Rights movements that germinated in 1960s America. Civil Rights strove to provide African Americans the

same rights, opportunities, and benefits as white Americans in all aspects of life, from the mundane to the profound. In parallel, Equal Rights sought to equalize rights, opportunities, and benefits for women relative to men.

The rights movement was a powerful impetus for the reduction of institutionalized discrimination against blacks and women, which began the process of allowing them to rise as far as their individual merit would take them. This fostered social tolerance, because the laws and institutions that were challenged were themselves perpetuating intolerant attitudes. With the change of societal structures comes the slow change of attitudes that were anchored by those structures.

The experience of Sandra Day O'Connor, who retired from the US Supreme Court in 2006, shows the lag between institutional change and attitudinal change (Twenge 2006, 188). When she graduated near the top of her law class at Stanford University in 1952, the only job offers she received were for legal secretary. By the early 2000s, more than half of all university degrees earned were by women, and almost half of all medical and law degrees were earned by women (Twenge, 188). The radius of equality of opportunity, and the social tolerance that comes in tandem with it, continues to widen, slowly reducing the discrimination of the gay and lesbian community in society, which in turn fosters the acceptance of alternative lifestyles into the mainstream.

As might be expected, young adults embody these traits because they grew up living them in a society with reformed institutions. Graves describes Canadians under 40 as “more pluralistic,” “far more tolerant of immigrants,” and “colour-blind” (Martin 2007). This equality revolution fostered social tolerance, which supplies the “socially progressive” description in the generational composite.

A fourth trait is a growing disposition against government, or a mild anti-government attitude. There is speculation that Xers in particular internalized the message that “government is part of the problem, not the solution,” which became a mantra for the Reagan-Bush-Thatcher conservative movement (Halstead 1999, 34). This view turned the so-called New Deal consensus—that government is positive because it solves problems, a consensus which the pre-Boomers and Boomers internalized as they grew up—on its head. Even though this doctrinaire opposition to government was American in origin, these attitudes had a partial resonance in Canada.

This anti-government posture combined with rising individualism and the era of public indebtedness further re-enforced anti-governmentalism. Rising individualism is inconsistent with using government as a mechanism of income redistribution. Public debt required the government lower expenditures and, with this, reduce itself. The combination of individualism, government surpluses, and a small-c conservative climate of opinion fostered a general attitude of relative “fiscal conservatism”—a consensus that now underpins the Liberal and Conservative Parties of Canada.

### **“Fiscally Conservative, Socially Progressive, Radically Individual”**

The characteristics that compose the sketch of the Next West Generation should be making themselves clear. Equality and social tolerance feed a socially progressive outlook, and mild anti-governmentalism and individualism feed a fiscally conservative outlook. (Whether this outlook translates into true fiscal conservatism is another matter as governments continue to spend huge sums of money on public programs.) Douglas Coupland has argued, “coming down the pipe are an extraordinarily large number of fiscal conservatives who are socially left” (Halstead 1999, 37). This partly accounts for the consensus among mainstream Canadian political parties on balanced budgets and the overwhelming support among young Canadians for same-sex civil-union legislation.

The key to the Next West Generation, however, lies in the extent to which it has taken individualism to heart. The decline of rules as an indicator of rising individualism only goes part way to accurately portraying what Fukuyama calls “radical individualism.”<sup>1</sup> The knowledge-based economy, technology, marketing, and consumer choice all feed individual autonomy, tilting the balance decisively in favour of individual choice and against group constraints. There is mounting evidence that people are thinking more in terms of themselves and less in terms of others—less in terms of sacrifice, sharing, duty, obligation. Psychological studies taken over periods of time report that young people now rank “meaning” and “self-fulfillment” as virtues much higher than “honour” and “obligation” (Twenge 2006, 46). People used to answer that it was more important to “have respect for others”; now “have respect for myself” is a far more common answer (*Ibid.*, 46).<sup>2</sup>

1. Fukuyama's use of “radical individualism,” which is taken from his book, *The Great Disruption*, is reported by E. J. Dionne Jr. in “Why the Culture War Is the Wrong War?” (*Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2006, page 134).

2. The title Twenge choose for her book is unsurprising: *Generation Me*.



Picking up the theme of radical individualism, Wallulis describes the contemporary generational condition as “advanced insecurity” (Wallulis 1998). Post-war American, and presumably Canadian, society offered a defined path for progression into adulthood, where one was guided by the likelihood of two anchors to identity—marriage and employment. The attainment of these anchors generated a sense of predictability, personal security, and ultimately, happiness. The advent of women’s choice to pursue careers and the change to more flexible employment combined to weaken the anchoring effect of these life-markers on individual security. This cast a larger share of young people adrift in a sea of employability and marriageability—the *possibility* of something, not the *guarantee* of something. This uncertainty over the basic markers of a life-path generates a higher rate of anxiety in today’s young adults. Arnett concurs with the general trajectory Wallulis describes, highlighting not only the different, and delayed, progression today’s young adults take from adolescence to adulthood, but he also notes the emphasis placed on discovery and exploration by this cohort (Arnett 2004).

Wallulis’s idea is controversial because he argues that choice and freedom—the choice women now have in terms of their identities and careers and the flexibility that many people feel exists in the labour market—is a net negative for people: the uncertainty generated outweighs life and career options. Aside from this intangible influence shaping today’s young adults, there are material factors contributing to anxiety among members of the Next West Generation.

