



Canada's Future (Might Be) Conservative: A Look at Falling Birth Rates Among Progressives

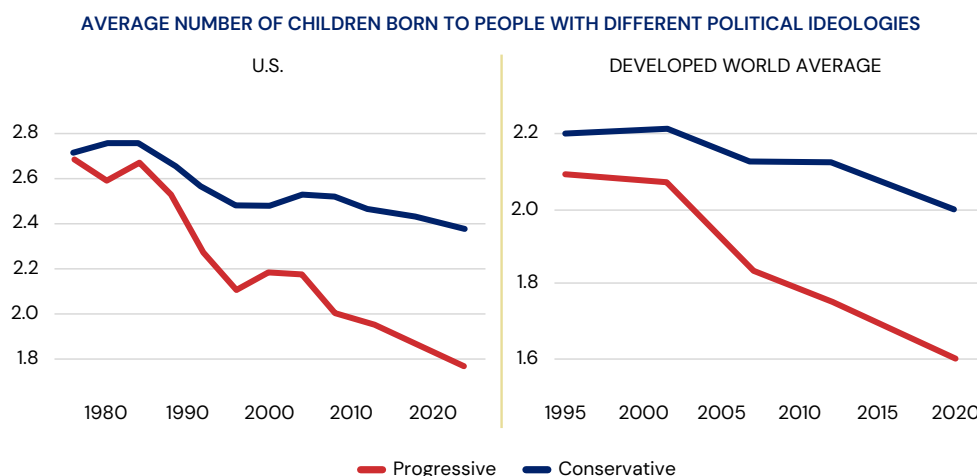
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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

Two graphs in recent weeks have highlighted the intersection of demographics and the party politics. The first shows that in both the United States and across the developed world, birth rates are falling¹ much faster among progressives than among conservatives. This isn't a small or marginal difference. The data show that progressive households are increasingly postponing or forgoing children altogether, while conservative households are having children at rates closer to the replacement birth rate. Over time, these differences compound and could lead to deep consequences for culture, economics, and politics.

Birth Rates Are Falling More Steeply Among Progressives Than Conservatives



Birth rates calculated for all adults aged 35+

Source: FT analysis of the U.S. General Social Survey and World Values Survey, based on prior work by Fieder et al (2018)
<https://www.ft.com/content/a08ca4a6-d86e-41dc-9327-da0f2c418c98>

The second graph digs into values in the United States by asking² young Americans how they define success, broken down by gender and vote choice in the 2024 presidential election.

The divide is stark. Among young men who voted for Donald Trump, “having children” was ranked as the most important personal definition of success. For young women who voted Trump, children still ranked fairly high, in sixth place. But for men who voted for Kamala Harris, children were a distant tenth priority, and for Harris-supporting young women, children came in twelfth out of thirteen possible measures of success.

The signal is clear: there is a widening values gap on the role of family and children in shaping a meaningful life.

¹ John Burn-Murdoch, “Why progressives should care about falling birth rates,” *Financial Times*, August 29, 2025.
<https://www.ft.com/content/a08ca4a6-d86e-41dc-9327-da0f2c418c98>.

² Marc Trussler and Stephanie Perry, “Poll: Gen Z’s gender divide reaches beyond politics and into its views on marriage, children and success,” *NBC News*, September 8, 2025,
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-gen-zs-gender-divide-reaches-politics-views-marriage-children-suc-rcna229255>.


Which of the Following Is Important to Your Personal Definition of Success?

RESULTS AMONG RESPONDENTS AGES 18-29.
EACH RESPONDENT WAS ABLE TO PICK THREE CHOICES OUT OF 13 OPTIONS.

Rank	Female, voted for Harris	Male, voted for Harris	Female, voted for Trump	Male, voted for Trump
1	Having a job or career you find fulfilling	Having a job or career you find fulfilling	Achieving financial independence	Having children
2	Having enough money to do the things you want to do	Having enough money to do the things you want to do	Having a job or career you find fulfilling	Achieving financial independence
3	Having emotional stability	Using your talents and resources to help others	Owning your own home	Having a job or career you find fulfilling
4	Using your talents and resources to help others	Having emotional stability	Being spiritually grounded	Being married
5	Achieving financial independence	Achieving financial independence	Having enough money to do the things you want to do	Having enough money to do the things you want to do
6	Having no debt	Making your family or community proud	Having children	Owning your own home
7	Owning your own home	Owning your own home	Having no debt	Being spiritually grounded
8	Making your family or community proud	Having no debt	Using your talents and resources to help others	Making your family or community proud
9	Being spiritually grounded	Being married	Being married	Having no debt
10	Being able to retire early	Having children	Having emotional stability	Using your talents and resources to help others
11	Being married	Being spiritually grounded	Making your family or community proud	Being able to retire early
12	Having children	Being able to retire early	Being able to retire early	Having emotional stability
13	Fame and influence	Fame and influence	Fame and influence	Fame and influence

