

**The Political Identifications of Young Adult Canadians:
Generational Trends Over Two Decades**

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Introduction

A federal government document from the Policy Research Initiative dealing with the issue of social cohesion states of national identity in Canada: “There is no one description of a Canadian. Being unsure about what is a Canadian is a good thing. It leaves more space to be who we are.”¹ In the literature on Canadian identity, nationalism, and national political community scholars like Taylor and later Kymlicka explain how the ties that bind Canada’s political community should rely upon diversity and multiculturalism. Taylor advocates a ‘unity in diversity’ idea of Canadian identity wherein citizens might “find it exciting and an object of pride” to work together to build a society founded on “deep diversity” and be willing to make sacrifices to keep it together.² Kymlicka forwards a vision of “multicultural citizenship” that promotes a sense of solidarity and common purpose in a multinational state through the accommodation rather than subordination of national identities.³ Accordingly, “people from different national groups will only share an allegiance to the larger polity if they see it as the context within which their [specific] national identity is nurtured, rather than subordinated.”⁴ For Webber, a commitment by members of multiple political communities to engage in public debate over the future of Canada is integral to the construction of the Canadian political community.⁵

¹ Policy Research Initiative. *Inclusion for All: A Canadian Roadmap to Social Cohesion*. 2002. Ottawa: Government of Canada. http://policyresearch.gc.ca/page.asp?pagenm=rp_inclu#1 Accessed May 15th 2004.

² Taylor cited in Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 190.

³ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵ Jeremy Webber. *Reimagining Canada*. (Kingston/Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 225.

Underlying the federal government report on social cohesion and the research of these scholars is an assumption that membership to the Canadian political community (how ever the community is defined) *should* be and *is* desirable and valuable to its citizens. Yet this assumption does not reflect the reality for many young adults in Canada today. While a majority of Canadians feel Canada is important to them, evidence is coming to light that young adults are distancing themselves psychologically from the nation and other political identity groupings like language, ethnicity and gender.⁶ This finding presents a much different reality than Canadians simply being ‘unsure of’ or ‘thinking differently’ about what it means to be Canadian; for a growing number of young adults, Canada is becoming less relevant.

This paper explores the ways in which young adults identify with the Canadian political community differently than older Canadians. ‘Political identity’ is an important concept because it tells us how citizens subjectively perceive their membership in a community upon which political institutions are built.⁷ As young adults replace older ones over time, generational differences in their political identifications today give us a glimpse into the future of how meaningful membership and how political communities will be ‘imagined’ in the years to come.⁸ In this paper I argue that the decline of political identifications among young adults is tied to a broader phenomenon of a decline in the value of being a member of and belonging to political

⁶Jon Pammett and Lawrence Leduc. *Elections Canada Survey: Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters*. 2003. <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=social&dir=tur/tud&lang=e&textonly=false>, Accessed April 2004.

⁷This definition of ‘political identity’ was taken from François Rocher and Miriam Smith, eds. *New Trends in Canadian Federalism*. 2nd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 22.

⁸ Benedict Anderson makes the case that political communities and nations in particular are ‘imagined’ by citizens and thus need citizens to psychologically commit to thinking about the definition of the national community they live in. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities—Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso. 1983).

identity-based communities that is particular to this generation of young adults. Youth ‘disassociation’ is the most pronounced in national political communities. Using survey data I find that while older Canadians identify with pan-Canadian nationalism, even though young adult Canadians exhibit high levels of pride in symbols associated with pan-Canadianism such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and multiculturalism, they are still not inclined to feel Canada is important to them.

Further, youth disassociation with Canada does not appear to be a lifecycle effect but rather is a new phenomenon specific to this generation of young adults. Using time series analysis I find that twenty years ago, Canadians between the ages of 18 and 55 were just as likely to feel “being Canadian” was important to them whereas today, those under the age of 24 are less much likely to think the same. I also find that youth identifications with linguistic, ethnic and gender groups are waning in importance, confirming a general trend of disassociation from identity-based communities in general. Consequently, the Canadian political community and communities within the national community of future generations are likely to be more atomized and less relevant to their members than they have been during the last two decades, and arguably more so than they have ever been before.