Generation Y, in particular, has grown up in an era of unrivalled prosperity. Since the last Canadian recession of 1990-91, the economy has experienced real growth of approximately 3% per year, unemployment has dropped to multi-decade lows, and inflation has remained low and stable. Yet the surface prosperity masks challenges that lie beneath the major indicators. The increase in wages has not come close to matching the increase in house prices, so home ownership has become less affordable. Beneath aggregate inflation, the prices of energy, utilities, and university tuition have all risen far above the target level. So while overall inflation remains modest, the price of many essentials are climbing steeply. In addition, the pathway to career success for young adults now comes with higher hurdles.

These cost of living challenges feed the insecurity that Wallulis describes. As home ownership has become more expensive, fewer young adults reach this goal or they reach it at a later stage. And because owning a home is a milestone, like marriage and job security, the delay or absence of this anchor tends to erode a person’s sense of security. This leaves many young people feeling that they are running to stand still and with the sense that they are not getting ahead and may in reality be falling behind.

Career success, like the job security of a previous generation, cannot be taken for granted. Gone are the days when a bank teller or loan officer would work her or his way up to the vice presidency. University education is the minimum for a starting position with career-advancement potential, and post-graduate university achievement or a professional degree is likely the prerequisite for many high-salary jobs. An admittedly extreme example, Winerip’s “Young, Gifted, and Not Getting Into Harvard” showcases how competition for acceptance into Harvard University has changed over the decades (Winerip 2007). Winerip, a 1970s Harvard alum, compared his summer work experience of digging trenches for public works and selling hot dogs at Boston’s Fenway Park at night to that of today’s potential entrants: the boy who played two musical instruments, did cancer research during the summer, and authored his own cook book; and the girl who did research for NASA on weightlessness in mice. Acceptance into top-tier universities and professional programs has become much more difficult, and the cost of university education, elite and regular institutions alike, squeezes out students from completing university, or leaves them with prohibitive debt loads upon graduation.

Where does this composite sketch of the Next West Generation leave us in terms of evidence-based forecasts? The first point to note is that all generational analysis comes with a “buyer beware” sticker: a composite is only a composite, an average, an educated guess, a set of generalizations to which there are many exceptions. Although this cohort is labeled as “radically individualistic,” there is disagreement among experts on just how radical the individualism is. *Psychological Science*, a leading research journal, has published a rebuttal to *Generation Me*, arguing that Generation Ys in particular are no more self-focused or narcissistic than prior generations.<sup>3</sup> They argue that the younger generations are not becoming more self-

3. Based on research by Kali Trzesniewski at the University of Western Ontario and colleagues at University of California (Davis) and Michigan State University. Stephanie Rosenblum “Generation Me vs. You Revisited,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2008; and Tralee Pearce “Gen Me: No More Self-Centred than You,” *Globe and Mail*, January 29, 2008.



focused, in any objective way, but that this perception is only because their behaviour as a group is viewed through the lens of older, much older, generations. Despite these differences, individualism will be returned to as a theme to provide an explanation for dropping voter turnout.

The fiscally conservative side of the Next West Generation's personality implies expectations about government: clean accounting, smart management, and woe to the government who presides over the switch from budgetary surpluses to deficits. The socially progressive side emphasizes policies that will be rights expansive, not restrictive. Young people do not see same-sex civil union or abortion as political debates; they view a woman's right to choose as natural as the opportunity for same-sex civil union. This view is like the second helix in the Next West Generation's DNA. Public policy that widens and codifies tolerance will be the natural position for this generation.

Finally, this generation is increasingly anxious about their place in the world. It is both a rational and irrational fear. On one hand, the popular culture of celebrity and success place enormous pressure on young people to succeed beyond any reasonable measure (and by a younger age than is reasonably possible). This type of stress is just "in the heads" of this generation. On the other hand, the rising costs of living, uncertainty over marriage, and insecurity over jobs combine to instill powerful fears among the members of the Next West Generation. This generational anxiety may, curiously, translate into increased attachment to Canada and its provinces. Insecurity triggers strengthened national identity. When anchors such as marriage, home ownership, or a career are dissolved, or at least start to move out of reach, the anchor provided by home and government rises in relative importance.

With this sketch in mind, the following sections examine several issues—voter turnout and the reasons behind changing participation; the political geographic identities of the Next West Generation; and views regarding the perennial issues of Canada-Quebec and Canada-United States relations.

### 3. Voter Turnout Among Young Adults

Voter turnout in Canada has dropped since the federal election of 1988. Seventy-five percent of Canadians eligible to vote actually voted in the 1988 election. Turnout was 65% in 2006. The decline in voting, however, has not been drawn evenly from across the electorate: it is largely because of a drop in voting among young adults. While it is not unusual for young adults to be less likely to vote than older citizens, the Next West Generation is less likely to vote *than previous cohorts of young adults*. "The generation of Canadians born since 1970 is less likely to vote than their parents or grandparents were when they were the same age. Turnout among the post-1970 generation is 10 points lower than it was among those born in the 1960s when they were in their twenties and 20 points lower than it was among baby boomers at the same age" (Gidengil 2004, 110).

Indeed, age predicts a drop in turnout far more strongly than other demographic factors such as income, education, sex, or rural/urban residence (Pammett and Leduc 2003, 1).