Notes: The poll was conducted Aug. 13-Sept. 1 and surveyed 2,970 adults ages 18-29 nationwide online.

Source: NBC News Decision Desk Poll. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-gen-zs-gender-divide-reaches-politics-views-marriage-children-suc-rcna229255>



These American findings matter because they point to more than just a difference in attitudes toward children. They reflect a deeper divide in how people are structuring their lives. If your definition of success is centred on family, you are likely to make decisions around work, housing, and community that support that goal. If success is defined instead by financial independence, travel, or creative fulfillment, then family may naturally take a backseat. The fact that these priorities split so sharply along partisan lines suggests that politics in the United States has become intertwined not just with what people believe, but with how they choose to live.

Canada has long assumed it is insulated from such cultural polarization, but as the data below show, we may be on a similar trajectory with long-term political consequences.

The Canadian Data

Ideally, we'd have individual-level demographic data for every Canadian that could be matched directly with political preferences. That would allow us to measure, conclusively, how progressive and conservative Canadians differ in their choices around marriage, children, and family life. Of course, no such dataset exists. Instead, a close proxy we can use is riding-level data. While not perfect, it still gives us valuable insight into the kinds of households that make up the ridings most strongly aligned with each political party.

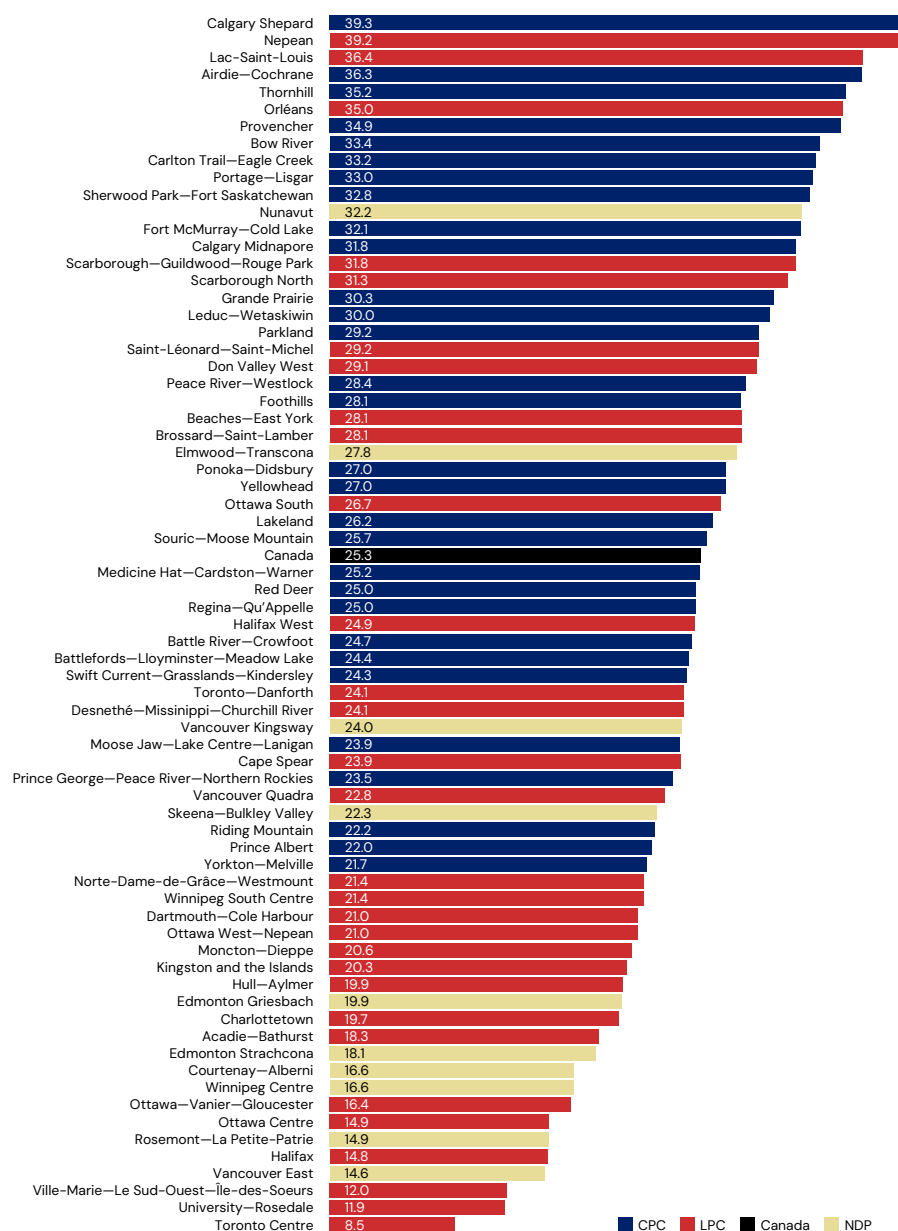
To get a broad sense of how progressives and conservatives differ, I looked at the most Liberal, Conservative, and NDP ridings in the 2025 federal election. Specifically, I pulled the 30 ridings with the highest Conservative vote share, the 30 with the highest Liberal vote share, and the 10 with the highest NDP vote share. Then, for each of these ridings, I looked at three simple but powerful measures:

1. The percentage of households made up of couples with children.
2. The average number of children per household with children.
3. The share of the overall population that is under 18.

Couples with Children as a Share of Riding

The first graph looks at the share of each riding's households that consist of a couple with children. This is the dominant family type with children in Canada, even though it excludes other types of households like single-parent or multi-generational households. Those latter categories make up very small shares of the population and including them would not meaningfully change the results.

Couple with Children as a Share of Riding

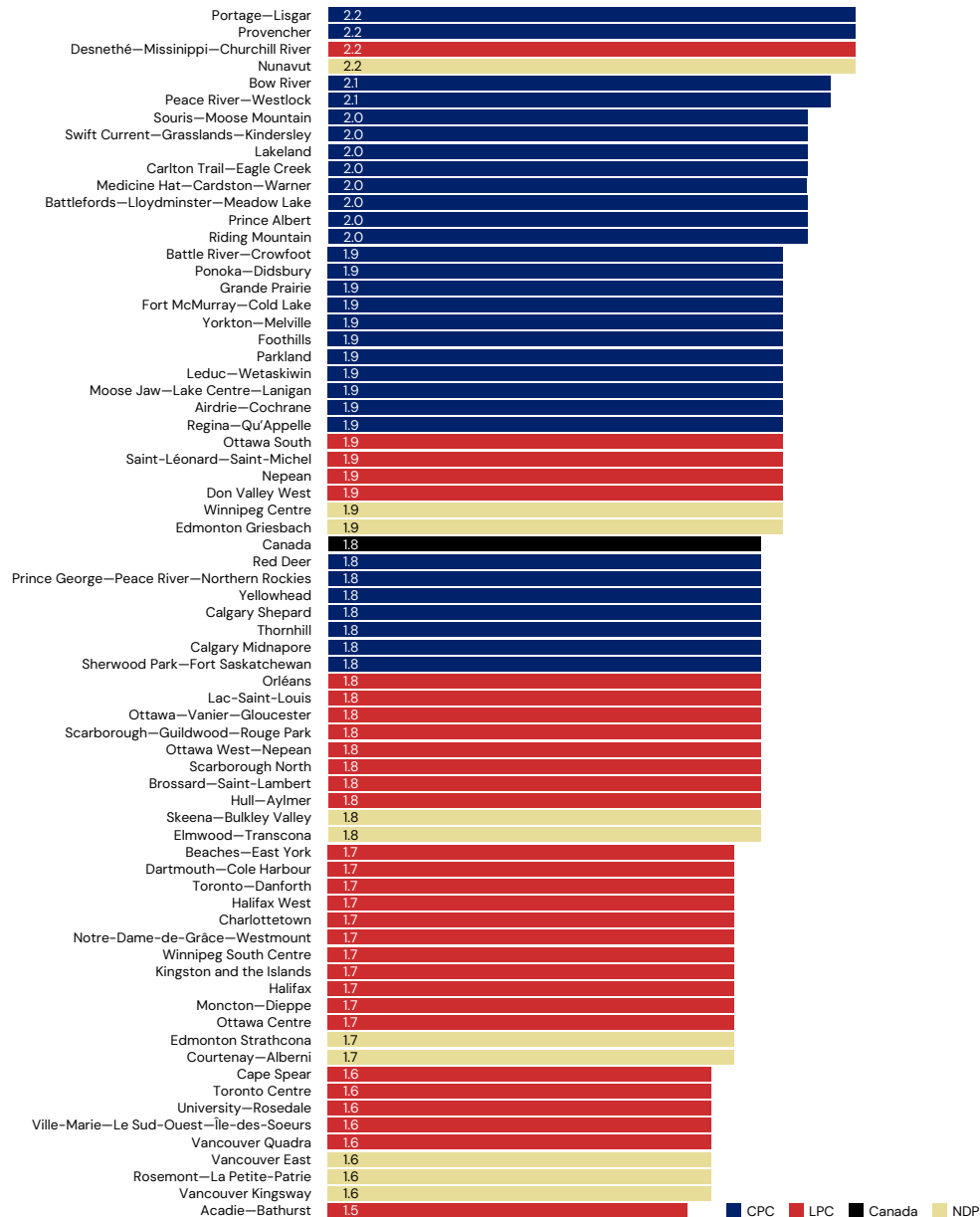


The results are striking. Conservative ridings have a much higher share of couples with children compared to Liberal or NDP ridings. Of the 30 most Conservative ridings, nearly two-thirds are above the national average. By contrast, only about one-third of the Liberal ridings are above the average, and among NDP ridings, just two of the ten. Put simply: if you walk into a random household in a Conservative riding, you are significantly more likely to find a couple raising children than if you walk into a household in a progressive riding.

Average Number of Children per Household

The second graph adds another layer by looking not just at whether households have children, but how many. Here, the divide is even clearer. Among the 30 Conservative ridings, not a single one falls below the national average for the number of children per household. Every Conservative riding examined is either at or above average. Among Liberal ridings, by contrast, only about 13 percent exceed the national average. For the NDP ridings, it's 30 percent.