Methodological Considerations

In their investigation of the utility of the concept ‘identity’ Brubaker and Cooper contend that the term has been over-extended to such an extent that it now means both everything and nothing at the same time.⁹ Oddly enough the definitional anarchy of ‘identity’ coincides with the growing use of identity as a variable in the

⁹ Brubaker and Cooper. “Beyond Identity” in *Theory & Society*, 2001. 29, 1-47.

social sciences. In their study of identity research, Abdelal et al. find that throughout the 1990s, articles about identity in the social sciences have increased exponentially.¹⁰ Moreover, this trend appears to have worked its way into political science, a discipline traditionally less concerned with the concept of identity than other social science disciplines.¹¹

Existing research on political identity in Canada often conflates the concepts of national identity, attachment, sense of belonging, sense of importance, general ‘warm feelings’ for a community, and primary political identifications. For example, Graves et al. use levels of attachment and belonging to various political domains in order to make claims about political identities in Canada.¹² Blais and Nadeau and Howe refer to ‘national identity’ but use questions that measure strength of attachment.¹³ In order to avoid this conceptual issue this paper pays special attention to question wording and uses a specific definition of political identity to mean “the way in which individuals perceive their membership in the community upon which political institutions are built”.¹⁴ Political identities are also inextricably linked to political communities, which are based on the common perceptions of its members. The general concept of national identity is best measured by questions that directly ask about primary political identifications and the importance of the nation or being Canadian. Questions about

¹⁰ Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston and Terry Martin. *Treating Identity as a Variable: Measuring the Content, Intensity and Contestation of Identity*. Paper presented at the APSA, August 30-September 2nd, 2001, San Francisco.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² Frank L. Graves with Tom Dugas and Patrick Beauchamp. “Identity and National Attachment in Contemporary Canada” in *Canada: The State of the Federation 1998,99—How Canadians Connect*, Harvey Lazar and Tom McIntosh, eds. (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations/McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999).

¹³ Matthew Mendelsohn. “Measuring National Identity and Patterns of Attachment: Quebec and Nationalist Mobilization”. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*. Autumn 2002. Vol 8, no.3. 72-94, 7.

¹⁴ Rocher and Smith, 22.

strength of attachment, feelings of warmth and a sense of belonging are useful in assessing political identifications at the national level, but they do not measure national identifications as precisely as the former do.

Quantitative data provide a good way to assess political identities because it is at the level of the individual where political communities are imagined and identities either realized or not. A fuller picture of changing political identifications requires different questions that tap different elements of the same general concept. Time series data allows us to assess fluctuations in identifications over time and to determine whether generational differences exist. Different data sources also reveal how wording may affect responses; hence, multiple questions allow us to take into account these possible effects and to observe general trends while testing the same underlying concept. In order to provide the most accurate reflection of political identities in Canada over the past twenty years, this paper uses extensive polling data on political identities. The range of data compiled from multiple datasets allows for a richer study of political identities today and broader assessment of national identities specifically over the past twenty years.

Time series analyses draw from the Project Canada Research Program from the University of Lethbridge conducted every five years from 1975 to 2000.¹⁵ All Project Canada surveys use self-administered mail back questionnaires randomly selected.¹⁶ Each of the five samples has been weighted down to about 1,200 cases in order to

¹⁵ Data made available by the American Religion Data Archive and the principal investigator, Reginald Bibby. <http://www.thearda.com>. Data in this paper draws from the 1985, 1990 and 1995 panels. The question that is used as the dependent variable in this study—How important is “being Canadian” to you, was not asked in 1980. Data from 2000 were not yet made available at the time this draft of the paper was written.

¹⁶ Discrepancies between the sample and population characteristics have been corrected by weighting for provincial and community size, along with gender and age.

minimize the use of large weight factors (i.e., three or more). The survey samples consist of a core of people who participated in the previous survey and new participants every year. For example, the 1995 sample of 1,765 cases comprises 816 people who participated in previous surveys and 949 new cases. This allows for a tracking of responses of specific individuals over time. The dependent variable used from the Project Canada studies asks respondents whether “being Canadian” is important to them (see Appendix for exact question wording).