There are several attitudes prevalent among today's young adults that may explain the drop in their electoral participation. Today's young adults have less interest in and knowledge about politics (Milner 2007). This knowledge gap holds for current affairs and politics, history, constitutional issues, or important facts and dates. They also tend to feel that voting is a choice, not a civic duty. As a cluster, these attitudes translate into the behaviour of not voting.

It is more mysterious why political interest is lower among Generation X and Y. One argument is that interest has declined along with group activities that used to promote civic engagement. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam encapsulates the first idea: "As we continue along the line from the Boomers to the Xers, this downward trend in joining, voting, newspaper reading, church attendance, volunteering, and being interested in politics continues almost uninterrupted for nearly forty years" (Putnam 2000, 254). Putnam believes that television viewing has replaced these former group activities.

A second argument is that the number and severity of problems in the world today overwhelm the ability of young people to cope with them, so they avoid learning about them and retreat from traditional political solutions as a way to solve them

(MacKinnon 2007). Young people feel the burden of mistakes made by previous generations: “The message they hear repeatedly—*it’s up to youth to save the world, reverse climate change, find a way to make health care sustainable for the baby boomers*—creates anxiety among youth. To paraphrase one participant [of the CPRN workshop]—‘we’re told to fix things but the tools we get are a few nails and no hammer’” (CPRN 2007, 2).

A third argument is that the rise in individualism erodes the feelings of duty and obligation at the same time as it promotes the view that most things in life are a choice. “Fewer than one-fifth of those born since 1970 expressed a strong sense of duty to vote, compared with one-third of those born before 1945, and almost two-fifths said that they would not feel guilty at all if they did not vote, compared with only 15 percent of older Canadians” (Gidengil 2004, 112).

This is consistent with research done by the Canada West Foundation. When western Canadians were asked to agree or disagree with the assertion that “all Canadians who are eligible voters have an obligation to vote,” 72% of those older than 35 agreed or strongly agreed while only 56% of those younger than 35 agreed or strongly agreed. The age pattern of the sentiment that voting is a duty makes a strong argument that the changing balance between obligation and choice partially explains the drop in voter turnout.

The balance between duty/choice and self/other is changing as a result of individualism. Individualism is a strong value and it is on the rise. Individualism is fed by the education system, marketing, and technology. It will continue to encourage people to focus on themselves, rather than focus on others, and it prioritizes attitudes such as choice and personal freedom over obligation and acceptance of constraint. Twenge argues that the characteristic self-focus of the Baby Boomers is only a point on a continuum of development, and that Generation X will have more self-interest than the Boomers and Generation Y will have yet again more self-interest than Generation X (2006, 48). The psychologist Martin Seligman writes that “the traditional self—responsible, hard-working, stern—has been replaced with ‘the California self,’ which chooses, feels pleasure and pain, and dictates action and has things like esteem, efficacy, and confidence” (Twenge, 50-51). The logic for voting is weakened when the balance between duty/choice and self/other is changed because the outcome of voting is rarely immediate, concrete, and in one’s direct self-interest.

While these ideas are intuitively appealing, they are ultimately inconclusive. At the end of the day, we do not know for sure why today’s young adults vote less than young adults did in the past.

## 4. Political Participation

The drop in voter turnout has been accompanied by a drop in several traditional indicators of political participation: writing a letter to an elected representative, joining a political party, and running for office (Gibbins 2004). This is why the drop in turnout is more alarming than the simple absence of voters would suggest: the drop is part of a wider withdrawal from traditional forms of political expression. Absent voters are the tip of an iceberg.

Political party membership tells an interesting story. Sixteen percent of Canadians belong to a political party, but only 3% of Canadians younger than 25 belong to a political party (Cross 2004, 19). The average age of party members is 59, and *half* of all party members are older than 65.

It is important to stress, however, that many of today’s young adults participate politically, but do so in nontraditional ways. Young adults view interest groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as more likely to allow them “to make a difference” than joining a political party, which helps to explain why they tend to reject party membership (Cross 2004, 19-20). Human resource directors report that Generation Xers and Yers are more likely to belong to an NGO than their predecessors, more likely to belong to more of them, and more likely to ask for a leave of absence from work to volunteer (Lowe 2007).

A second non-traditional political behaviour seen in greater numbers among young adults is protest. Young adults politicize consumer choices and boycott products, brands, and entire companies much more than their predecessors (Klein 2000). And they engage in dissent—defined as signing a petition, joining a boycott, attending a lawful demonstration, occupying a building, or joining a strike—more than their predecessors (Grabb & Curtis 2005, 224-25). (There is an interesting twist in the North American context. Younger Canadians are more likely than Americans to exhibit dissent in the form of milder dissent, such as boycotting a product, but younger Americans are more likely than Canadians to exhibit the more strident

forms of dissent, such as occupying a building or attending a disruptive protest.)

Does the rise of non-traditional political engagement compensate for the reduction of traditional political participation? Is one substitutable for the other? What does this mean for the future health of Canadian democracy?

An argument against substitution is that democratic representation is less representative for every vote that is not cast (Gidengil 2004). Non-voting by a small share of the population is balanced by the ability of a subset of the whole to act as a reliable approximate for the total population. However, this does not hold true as the non-voting share rises above some threshold. A tipping point will be reached when the subset of voters is too small to reliably approximate the preferences of the entire electorate and the result will be non-correspondence between governed and governors.