Average Number of Children per Household with Children

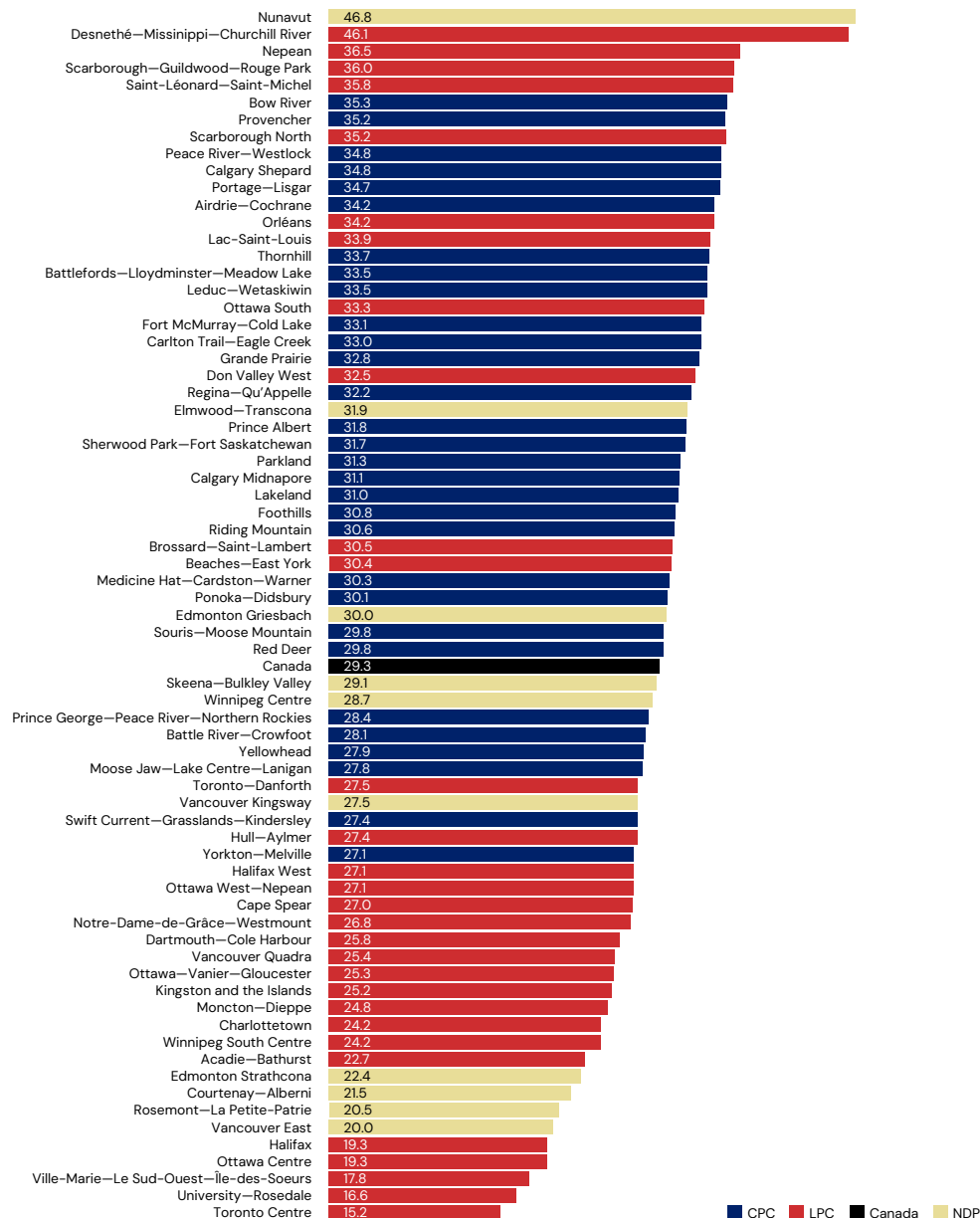


This matters because it shows that Conservative ridings are not only more likely to have families with children, but that those families tend to be larger. More children per household translates into a younger age structure, different demands on schools and services, and a very different cultural outlook compared to places where households are smaller and children are fewer.

Children as a Share of the Population

Finally, the third graph looks at the share of the total population made up of children. Once again, the pattern is unmistakable. Conservative ridings are home to significantly larger proportions of children, while Liberal and NDP ridings lag behind. Outside of a handful of urban or regional outliers, this pattern holds across the board.

Children as Share of Population Riding



Taken together, these three measures paint a consistent picture: Conservative ridings in Canada have more couples raising children, more children per household, and a higher share of the population under 18. Progressive ridings, by contrast, are older, smaller, and less focused on children as part of household life.

Why the Divide?

There are many reasons progressives in Canada may be having fewer children than their conservative counterparts. The graphs above show this is not just anecdotal but structural, baked into the demographics of different ridings. And while part of this trend reflects a broader global phenomenon, some of the drivers may be uniquely Canadian.

Education and Family Formation

