

[Are immigrants natural conservatives? Think again](#)

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When U.S. President Barack Obama won 71 per cent of the Hispanic vote in 2012, it dealt the final blow to an idea that had been popular during George W. Bush's years: that Hispanic Americans' conservative values on social issues (rooted in their predominantly Catholic religiosity), made them "natural" Republicans. Republicans also expressed frustration that Mr. Obama had captured 73 per cent of the Asian-American vote when, as conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly put it, "Asian people are not liberal, you know, by nature. They're usually more industrious and hard-working."

Editorial cartoons from December, 2013

North of the border, the notion that migrants – particularly South Asian and Chinese newcomers – will provide the Conservative Party with a natural base also has some proponents. The Conservatives have made no secret of their outreach efforts aimed at migrant communities, particularly in coveted suburban ridings in and around Toronto and Vancouver. The Conservative playbook for courting migrants has typically focused primarily on pocketbook issues (low taxes and small-business initiatives), and secondarily on social conservative messages or targeted stances on international issues.

The most clearly articulated case for the affinity between migrants and the Conservative Party has been advanced by Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson in their recent book *The Big Shift*. The book paints a familiar portrait of the hard-working immigrant "striver" who is not concerned with issues such as "community supports, the environment and international engagement" that preoccupy "creatives." Instead, the argument goes, immigrants care primarily about "seeking to own a home in a safe community while they pursue their dreams."

Findings from Environics' Cultural Markets practice indicate that South Asian and Chinese migrants do indeed possess some attributes of the "striver" archetype. They are strongly focused on their children's education, oriented toward saving money and attracted to small-business opportunities. Our values research has also found more traditional social values among these groups, placing greater emphasis on authority and patriarchy. The archetype of the hard-working, family-oriented immigrant is appealing – and not just to Conservative campaigners: our qualitative research has found that immigrants themselves are attracted to that self-image.

But the story is more complicated.

The idea that migrant attitudes are defined by a focus on economic mobility is outdated. These days, middle-class Chinese and Indians who are solely focused on material gain are better off staying in their home countries. Today's migrants are often people who voluntarily accept a decline in status and even income to move to Canada. Young professional immigrants who choose Canada are often seeking gains in quality of life more than standard of living. Focus group participants have told us they want to raise their children outside the hierarchies and pressures of their home countries. South Asian immigrants, in particular, are attracted to

Canada's multicultural society, believing they and their children are enriched through exposure to diverse cultures. Many of the Chinese immigrants we speak to are tired of "striving" and are trading off more opportunity in China for less stress in Canada.

Who said the following: "People in Canada are from all over the world and they live the way they want to live. People here preserve their cultures like no other place in the world and we all share in the celebration of each other's lives and it is a beautiful thing."

Is this an Upper Canadian elite chatting over a glass of Chablis in downtown Toronto? No, it's a 54-year-old South Asian migrant in British Columbia, eloquently expressing her appreciation of Canadian pluralism in one of our focus groups. Immigrants are not frozen in time, endlessly running a "traditional" script from "the old country." They sample, they explore, they choose. Time and again, we hear immigrants extol things that might be considered progressive values – including Canadian-style pluralism – as they acculturate to life in their new country.

How do these evolving economic and social priorities translate into political positions? The Broadbent Institute commissioned Environics Research to conduct a poll specifically to explore the hypothesis that immigration is causing Canada to become more conservative. It finds foreign-born and Canadian-born Canadians to be remarkably aligned on a range of issues – from the size of government to Canada's role in the world.

On some social issues, such as same-sex marriage and marijuana decriminalization, the most recent immigrants stand out in their conservative positions. This is consistent with our finding that new immigrants tend to hold somewhat more traditional social values reflective of prevailing attitudes in their countries of origin. But in other areas, migrants look a lot like the Canadian-born. The Broadbent survey finds that immigrants who have arrived in Canada in the past 10 years are more likely than other Canadians to say they would rather have a "bigger government that provides more services to people and regulates businesses more." They are also more likely to believe that unionization is generally good because it "leads to better wages, more equality in society, and strengthens the middle class." These attitudes fit with recent findings from EKOS that immigrants are slightly less likely (not more) than the Canadian-born to vote Conservative – and markedly more likely to vote Liberal.

None of this is to say that Conservatives cannot successfully court immigrants. Former immigration minister Jason Kenney has made notable inroads. But hard work and targeted appeals are critical to success for all parties, including the Conservatives: The notion that immigrants "naturally" turn blue the moment they arrive is not supported by the evidence.

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