For current polling data this paper draws from CRIC’s “New Canada” 2003¹⁷ and the Elections Canada 2003 surveys. CRIC’s New Canada survey was carried out in 2003 by Ipsos-Reid.¹⁸ A representative sample of 2,000 randomly selected Canadians were interviewed by telephone. A survey of this size has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.2%, 19 times out of 20. The survey sample includes 1,000 respondents between the ages of 18 and 30 and 1,000 respondents 31 years and older. The dependent variable used from the CRIC data asks how important to their own sense of identity various identity groupings are (see Appendix for exact question wording). Data from the 2003 Elections Canada was designed to measure a wide variety of explanations for not voting, the Elections Canada survey also includes questions related to political identity (see Appendix for exact question wording).¹⁹ The sample design calls for a short screening interview with a large number of Canadians (5 637) and a longer interview conducted with 960 reported voters in the 2000 federal general

¹⁷ Thanks to Andrew Parkin from CRIC for early access to the data.

¹⁸ The CRIC-Globe and Mail Survey on “The New Canada”(2003)[computer file]. Centre for Research and Information on Canada, the Globe and Mail, and the Canadian Opinion Research Archive [producer], Canadian Opinion Research Archive, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON[distributor].

¹⁹ Data made available by Elections Canada. Thanks to co-principal investigator Lawrence Leduc for early access to the data. The dataset can be found at:
<http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=index&dir=tur/tud&lang=e&textonly=false>

election and 960 reported non-voters in that election.²⁰ The total weighted N for non-voters in the 2000 general election is 1097. It should be noted that the data presented here offer only snapshots of national identities because they do not provide yearly data. It is expected and assumed that fluctuations between years exist. Time series analyses however, give us enough of a context to note several discernible trends in Canadians' national identifications over the past twenty years, which allow for the creation of a partial moving picture of national identifications in Canada.

Analysis

An overall portrait of national identities in Canada today indicates that levels of nationalism in Canada are stable and quite robust for most Canadians, especially in comparison with supranational categories like the world or North America. Data collected from the Elections Canada survey indicate that among those who feel “very close” to any geographic unit, a plurality of 41% chose Canada, while only 18% selected a supranational unit (North America). Three in ten respondents feel ‘very close’ to their neighbourhood and town, and one in four to their province. Similar results occur in other polling data.²¹

When we compare these results by age however, a generational divide emerges: while 1 in 4 Canadians over the age of 30 believe that Canada is “very important” to them, only 29% of Canadians under the age of 30 felt the same.²² The number of young Canadians who selected Canada as their primary source of identification has also

²⁰ A system of corrective weights was calculated for the dataset by Decima Research, and the weighted data is used for this paper.

²¹ For example, CRIC's New Canada data reveals that 37% of Canadians feel as though the nation is “very important” to them, compared to 33% who said the same of the language and 25% of their province of residence.

²² Data from CRIC's “New Canada” 2003 dataset.

declined over the past decade: while in 1990 33% of youth selected Canada as their primary source of identification²³, by 2001 that number has dropped to 23% of those aged 18-24 who selected Canada first.²⁴

Not only are young Canadians less likely to feel Canada is important to them, but their pride in national symbols does not seem to parlay into positive nationalist sentiments as much as it does for older Canadians. According to Edelman, political symbols should act as emotional ‘anchors’ to identities because they trigger emotional responses in citizenries and foster a sense of belonging and membership to the nation.²⁵ Political identities are also created by the “actions, discourse, and symbols offered by political actors themselves”.²⁶ Consequently, we should expect to find a relationship between high pride in national symbols and positive national sentiments. While older Canadians identify with pan-Canadian nationalism, this does not appear to be the case for young adults, even though they have high levels of pride in pan-Canadian symbols.

CRIC’s “New Canada” survey includes questions that ask respondents how much pride they have for various symbols and symbolic events in Canada on a scale from 0 (no pride) to 10 (a lot of pride). CRIC’s symbols include: Canada’s Olympic Hockey team victories, Pierre Trudeau, having two official languages English and French, Canada’s participation in key battles of World War I or World War II, Multiculturalism, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, When Canada decided to not participate in the war on Iraq, when Canadian airports took in American planes that were diverted in September 11th, 2001, Canada’s participation in peacekeeping

²³ Data from the World Values Survey, 1990-1991.

²⁴ Data from the Building the New West Survey Conducted by the Canada West Foundation in 2001. $p < .001$, $V = .064$.

²⁵ Murray Edelman. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 6.