One of the most consistent findings in demography is that higher levels of education are associated³ with delayed family formation. Progressive ridings in Canada tend to be more educated, which means longer years spent in school, delayed entry into the workforce, and later milestones like marriage and childbearing. Among the most Liberal ridings, 38 percent of adults have a bachelor's degree or higher. For most NDP ridings, it's 26 percent. Among Conservative ridings, just 17 percent.

This difference matters. Someone pursuing a graduate degree in a downtown Toronto riding may not begin a career until their late twenties, while their counterpart in a trades-heavy Conservative riding might start earning a full-time income by age 20 or 21. That five-to-ten year head start makes a profound difference for when families are formed. By the time progressives are ready to think about children, their conservative peers may already have two.

These diverging timelines don't just affect when families are formed; they shape how entire communities look and feel. In a Conservative riding, it's common to see young adults married with children before 25, often buying starter homes and settling into careers. In a progressive riding, by contrast, many young adults are still in school at that age, living in rental apartments, and prioritizing career advancement before even considering family. Over the span of a decade, those differences accumulate into two very different social realities, which then feed back into the politics of each community.

Housing Costs and Family Size

Housing affordability is another⁴ key factor. It is no coincidence that the ridings with the highest housing costs are also the ridings with the fewest children. Among the most Liberal ridings, 24 percent of households spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing. For the most NDP ridings, it's 22 percent. For Conservative ridings, the figure drops to 17 percent.