A second argument against substitution is that the prolonged civic deficit caused by the relative lack of Generation Xers and Yers joining political parties, writing letters, running for office, and discussing politics around water coolers will fray the ties that sustain democracy. It is, however, difficult to quantify the extent of the damage of this broader political withdrawal. This argument has a tipping point, as well, where some fraying will be inconsequential, but there will likely come a point where the effects of a wider withdrawal will show up.

There are also arguments that suggest that the drop in voter turnout should not be a cause for alarm. The first one is elemental in its simplicity: happy people vote less. The distinguished political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset long ago argued that a high level of contentment that is widely distributed among the population would lower turnout (Lipset 1980). Anger, fear, and desire for change are all strong motivators to vote. The crux of his argument is based on a relative perception: if the level of contentment during an election campaign is relatively higher than in the recent past, and if the contentment is distributed relatively more widely, then turnout will drop.

The second positive argument takes us back to the values of today's young adults. Studies show that they are more trusting and less cynical of government, elected leaders, and political institutions than their elders (O'Neill 2001; Howe 2004). This is the opposite of the stereotyped cynicism that supposedly

infests today's young adults. Instead, it reveals a democratic persuasion or temperament. This suggests that the widespread withdrawal from the political community will not be ruinous, but that the underlying democratic spirit will continue to express itself in nontraditional ways. (The real concern would be if trust was down and cynicism was up among the under 35-year-olds, which could be interpreted as fertile emotional ground for a complete rejection, and then discarding, of established Canadian democratic institutions.)

What is perhaps alarming is that, while the Next West Generation does engage in nontraditional forms of political expression, it is the voters who are doing so. As Berdahl argues, "under 35s who participate in alternate democratic forms are also voting, while non-voters are not participating at all" (2006, 21).

Where is the balance to be found between the pros and cons of nontraditional political engagement, these positive and negative arguments with their resulting optimistic and pessimistic views of democracy in Canada?

Democracies are always in the process of remaking themselves, and strong democracies, ones in long-term continuous existence and where the people strongly believe in the associated ideas of democracy, have a remarkable ability to adapt to change. Canada is a strong democracy. To say Canadian democracy is reinventing itself is an over-statement, but it would be fair to say that our traditional political institutions will, and should, adapt to the characteristics and interests of emerging generations.

## 5. Identity

Huntington writes that "the concept of identity is as indispensable as it is unclear" (2002, 21). Although identity is itself an intangible factor, it is a force that gets translated into real world terms, something that is felt or experienced as part of one's association or attachment to something. Group identifications can be organized along several dimensions including ethnic, religious, gender, national, linguistic, class, and socio-economic status.

"Identities," according to Colley, "are like badges, not hats" (2005, 5). This means that identities are multiple, like the multiple badges someone can wear, and not like hats, where it is only possible to wear one at a time. For example, a person

could be an Albertan, a Canadian, a Ukranian-Canadian, a man, a Protestant, a Baptist, and a Caucasian. None of these identifications exclude the others. The purpose is to provide meaning and to differentiate one from the many, and the differentiation comes from the ability to hold many identities at once and choose which to use at any one time. There is a common example that runs like this: “a female psychologist in the company of a dozen male psychologists will think of herself as a woman, but in the company of a dozen female friends will think of herself as a psychologist” (Huntington 2002, 24). The ability to prioritize one identity over another at any given moment is nicely described by one of the Canada West Foundation focus group participants: “If I traveled Canada, I would say Albertan, and if I traveled the world, I would say Canadian—proudly Canadian.” Identity is multiple and the deployment of identity is situational.

This section explores *geographic* identity. Geographic identity concerns itself with what geographic unit (typically a political jurisdiction such as a municipality, province or country) to which one feels most attached. Geographic identifications can be measured as “substance” and “salience.” The salience is the chosen identity—the priority of one over another. The substance is why a particular identity is chosen—the feelings and reasoning behind the choice.

Together, the substance and salience reveal a lot about the unity and strength of a country. They are indicators of the loyalty of the population to the country as a whole and to its component parts. As such, they are also indicators of the potential fractures and faults lines in a democracy, which is important knowledge to have in a large, pluralistic country like Canada where the federal structure promotes competitive identifications.

## Focus Group Findings

The Canada West Foundation conducted 14 focus groups in six western Canadian cities (Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg) in March 2007 with young adults aged 25 to 34. The number of men and women were equally split and participants were drawn from a range of income, education, and occupation categories. Four of the groups were composed exclusively of Aboriginal participants. In total, 119 young adults took part in the focus groups.

Participants were shown a list of different geographic units (see Figure 1) and asked to consider with which they “identified,” “belonged,” or “felt connected.” Participants considered their attachments by discussing their feelings and reasons with one another. They then indicated a first and second choice.

**Figure 1:**  
**Geographic Political Identity**  
**(First and Second Choices Combined)**

World	35
North America	6
Canada	45
Western Canada	20
Province	34
City	41
Other	18
Total Responses	199*

NOTE: Not all participants made both a first and second choice. Other included Aboriginal identifications and a handful or religious and ethnic identifications.

The raw numbers are interesting, but the pattern of explanation behind the numbers is more important. “Canada” was chosen most often with 45 participants selecting it as their first or second choice. “City” was a close second with “World” and “Province” essentially tied for third.