²⁶ Rocher and Smith, 22.

activities around the world, the vastness and beauty of the land, the CBC, the success of Canadian musicians or actors or artists, when the United Nations ranks Canada as the best country in the world in which to live, the Queen, Canada's politeness and civility, and the fact that people from different cultural groups in Canada get along and live in peace.²⁷

On average Canadians aged 18-24 have more pride than their older counterparts in the Charter, multiculturalism, Canada's stance on the war in Iraq, healthcare, and French and English as Canada's two official languages. For example, those aged 18-24 have a mean score of pride in the Charter of 8.27, while those aged 35-44 have a mean score of pride of 7.59. Youth also rank highly in their pride for Canada in an international context, with a mean score of 9.07 compared to 8.47 for those aged 35-44 on Canada's U.N. role, and 8.29 compared to 7.85 for those aged 35-44 for Canada's peacekeeping role.

Prior to testing the symbols/national identity relationship, a factor analysis was conducted in order to test for possible underlying relationships among the following symbols: Multiculturalism, the Charter, Official languages, cultural groups living in peace in Canada, peacekeeping, healthcare, world war battles, Canada taking in American planes on 9/11, Olympic hockey team victories, the Queen, and the success of Canadian musicians and artists.²⁸ Table 1.1 displays the results of the factor analysis [Table 1.1 about here]. The factor analysis yields 2 factors with an Eigenvalue of over 1.0 and explains a total of 46% of variance with a KMO of .860. It shows the rotated factor loadings resulting from the factor analysis undertaken.

²⁷ Some of the questions related to symbols in the New Canada dataset were split sampled which means that in some of the analysis presented in this paper, the dataset was split in two.

²⁸ These questions were asked to roughly half of the respondents in the CRIC survey (n=approx.1000)

Table 1.1 Factor Analysis: Political Symbols in Canada ²⁹
(Principal Components, Varimax Rotation)

	Factor 1: Pan-Canadian Symbols	Factor 2: Non-Gov't Symbols
Multiculturalism	.751	.078
The Charter	.733	.122
Cultural groups in harmony	.691	.200
Two official languages	.668	.005
Peacekeeping	.613	.323
Health Care	.519	.135
World War Battles	-.035	.754
Canada on 9/11	.057	.688
Beauty of land	.204	.666
Olympic hockey victories	.201	.643
The Queen	.165	.489
Success of Canadian musicians/artists	.405	.438
% Variation Explained	32.1	13.5

Source: CRIC "New Canada" 2003

KMO=.860

Variation Explained=46%

The loadings reveal two underlying relationships amongst the symbols: the first includes symbols that are associated strongly with the federal government (multiculturalism, the Charter, diverse cultural groups in peace, two official languages, Canada's peacekeeping role abroad, and healthcare). The items in the second factor include symbols that are not associated directly with the federal government (World War battles, the beauty and vastness of the land, Canadian Olympic hockey victories, the Queen, and the success of Canadian musicians/artists³⁰). These symbols are also

²⁹ A second factor analysis was conducted using the other half of the dataset and confirms the pan-Canadian/non-governmental dimensions of political symbols in Canada. The second factor analysis yielded two factors with an Eigenvalue of over 1.0. The first factor includes the following variables: Canada's stance on Iraq, multiculturalism, the CBC, Trudeau, and healthcare while the second factor includes: Canada's world war battles, Olympic hockey victories, Canada's U.N. rankings, scientific inventions, peacekeeping activities and Canada's politeness and civility. It explains 46% of the total variance with a KMO of .857.

³⁰ Note that pride in Canadian musicians and artists loads in both factors. Since it loads more heavily on the second factor however, it is included in the analysis with the second factor in the research below.

non-governmental, meaning they are not tied to the federal government as directly as the variables that loaded in the first factor.

The results of the factor analysis portray two different views of the Canadian political community: the first leans strongly toward Trudeau's vision of 'pan-Canadian' nationalism of Canada as a nation of 30 million individual rights-bearers that includes symbols like multiculturalism (adopted in 1971) and Official Languages (adopted in 1969). The centrepiece of this vision-- the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (adopted in 1982)—also loads more strongly in the first factor. That these items relate strongly to one another suggests that for at least some Canadians, pan-Canadian symbols are linked together and likely tied to a perception of Canada as a 'pan-Canadian' community.

The second factor loads items that are not tied directly to the federal government but rather rest on historical/cultural symbols and are non-governmental in nature: Canada's participation in World War I and World War II, Canada's role in accepting American planes on September 11, 2001, the beauty of the land, Olympic hockey victories, the Queen, and the success of Canadian musicians and artists. These symbols are not tied to any specific vision of Canada.

