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The New Fertility Divide—What’s Happening in Canada?

The nation of Canada is something of a mystery to most Americans. The U.S. and Canada share many dimensions of culture, language, heritage, and history. Nevertheless, the two cultures are also significantly different—as any visitor across the border will quickly notice. In addition to the obvious cultural and political differences, demographers now point to another significant distinction—a divide in fertility rates.

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In recent decades, Canada has moved in a generally more liberal direction, while American voters have elected a conservative candidate in five of the last seven presidential elections. In general terms, Canadian culture is more pervasively secularized than that of the U.S.—a factor that explains, at least in part, Canadian acceptance of gay marriage, marijuana, and other liberal causes. In addition to these observations, demographers now point to another significant distinction—a divide in fertility rates.

Writing in the August/September edition of *Policy Review*, Barbara Boyle Torrey and Nicholas Eberstadt argue that significant shifts within Canadian culture have produced a significant decline in fertility rates.

Torrey, visiting scholar at the Population Reference Bureau, and Eberstadt, who holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute, note that the United States and Canada “are more similar to each other than any two other large countries on the planet today.” Nevertheless, the two nations remain “remarkably distinct from one other.” Torrey and Eberstadt argue that the political divide now separating Canada and the United States is eclipsed by demographic factors of even greater importance. The “steadily increasing differentiation of demographic trends” traced in Canada and the United States represent, they argue, a “largely unrecognized divergence” between the two neighboring countries.

“Twenty-five years ago the population profiles of Canada and the United States were similar,” the authors note. “Both were younger than their European allies, and their societies were more heterogeneous. In 1980 their populations had almost the same median age, fertility rates, and immigration rates. In the year since then, small changes in demographic variables have accumulated, ultimately creating two very different countries in North America by the end of the twentieth century.”

Significantly, Torrey and Eberstadt report that Canadians now have half a child fewer than Americans during their life spans. In other words, the Canadian fertility level is approximately 25% lower than that of Americans. Coupled with this is the fact that Canadians live two years longer on average. Thus, the divergence in fertility rates is likely to grow, and the resulting population changes are likely to be exaggerated in Canada—especially as the population ages.

“Changes in patterns of marriage and fertility are the accumulated outcomes of millions of personal decisions by men and women,” Torrey and Eberstadt acknowledge. “When couples, one at a time, make decisions that differ in aggregate from the couples in a neighboring country, it is a reflection of deliberate agency rather than mere chance. That’s why the still-widening demographic gap that has opened up between Canada and the U.S. says even more about the two societies and their futures than public or policy differences on any single issue.”

The facts speak for themselves. Canadians have 25% fewer children than Americans. This is all the more remarkable given the fact that Canadians have had more children than Americans in previous generations. As recently as 1945, Canadian women had a half child more than American women. In the years since, total fertility rates in both nations have gone down, but the two neighbors have switched places in terms of a fertility advantage.

Several related demographic factors are of interest. On average, Americans have babies earlier than Canadians and are more likely to marry. At the same time, Canadians are less likely to divorce. The marriage rate differential goes a long way towards explaining the divergence in fertility rates. At present, the Canadian marriage rate is only 60% of the U.S. rate. Canadians are also more likely to enter into "common law" marriages that are less likely to produce children.

What explains changes in fertility rates? Torrey and Eberstadt suggest three major hypotheses. First, some suggest a "Family Economics" hypothesis. Proponents of this theory argue that "the opportunity cost of having children increases directly with women's education and income." In other words, fertility rates are likely to fall as women become better educated and more employable. A "Relative Income" hypothesis suggests that "large birth cohorts will have more trouble reaching their expected income goals than smaller cohorts." A smaller number of workers would presumably lead to higher income rates. Third, a "Role Incomparability" hypothesis posits that "the ability of women to combine childbirth and work is a strong determinant of how many children they will eventually have."

As Torrey and Eberstadt observe, these hypotheses are not necessarily incompatible. Couples and individuals may combine or modify these factors in making their own decisions concerning reproduction.

The most interesting part of Torrey and Eberstadt's article focuses on worldview issues rather than economics. Well into their analysis, the authors raise the role of values and religion in explaining the fertility divide.

"The role of values in explaining social trends such as fertility is harder to quantify than personal income or government services," they affirm. "But changing values may still hold insights that the better-quantified variables cannot. A number of studies have documented differences in some core values between Canada and the United States." Torrey and Eberstadt believe that these divergences in values go a long way toward explaining the differential in birth rates.

The role of the man in the family turns out to be an important predictor of fertility rates. Torrey and Eberstadt report that a recent survey asked people in Canada and the U.S. whether they agreed that, "The father of the family must be master in his own house." Those who answered in the affirmative were more likely to report higher birth rates. The segment of the population that expressed agreement with a strong role of the father in the family "was highly correlated with total fertility rates across Canadian provinces and U.S. regions in 2000," the authors document. Since Americans were more likely to respond with an affirmation of a strong male role in the family, they were also more likely to report higher rates of fertility.

Torrey and Eberstadt then focus on the importance of religion as a demographic variable. They note, "People who are actively religious tend to marry more and stay together longer. To the extent that time spent married during reproductive years increases fertility, then religion would be a positive factor in fertility rates." In Canada, women who reported weekly church attendance were 46% more likely to have a third child than women who did not. Americans reported a higher level of church attendance and produced a higher level of fertility.

The process of secularization has been accelerated in Canada, especially over the last three decades. This factor seems to play a part in explaining the decrease in Canadian birth rates.

But Torrey and Eberstadt point to another related factor. "Religiosity, as defined by importance of God and church attendance, is also significant for fertility because it is the most powerful predictor of attitudes toward abortions," they note. Since 1980, the Canadian abortion rate has been rising while the American rate has been falling.

In conclusion, the authors explain that "changing values in the U.S. and Canada may be contributing to the fertility divergence." Since Americans are more likely to affirm a strong role of men in the family and more frequent church attendance, we can expect a higher level of fertility. At the same time, these same factors also serve to predict a lower level of abortion. On the other hand, Canada's higher abortion rate "may be the result of changes in values," which are now firmly established in Canadian culture.

In the end, worldview issues must surely play the determinative role in the reproductive decisions made by couples. A decline in national fertility rates must surely be fundamentally related to basic values and commitments.

One key insight from Torrey and Eberstadt's study is crucial—when a society increasingly embraces a secularized worldview (and all that goes with it, including acceptance of abortion), fertility rates understandably fall. The Christian worldview—a worldview that understands children to be gifts from God and affirms parenthood—represents a cognitive counter-culture in the midst of an increasingly secularized society. We are indebted to Torrey and Eberstadt for documenting this truth.

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