When the facilitator asked the participants the reasons why they picked what they did, a basic pattern emerged. It is significant that “Canada” was chosen most frequently, and there were two types of answers provided: unqualified assertion and substantiated answer. Several people said that they are “proud to be Canadian” but did not—or had trouble—explaining why. Others said that they are proud of Canada and offered the respect and esteem with which Canada is held in the world as the reason.

The answers and reasons for “City” and “Province” were very similar. The reasons were personal, concrete, and often related to the presence of family. Their city and province is where they live and work and what they know day-to-day.

Participants who choose the “World” said that they identified with it because it is the right level at which to solve problems such as protecting the environment and securing peace and stability. As a participant from Vancouver said, “collective problems require collective solutions.” Thinking in global terms came naturally to many of the participants.

The real pattern of meaning and significance, however, emerges beyond the simplified descriptions outlined above. When we delved beneath the basic “proud to be Canadian” concept, we heard the following: “We’re one of the most respected countries in the world,” and “I’m proud to be Canadian because of the things Canada is doing in the world.” The predominant reason for identifying with Canada was international respect.

What is interesting is the lack of material and domestic reasons for pride in Canada. Canada has enjoyed sustained political stability and economic success for generations, and it would be difficult to find more than a handful of countries in any international comparison that could boast the same successful track record. Despite this, not one participant mentioned economic or ideological reasons as a source of pride. International respect trumps the domestic economy and peaceful society as justifications. The emphasis on international respect to the exclusion of the economy and an orderly society suggests that these benefits of life in Canada may be taken for granted to at least some degree.

The basis of attachment to one’s city and province was internal and concrete. These political geographic groupings form the real, lived framework for life. Participants did not cite abstract, intangible, psychological, or inspirational reasons for identifying with their city or province. One participant said that he picked “Vancouver because that is where my life is, where my everyday is.” Another participant put it more sharply: “I chose Calgary because it is real, it is tangible, I can see it and feel it. Anything bigger than that is just conceptual.”

Identification with one’s city or province is not rooted in what it has accomplished or what it stands for whereas Canada was chosen for what it does and stands for internationally. This suggests that the loyalty of the participants is not anchored in the province or city in the same way that it is in the country. The logic, as mentioned, for choosing city or province is concrete and rational. For example, a participant from Saskatoon said that she “choose Saskatoon because it is where I want to raise my family.” City and province are overwhelmingly identified with because of a “here-and-now” logic.

The basis for identifying with the “World” was rooted in a desire to see oneself as part of a global community and in the recognition that many problems are global in nature and, in turn, require a global response. For example, a participant in Edmonton remarked that he “identify[ies] with the world because it is a global village,” while another participant from the same group said: “I chose the world because I like to focus on the bigger picture.” A participant from Vancouver said: “I identify with the world because we are all the same, we’re all in this muck together.” Another participant from Vancouver said that he identifies “with the world because underneath we are all the same, a lot of issues hit everywhere...AIDS or global warming.” A third participant from Vancouver said that it was his “personal vision for the world to be borderless...because boundaries contribute to problems.”

The prescriptive nature of world identity predominates in a way not seen in identifications with country, province or city. It is about hopefulness and the idea that the world could be a better place if worked together. This prescriptive logic is consistent with globalization: many of the contemporary problems are too big for the nation-state to solve; because the problems reach across borders, only coordinated action can begin to address them. In addition, the contrast between the identification with Canada that relies on the country’s past and present international reputation and the identification with the world that relies on a future orientation is interesting because there is no reason why there could not be a future orientation as a basis for identifying with Canada. (This sentiment is reflected in the title of a recent book, *The Unfinished Canadian* by Andrew Cohen.) Young adults could choose Canada for not only what it has done, and how it is, but for what it could become, yet this formulation was never expressed. The Next West Generation thinks of the world in terms of the *future*, and it thinks of Canada in terms of the *present*.

“Western Canada” was selected 20 times compared to only 6 for “North America.” When people chose western Canada, the reason was that this was where extended family lived. North America was rejected because the association with the US was too strong. As one young woman said, “to choose North America is to be confused with the United States, and I don’t want that.”

## Aboriginal Canadian Identity

Aboriginal Canadians participated in four focus groups, two each in Regina and Winnipeg, with two composed of 18-24 year olds and two composed of 26-30 year olds. A total of 31 Aboriginal Canadians participated.

A striking difference between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal focus groups was the political topics and current events mentioned at the start of the sessions. Aboriginal Canadians mentioned “racism in Canada,” “on-Reserve poverty,” “policy brutality,” “gang violence,” “native elections,” “native self-governance,” “honouring treaty rights,” and the “Kelowna Accord” as important to them. None of these issues were mentioned by the non-Aboriginal groups. Many of the issues that non-Aboriginal participants stated mirrored the daily, mainstream news items such as “climate change,” “the war in Afghanistan,” “affordable housing,” and “accessible health care.” The results of the focus groups suggest that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians occupy different worlds when it comes to public policy concerns.

Turning to the identity and attachments that Aboriginal Canadians have, we see some similarities and at least one dramatic difference when compared to the non-Aboriginal sample. Figure 2 shows the geographic identities selected by the Aboriginal participants.

**Figure 2:**  
**Geographic Political Identity (First and Second Choices Combined) – Aboriginal Participants**

World	6
North America	2
Canada	13
Western Canada	1
Province	10
City	12
Other	14
Total Responses	58*

NOTE: Not all participants made both a first and second choice.