Although young Canadians have more pride in key pan-Canadian symbols than older people, their pride does not translate into positive nationalist identifications as much as it does for older Canadians. In order to test the relationship between pride in symbols and nationalist sentiments, the variables that loaded on the pan-Canadian factor analysis were added together and divided by the total number of variables for a score of 0(no proud) to 10 (the most pride). The pan-Canadian index was then recoded

into three categories: not very proud (0,1,2), neutral (3 to 7) and very proud (8,9,10).³¹ A cross-tabulation of the pan-Canadian symbol index with nationalist sentiment controlling for age shows that among those aged 31 and over who felt “very proud” of pan-Canadian symbols, 53% felt the nation was also “very important” to them.³² Comparatively, among those aged 18-30 who felt “very proud” of pan-Canadian symbols, only 36% felt the nation was “very important” to them, a difference of 17 percentage points.³³ While the national identifications have a ‘pan-Canadian’ character for older Canadians, pride in pan-Canadian symbols has a much more benign or negligible effect on Canadians under the age of thirty.³⁴ Young adults seem to be much more impervious to national symbols as emotional anchors to the national political community than older citizens.

The chasm between higher levels of pride for pan-Canadian symbols and lower levels of national identifications for Canadian youth emphasizes how emotionally detached young adults are from the national community. Polling data from a recent Environics survey reveal that when asked directly what was most important to Canadian identity, 18-29 year olds said the Charter.³⁵ Although young Canadians feel pride in pan-Canadian symbols and believe these symbols should *objectively* promote nationalist identifications, their personal constructions of political identity do not

³¹ This coding is replicated from Parkin and Mendelsohn’s in their report using the same data in the New Canada 2003, 11.

³² $p < .001$, $V = .160$

³³ $p < .001$, $V = .201$

³⁴ Janine Brodie discusses the development of a new pan-Canadianism in the mid-1940s that gathered steam through the mid-1960s with the passage of Canada’s first *Citizenship Act*, an official Canadian anthem and flag, the financing of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and universal healthcare (Medicare) in 1966 in “On Being Canadian” in Janine Brodie and Linda Trimble, ed., *Reinventing Canada* (Toronto: Pearson, 2003), 23.

³⁵ Jack Jedwab and Chris Baker. *Canadian Identity: Bilingualism, Multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights*. (Ottawa: Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, 2004). <http://www.acs-aec.ca/Polls/Poll38.pdf>. Accessed May 5th, 2004.

follow suit. This finding emphasizes the degree to which young Canadians are disconnected from the national community: even though these symbols were constructed to promote national unity and identity—multiculturalism, bilingualism and the Charter³⁶—, they are now less tied to the nation for youth than they are for older Canadians. The finding also demonstrates a measurement distinction between subjective and objective assessments of national symbols as they relate to national identity.

The emotional and psychological space between young adults and the national political community is a new phenomenon particular to this generation of youth as time series analysis rules out the likelihood that the differences today between young and older adults are the result of life-cycle effects. Data from 1985, 1990 and 1995³⁷ from Project Canada demonstrate that youth aged 18-24 from these generations felt “being Canadian” was as important to them and in some cases more important to them than it was to other Canadians under the age of 55 [Table 1.2 about here]. Table 1.2 demonstrates that in 1985, 61% of young Canadians said being Canadian was “very important” to them, while 59% of those aged 25-34, 62% aged 35-44 and 66% of those aged 44-54 said the same. While compared to the oldest cohort of over 55 young Canadians are less likely to feel ‘being Canadian’ was “very important”, they are comparable with those from all other age categories and in some cases, even surpass those of older generations.

³⁶ Les Pal. *Interests of State Interests of State—The Politics of Language, Multiculturalism, and Feminism in Canada*. (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993).

³⁷ The question related to “being Canadian” was not asked in 1980.

Table 1.2 % Who Said Being Canadian is “Very Important” To Them By Age Category in 1985, 1990 and 1995:

		Age Categories					Sig.	Cramer's V
		18-24	25-34	35-44	44-54	55-65		
Year	%							
	1985	61	59	62	66	82	p<.000	V=.102
	1990	51	52	57	62	72	p<.002	V=.100
	1995	63	48	50	65	72	p<.000	V=.156

Source: Project Canada 1985, 1990, 1995

It is interesting to note in Table 1.2 the possible effect the Québec referendum on sovereignty had on youth nationalist identifications in 1995, a year that has the highest percentage of youth who said “being Canadian” was very important to them among the three. Because Canadians in this age group were not born yet or were too young to remember the first Québec referendum or the volatility of the Constitutional debates in the early 1980s, the 1995 referendum was the first time many young adults were confronted with the issue of Canadian unity and identity in such an overt and pressing manner. As a result, national identities were likely much more public and immediate to youth for the first time in their lives. On the whole, when compared with data from today’s youth who exhibit much lower levels of national sentiment compared to their older counterparts, it is clear that compared to youth from twenty years ago, youth today are much less nationalistic.

Young Canadians were also equally likely to support pan-Canadian values as older Canadians in 1985: there are no statistically significant differences between youth (18-24) and older Canadians on a host of ‘pan-Canadian’ values: a majority of all Canadians believed the issue of Canadian unity was serious, saw Canada as a mosaic

versus a melting pot, and thought Canada should support two official languages rather than just English as an official language.³⁸

Drawing from CRIC 2003 data, the pan-Canadian values of the younger generation in 1985 continue to animate their national identifications twenty years later. Two age categories were constructed based Charter-era and post-Charter era generations: the “Charter era” generation includes respondents aged 35-44, all of whom were young adults during the debates leading up to and during the patriation of the Constitution (for example, a 41 year old at the time of the survey in 2003 was 20 in 1985). A “post-Charter” generation includes those aged 18-34 today (the earliest federal election a respondent could vote in was 1988, six years after the Charter).

For the Charter-Era generation, among those who are “very proud” of the Charter, 43% also felt Canada was “very important” to them.³⁹ Yet, despite having more pride in the Charter than the Charter generation itself, there is no statistically significant relationship between pride in the Charter and nationalist sentiments among the post-Charter generation.⁴⁰ The pan-Canadian values of the Trudeau era young Canadians in 1985 acquired have remained with them twenty years later. This finding suggests that young adulthood is a key time period in the development of political identities, where identity ‘imprints’ are created and carried with citizens over their lifetimes. These results also suggest that in developing their political identifications, young adults also acquire the values of belonging to and being a member of the national

³⁸ See Appendix for question wording. All missing values removed from data. Age categories coded as: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54 and 55-65. Crosstabulations: Age and Mosaic3: $p < .398$, Age and Biling3: $p < .040$, $V = .095$, Age and Unity3: $p < .634$.

³⁹ Charter-Era: $p < .001$, $V = .158$.

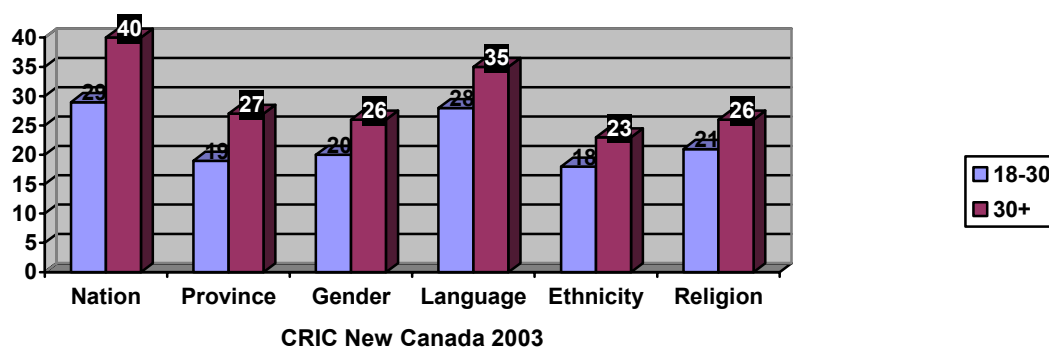
⁴⁰ Post-Charter era: $p < .06$, not statistically significant.

political community. Based on these results, it is plausible to assume that the political identifications of youth today will be sustained with them throughout their lifetime.

Youth and Other Political Identities

Young adults are not just identifying less with Canada, they are also identifying less with other political groupings. Figure 1.1 compares the responses of those aged 18-30 with those over 30 using CRIC “New Canada” data. It demonstrates that although those under 30 do still feel each identity grouping is important, the percentage of those who feel these groupings are ‘very important’ to them is much less than for those over 30 [Figure 1.1 about here].