For both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, “Canada” ranks high as a unit of geographic identification, though for the Aboriginal sample, “Canada” is second highest after “other.” For both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, “North America” is not a popular first or second choice and is joined by “Western Canada” for the Aboriginal participants. The most significant difference is that Aboriginal Canadians strongly identify as Aboriginal peoples and expressed this by saying “Other.” “Other” was chosen 25% of the time by the Aboriginal participants, and represented, for example, “James Bay Cree,” “Ojibway,” “Mohawk Six Nations,” “Métis” and “Reserve.” A participant from Winnipeg said “Red River” and when asked to elaborate said, “Look on the old maps, the Red River stretching from Pembina, North Dakota to the mouth of Lake Winnipeg.” The identification with nation, band, people, and reserve should be viewed as all the more strong because a quarter of the participants chose this by projecting their identity on to a blank category. While the rest of the categories had concrete referents, the “Other” category did not have any referent attached. One can only assume that the identification would climb higher than 25% if “Nation” or “Band” or “Reserve” had been listed instead of “Other.”

An important aspect of the Aboriginal participants’ identity is their attachment to Canada. Canada was selected often, and numerous participants noted a high level of pride in Canada. This identification with Canada is all the more interesting in light of the historically problematic, even antagonistic, relationship that the Government of Canada has had with Aboriginal peoples. The focus groups showed an absence of anger toward Canada. Aboriginal Canadians did express the view of wanting to make Canada a better place for Canadians such as themselves. Participants did not seem to be angry about their position in Canada. The one antagonism they did express was toward Quebec, and what they viewed as too much federal government attention on the demands of Quebecers, which will be touched on in a later section.

## Patriotism and National Identity Among the Next West Generation

The idea that Canadian patriotism is weak, and Canadian national identity is weak, has a lot of currency in Canada. It is a myth we routinely tell ourselves. The reality, however, is that Canadians—western Canadians in this case—strongly identify with Canada. This means that “Canada” has a high salience for young western Canadians.



There are at least two pieces of survey evidence to support this. First, survey results show that Canadians are more likely to identify with their national community than citizens in other countries. In an international survey, Canadians chose their national identity (“Canada”) more than 13 out of 14 other countries (Raney 2005). Only the Dutch chose “Netherlands” in greater numbers than Canadians chose “Canada.” National attachment ranged from 10% to 42%, with 40% of Canadians selecting Canada over other options.

The second piece of evidence is that national attachment for the Canadian sample rose from 30% to 40% from 1981 to 2000 (Raney 2005). Over this same period, the trend moved down in European countries where attachments to various sub-national units, provinces, states, regions, and various localities increased. The “continent as a whole” and “world” identifiers rose for both Canada and the United States, but fell for the European countries.

This evidence, which shows relatively strong identification with Canada and a rising level over time, agrees with the observation that Canadian patriotism has developed a brash and boisterous strain in recent years. Calgary-based author Will Ferguson observes that “Canadians are the second loudest people on earth” and that Canadian patriotism “loves shouting about being quiet” (Ferguson 1997, 13).

The Canada West Foundation focus groups show that many young adults in western Canada identify with Canada and are beginning to assert a positive, not relative, definition of national identity. Their home cities and provinces provide their concrete framework, while Canada is their existential anchor. Young western Canadians from the four western provinces see their city, province, or region as places where their extended family live or as a common landscape, while they see Canada as their *imagined* community (Anderson 1990). They view Canada as part of their identity in a way entirely different from continent, province, or city.

This national identification is, moreover, defined in positive terms. For too long, Canadian self-definition relied on a negative definition: Canadians were not Americans. Definition by negation is, obviously, not a healthy state of collective affairs. Several focus group participants supplied positive definitions of their own identity. As a participant from Winnipeg phrased it: “I chose Canada because I’m Canadian. And I’m Canadian not because I’m not American or not German.” This is a positive

affirmation at the same time as recognizing and overcoming the older tendency to rely on a negative definition.

The focus group results suggest that many young western Canadians view themselves as part of a larger political community, which requires necessary trade-offs and compromises among regions and interests. These findings indicate that civic nationalism has a basis of support among the Next West Generation. The findings also suggest that the personal investment young western Canadians have in Canada, and the bond they have with one another, is strong. Patriotism is sometimes defined as the love people feel for things shared or in common (Wills 1999), and the results of our focus group demonstrate a strong Canadian patriotism among western Canadians.

## 6. Views on Canada, Quebec and the US

This section addresses the views of the Next West Generation regarding two perpetual issues in Canadian politics and policy: the relationship between Canada and Quebec and the relationship between Canada and the United States. These issues are existential challenges to Canada. They have the potential to change Canada’s existence, to dramatically re-fashion what Canadian federalism is, whether Quebec remains part of Canada and in what capacity, and the degree of policy autonomy or sovereignty in relation to the US that Canada enjoys. These two challenges to Canada’s existence—one internal and one external—have preoccupied Canadian politicians and ordinary Canadians since the Second World War (Gotlieb 2004).

The first part of this section deals with how young western Canadians feel about Quebec, the impulse of self-determination and possible secession of Quebec, and the November 2006 motion in the House of Commons to recognize the “Quebecois as a nation within a united Canada.”