Figure 1.1: Percentage Saying Each Is “Very Important” by Age⁴¹



The largest age gap occurs among those who feel the nation is “very important” to them: while 40% of those over 30 felt the nation was “very important” to them, only 1 in 3 of those under 30 felt the same. Elections Canada data yield similar results: of those aged 55 and over, 57% felt “very close” while of those aged 19-34 only 30% said the same.⁴² Young Canadians are also less likely to feel other political identification groupings based on language, ethnicity and gender are important to them. The second

⁴¹ Data taken from CRIC’s New Canada Survey, 2003.

⁴² $p < .000$, $V = .169$

largest age gap occurs with sentiments toward the province, as 27% over the age of 30 and 19% under the age of 30 felt the province was “very important” to them. Using the same data Pammett and LeDuc find that youth are distancing themselves psychologically from all of the territorially based units of Canadian society.⁴³

By way of confirming the results presented so far and to test whether other factors might shape nationalist identifications, a regression analysis using the OLS method was conducted with nationalist sentiment as the dependent variable (how important is the nation to you) where recoded to 1 is “very important” and all other responses are equal to 0).⁴⁴ The independent variables are coded as dummy variables in the following way: youth (aged 18-30=1, all other ages=0), male (male=1, female=0), education (1=completed university degree or post graduate degree, 0=else), and born in Canada (1=yes, 0=else). Other identity groupings were also included as independent variables: language (1=very important, 0=all other responses), province (1=very important, 0=all other responses), ethnicity (1=very important, 0=all other responses), gender (1=very important, 0=all other responses), religion (1=very important, 0=all other responses). As well, two symbolic scale indices were created for the regression: one of federal government symbols and one of ‘Canada as an international nation’ symbols. These two symbolic indices were selected in particular because youth express higher levels of pride in symbols associated with the federal government and ‘Canada as an international nation’ more than non-political symbols like Canada’s involvement in the world wars.

⁴³Elections Canada Survey: Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters.
<http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=social&dir=tur/tud&lang=e&textonly=false>.
Accessed April 23rd, 2004.

⁴⁴ Data from CRIC’s “New Canada” 2003 Survey.

The international symbols scale includes pride in Canada's stance on the Iraq war, Canada's U.N. rankings and Canada's role as a peacekeeping nation. These responses were added up and divided by three to create a scale where 0 is equal to no pride and 10 is equal to the most pride. The federal government symbols include pride in Trudeau, the CBC, healthcare and multiculturalism. These responses were added up and divided by four to create a scale from 0 to 10 as well. The beta coefficients are reported and show the independent effect of each predictor after the effects of all the other predictors have been controlled for. Whether the coefficient is negative or positive is an indication of the direction of its effect on the dependent variable. A perfect positive relationship is equal to 1 and a perfect negative relationship is equal to -1. As well, the R-square is reported for each regression equation which tells us how much of the variance is explained in each regression and is converted to a percentage. The results of Table 1.4 emphasize how, when compared to federal government symbols, international symbols do not drive positive nationalist sentiments as much [Table 1.4 about here].

With a beta score of .132, pan-Canadian symbols foster a belief that Canada is important, while there is no statistically significant relationship between international symbols and the same. Moreover, the beta score of -.117 confirms a negative relationship between youth and feeling Canada is very important. The model demonstrates no statistically significant relationships between gender, education and whether a respondent is born in Canada with positive nationalist sentiments.

Table 1.4 Regression Analysis: Predictors of Feeling Toward Nation in Canada

Independent variables	Model 'Very Positive Nationalist Sentiments'
<i>Demographic Variables</i>	
Youth	-.117***
Male	.043
Education	.034
Born in Canada	.037
<i>Symbol Variables</i>	
Federal Government	.132***
International	.001
<i>Identity Variables</i>	
Language	.171***
Religion	.060*
Province	.121***
Ethnicity	.189***
Gender	.084*
R²	.223

Note: ***=p<.001, **=p<.01, *=p<.05.

Source: CRIC New Canada Survey, 2003 (half dataset).

Table 1.4 also emphasizes the compatibility of other political identifications with national ones: positive relationships exist between language and nation (.171), ethnicity and nation (.189), gender and nation (.084) and religion and nation (.060). The consonance of these identity groupings demonstrates that political identities travel together such that if a person has positive sentiments toward Canada, they are also more likely to have positive sentiments toward linguistic, provincial, ethnic, gendered and religious-based communities as well. If young adults feel the values associated with membership and belonging are less important to them, they will be less inclined to identify with any political grouping. This finding helps to explain why young Canadians are disassociating themselves not just from Canada, but also all other identity groupings.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of weakening political identifications among young adults is important because it can shed light on what Canada's political community of the future will look like. As young people replace their elders as members in the political community, they bring with them their attitudes and opinions about the community. As the political identifications of youth weaken, the emotional bonds that tie political communities together weaken as well. The communities based on nation, ethnicity, language and gender are becoming much less relevant to younger members than to the generations that immediately precede them. The values of belonging and member are also eroding for the younger generation, suggesting a much more atomized society of the future.

Future research on youth and political identities may benefit from exploring how political identity research relate to studies on social capital; as Putnam points out, the less we connect with other people, the less we trust them.⁴⁵ On this basis alone, the emotional ties that bind political communities together and connect citizens to one another are a prerequisite for social cohesion. Without those ties, social capital and trust may continue to decline as this generation replaces older ones.

It is also likely not a coincidence that young adult participation in federal elections is declining at the same time that their national identifications are waning. Underlying citizen involvement in the political process is a belief that one's membership to a political community is valuable, thus justifying participation in the community as a worthwhile activity. If membership in a community is deemed

⁴⁵ Robert Putnam. "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America". *PS, Political Science & Politics*. V.28 December 1995, 664-83.

unimportant or unnecessary, acts and/or rituals associated with belonging to that community such as voting become less meaningful. Clearly, the declining political identifications and behaviours of youth are jointly symptomatic of a changing relationship between youth and the Canadian state; a change that requires closer scrutiny.

Appendix
Survey Question Wording

CRIC “New Canada”:

Importance of Identity: I will read you a number of factors which may contribute to one's personal feeling of identity. For each, please tell me whether it is very important, important, not very important, or not at all important to your own sense of identity? Nation, Language, Region or Province, Ethnicity or Race, Religion, Gender.

Symbols: “I will read you a list of things and events that some people say make them proud to be Canadian. I would like you to tell me whether each of these makes you feel proud to be a Canadian. Please use a scale of 0-10, where 0 means it does not make you feel proud at all, and 10 means it makes you feel very proud. You can use any number between 0 and 10. How about Canadian Olympic hockey team victories, (split sample) Pierre Trudeau/Having two official languages, English and French, Canada’s participation in key battles of World War I and World War II, Multiculturalism, The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, (split sample) When Canada decided to not participate in the war on Iraq/When Canadian airports took in American planes that were diverted on September 11th, 2001, Canada’s participation in peacekeeping activities around the world, (split sample) Canadian scientific inventions, like the Canadarm/The vastness and beauty of the land, (split sample) the CBC/The success of Canadian musicians or actors or artists, (split sample) When the United Nations ranks Canada as the best country in the world in which to live/the Queen, (split sample) Canada’s politeness and civility/The fact that people from different cultural groups in Canada get along and live in peace.

Elections Canada 2003:

Feelings of Closeness Toward Canada: Can you tell me if you feel very close, somewhat close, not very close, or not at all close to: your neighbourhood, your town/city, your province, Canada, North America, the country your ancestors came from?

Canada Project 1985, 1990, 1995:

How important to you is - Being a Canadian? Very important, fairly important, not very important, not at all important.

Mosaic: How do you feel about the following? - Some people say that Canada should be a melting pot for people coming here from other countries. They say that Canada should be a mosaic, where people are loyal to Canada yet keep many of the customs of their previous countries. I favour the melting pot idea, I favour the mosaic, I have no preference, other, varied.

Biling: What do you think of bilingualism in Canada: Should Canada have two official languages (French and English), one official language (French or English) or should

Canada have no official language? French, Canada should have one official language: English, Canada should have no official language,

American Influence: How serious do you think the following problem is in Canada today? - American influence

Canada Project 1985:

Unity: How serious do you think the following problem is in Canada today? - Lack of Canadian unity

Canada Project 1990:

Unity 1990: What, in your opinion, is the nation's No. 1 problem? National Unity