Before presenting the results of the focus groups, it is worthwhile to contrast the difference between how English-speaking Canadians and Quebecers tend to view the country. To understand the different nationalisms is to understand a great deal about why many Quebec-Canada issues remain unresolved. Canadians outside Quebec generally view Quebec as part of the federal system, a system with ten provinces and three territories, and part of an undifferentiated whole of



33 million people. Quebec is different by virtue of the pre-dominance of the French language and distinctive customs and traditions, but it is a province equal to all others in constitutional standing, and it is expected to receive benefits, and share in the burden of costs, equally with other parts of Canada.

Quebecers tend to view things differently. They believe Canada is comprised of Quebec and English-speaking Canada. Although they recognize that Quebecers constitute a numerical minority, they view their relationship to Canada as one of a “compact” or, more recently, as a “marriage” or “partnership”—terms that imply equality. Mendelsohn writes that “Quebecers think of Canada as being composed of Quebec and ‘English Canada,’ not as an undifferentiated national whole nor as a country of regions (where Quebec is but one)” (2002, 74). “While most English-speaking Canadians see themselves as individual, unmediated members of a Canadian community, most Quebecers see themselves as members of a Quebec community, which as a collectivity participates in the Canadian community” (*ibid.*).

### Focus Group Findings

The focus groups suggest that the Next West Generation supports a strong and united Canada, but recognizes that Canada exists in a state of (potentially creative) tension. For example, a participant from Saskatoon said that she “wants a dynamic tension to drive change in the federation, because too high a level of unity leads to things being stale.” In a similar vein, a participant from Vancouver said “unity in diversity is more interesting than unity in similarity.”

When asked what they believe would happen to Canada if Quebecers did eventually decide to secede from Canada, numerous participants said that Quebec could stay or go from Canada with little consequence to the remaining federation whereas others expressed what could be called “the domino theory” of Quebec succession: it would precipitate either other successions or lead to an unpredictable reconfiguration of the federal nature of Canada. Typical comments include: “I think that the rest of Canada, especially the West, could survive if Quebec decided to leave” and “I think it would be terrible even if PEI left. I think that would be the beginning of the end of Canada. If Quebec goes, then more places will go.” Opinion was, in other words, divided on the implications of Quebec succession.

Likewise, there were different levels of accommodation and tolerance. A participant from Edmonton said that “Quebec provides a viewpoint that no one else does” whereas a participant from Vancouver argued that “separatists in Quebec have a strong argument for separating, so that’s okay if they decide to do it.” The latter comment points to a clear strain of pragmatic acceptance perhaps best summarized as “if they want to do, they should go.”

The Canada West Foundation 2006 Looking West Survey found a similar result. The survey found that although only 11% of western Canadians under age 35 believe that Quebec should separate, 29% expressed the view that they did not care if Quebec separated (Berdahl 2006, 13). So fully 2 out of 5 young western Canadians are either actively opposed to Quebec remaining a part of Canada or are indifferent.

There was a geographical clustering of attitudes towards Quebec with more tolerance to Quebec’s internal struggle expressed by Winnipeg participants and less tolerance by those in Calgary. A Winnipeg participant, for example, said that “Quebec’s inclusion in Canada is part of Canadian pride” whereas a Calgary participant noted that “I’m okay with the change. I think it’s time for Quebec to put up or shut up.”

Overall, attitudes were mixed to positive, with little animosity or venom—less than 1 in 10 comments were overtly negative toward Quebec.

The views of young Aboriginal Canadians were solicited in Regina and Winnipeg. Of all the views they expressed, none were more passionate than on the subject of Quebec. Focus group participants saw themselves in a competitive position to Quebecers in terms of Canada, their treatment by the Government of Canada, and their rights to self-determination.

Aboriginal young adults remembered better than the non-Aboriginal groups that in November 2006 the House of Commons recognized the Quebecois as a nation within a united Canada. This suggests a parallel awareness on the part Aboriginal peoples as nations within Canada. Individuals participants would often refer to themselves as members of “the Mohawk nation,” “Ojibway nation,” “Cree nation.” “Métis” was the only self-description not followed by “nation.”

The subject of Quebec secession, and its impact on Aboriginal peoples, elicited a strong response. A participant from

Winnipeg argued, for example, that “our treaties are entrenched in the Constitution, so that we have a right to become our own nation in Canada, just as Israel has a right to exist from long ago, we also have that right.” A participant from Regina said that “every treaty will become a nation,” in reference to the numbered treaties that the Government of Canada signed in the years following Confederation.

### The Next West Generation and Uncle Sam

Canada’s relationship with the US is a second existential challenge facing Canadians. This challenge takes the form of reduced policy autonomy and potentially reduced political independence (Hoberg 2002). Canada’s linkages, interdependence, and integration have increased with the United States in defence and security, trade and monetary matters, corporate organization and labour mobility, and the cross-border temporary (tourism) and longer-term movements (to work, to immigrate) of people. This is supported by the observation that Canada-US relations are both more intimate and more complicated, more intense and more invisible, than the relations either has with other countries.

The focus groups inquired into the range of attitudes of the Next West Generation regarding the US as a way to gauge if the increase in anti-Americanism (or anti-President Bush sentiment) that sprang into existence since 2003 is temporary or permanent, personality-based or structural, oriented to the government or to the American people themselves. Their opinion was solicited on economic issues such as labour mobility, monetary policy (adopting the US dollar and/or US monetary policy), and the acceptability of further economic integration (the “NAFTA-plus” agenda).

These comments were solicited in March 2007, at a time when President Bush’s American approval was low, the Iraq War was viewed as a failure in both Canada and the US, and the mismanagement of the administration to Hurricane Katrina cast a long shadow of unpopularity. Typical comments include: “I liked what the US stood for 50 years ago, but I’m not sure anymore”; “maybe our opinion will improve after two years of Obama”; “I think that we are very different countries. I can’t relate at all to the current administration”; “Canada isn’t perfect, but look at what the US does in the world. They have done some good but they didn’t do any good in Iraq”; “I like Americans, as people. I have many American friends, I go to Seattle all the time. It’s their government that’s the problem.

They [the friends in Seattle] say the government does not listen to them”; “I have no problems with Americans—my wife is from Texas, but I can’t justify what their government does, in foreign policy and at home.”

It was not surprising that sentiment ran overwhelming negative on the US and President Bush, but what may be more interesting is that many participants said that the negative views were structural and permanent, not just personality-based and temporary. It will be for future readers of this report to contrast what the general Canadian view of the US is after January 2009, when a new President takes office.

The focus group facilitator then probed the feelings of participants on labour mobility and monetary policy. The comments on labour mobility arranged themselves into two camps: assessing the costs and benefits on a personal level and for Canada. A participant from Saskatoon said that “labour mobility would be bad for Saskatchewan because everyone wants to leave anyway, but it might be good for Alberta, where the economy is strong.” The supply-demand, or push-pull, dynamic was a common refrain: “labour mobility is bad because [my province] would lose workers,” said a participant from Edmonton, while an Aboriginal participant from Winnipeg added that “labour mobility would benefit Alberta because the net flow would be in-bound to Alberta.”

Participants often spoke about labour mobility in terms of politics and outlooks, not career opportunity or salary differences. For example, a participant from Winnipeg said that he “would not work in the US because of their global policies,” and a participant from Saskatoon said she would “not take a job in the US due to different ways of living.” About a third of the participants viewed labour mobility as a positive on a personal level. As a participant from Edmonton said, “If it is going to benefit you, you should go.”

The second issue of monetary policy is more complicated. The focus group facilitator tabled various monetary arrangements for discussion: a dual currency arrangement, a new North American currency, and the adoption of the US dollar in Canada. The participants were skeptical about these options. Typical comments include: “You would start out with both the Canadian and American dollar and then the American dollar would crowd out the Canadian currency and pretty soon it would not exist”; “I could see it happening for a while, then there would be an economic slowdown and Canadians would

abandon the use of their own dollar”; “There’s no way the US will give up the American dollar. It’s the money of business around the world. Besides, if they gave up the dollar they would have to give up looking at their Presidents and they wouldn’t do that”; “They’ve had their money for over 200 years so I could never see them compromising on it by adopting joint money with other countries”; “I can understand that business wants NAFTA to have a common currency, because it frees up business, but I don’t want it.”

The participants reacted strongly against adopting the US dollar: “We’d be inheriting their bad debt, external debt and budget debt”; “Their bad debt becomes our bad debt”; “We’d get inflation. Countries that adopt the US dollar usually suffer from inflation,” which has been the case in Latin America”; “I’m strongly against it”; “Their currency is easier to counterfeit, so we’d have a riskier currency.”

The negative reaction to US dollarization was based more on the identity it would confer—or take away—than on the functional aspects: a participant from Vancouver rejected the US dollar for “emotional and symbolic reasons” and the notion that we would “feel like we’re just another state”; another Vancouver participant said that he “didn’t want to have their Presidents on our money—I like to see MacKenzie King on my bills. I like the history in that”; a participant in Winnipeg said she liked “Canadian geese on our money, and once you start disconnecting from those images, you lose a sense of yourself.” It was clear that the Next West Generation had thought about different national currencies before, and it was clear that the identity aspects to their Canadian dollar counted for as much or more than monetary and economic arguments in their strong feelings about retaining the Canadian dollar.

### Views About Uncle Sam and Canadian Destiny

The participants made rational arguments, for and against, labour mobility and monetary arrangements. As the subject became more general—the historical treatment of Canada by the US, or whether Canada should pursue greater economic integration—participants expressed themselves in more emotional terms. The spillover between dislike of President Bush and stalled trilateral discussions on economic integration (embodied in the Security and Prosperity Partnership) became obvious. As a participant from Winnipeg said, “I’d be a lot more comfortable with closer relations if it was not for the current administration. I’d even be comfortable talking about closer economic relations.”

When concluding the focus groups, the facilitator tabled the idea of Canada-US political union, the idea that refuses to die in the collective national unconscious of Canadians. This admittedly extreme notion was tested because opponents of economic integration often argue the final form trade and investment liberalization will take will be political union. This subject elicited fear, anger, and aversion, and a stronger reaction than any other topic: “It’s bull”; “absolutely not a good thing”; “it would require a catastrophe of biblical proportions for a North American political entity to happen”; “that would be terrible.” These comments are representative of the strong, direct, and negative reactions to the idea of political union with the US.

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## About the Canada West Foundation

### Our Vision

A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

### Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

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In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

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F O U N D A T I O N

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Manitoba Office:  
#400, 161 Portage Avenue East  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 0Y4  
Telephone: 204.947.3958

British Columbia Office:  
#810, 1050 W. Pender Street  
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6E 3S7  
Telephone: 604.646.4625

Head Office:  
#900, 1202 Centre Street SE  
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 5A5  
Telephone: 403.264.9535

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