When households are devoting a quarter or more of their income just to keep a roof over their heads, there is little left for the added costs of raising children. Families in Conservative ridings, by contrast, are more likely to live in single-detached homes with lower price-to-income ratios, making larger families financially feasible. In practical terms, a household in rural Saskatchewan can afford space for three children while a household in downtown Vancouver or Toronto struggles to afford even one.

³ Stefano Cantalini, "Does education affect the timing or probability of family formation?: An analysis of educational attainment and first union in Italy," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 49 (2017): 1–10.

⁴ William A.V. Clark, "Do women delay family formation in expensive housing markets?," *Demogr Res.* 27, no. 1 (2012): 1–24.

Marriage and Cultural Norms

Cultural attitudes toward marriage and family formation are also playing a role. Data show that Conservative ridings have a higher proportion of married adults: 51 percent, compared to 41 percent in the most Liberal ridings and just 36 percent in the NDP ridings.

The lower marriage rates in progressive ridings reflect a broader cultural shift. In urban, progressive centres, the emphasis has shifted toward financial independence, individual self-fulfillment, and career achievement. Marriage and children are no longer seen as default life milestones, but rather optional, sometimes even financially burdensome, commitments.

Types of Jobs and Economic Security

The type of work people do also shapes family decisions. In Conservative ridings, employment is more heavily concentrated in trades and natural resource sectors, which often provide stable, well-paid work that can support family life. By contrast, Liberal and NDP ridings have higher concentrations of workers in sales and service jobs, or in arts and culture. These roles are more likely to be precarious, part-time, or low-paid.

For younger workers in progressive ridings, that often means delaying marriage and children until greater⁵ financial security is achieved — a milestone that may never fully arrive. By contrast, a 24-year-old electrician in Alberta earning six figures can start a family without fear of financial ruin.

Climate Anxiety and Ethical Concerns

Finally, there is a distinctly progressive factor: climate anxiety. Recent Angus Reid polling⁶ from early September showed that 18 percent of voters list the environment or climate change as their top issue. But the breakdown is even more telling: 31 percent of 2025 Liberal voters and 37 percent of NDP voters rank climate as their top issue, compared to just 2 percent of Conservative voters.

This matters because climate anxiety is increasingly cited⁷ by younger progressives as a reason to delay or avoid having children. Ethical debates about overpopulation, resource depletion, and the morality of bringing children into a warming world disproportionately affect progressives.

⁵ Jeffrey Dew and Joseph Price, "Beyond Employment and Income: The Association Between Young Adults' Finances and Marital Timing," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 32 (2011): 424–436.

⁶ Angus Reid Institute, *Federal Poll Results, September 5, 2025*, https://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025.09.05_fed_poli_tables.pdf

⁷ Grégoire Zimmermann, Joëlle Darwiche, Jean-Philippe Antonietti, Nadine Messerli-Bürgy, Stijn Van Petegem, Bénédicte Mouton, and Gaëlle Venard, "'Bringing Children in a Burning World?' The Role of Climate Anxiety and Threat Perceptions in Childbearing Motivations of Emerging Adults in Switzerland," *Emerging Adulthood* 12, no. 5 (2024).

Key Takeaways

I am a Liberal, and on the progressive side of the big Liberal tent at that, and this should be a warning alarm for all left-of-centre voters in Canada. Yes, children do not automatically inherit their parents' political identities, but demography still matters. If conservatives are consistently raising more children than progressives, that imbalance compounds over time.

Each new generation will disproportionately emerge from households where conservative cultural norms around family, marriage, and childbearing are stronger. That doesn't guarantee partisan loyalty, but it does mean the conservative worldview has a demographic head start.

The implications extend far beyond party politics. Canadian society itself could become more polarized along family lines. We have already seen this dynamic play out in the United States, where politics has become tribal to the point that Democrats and Republicans often live fundamentally different lives, with distinct communities, values, and even cultural tastes.

Canada has long prided itself on being more unified, less divided than our southern neighbour. But the data suggest we may be heading down a similar path.

Anyone who has travelled widely across Canada can see this divide firsthand. The most Conservative ridings in rural Alberta and Saskatchewan look and feel worlds apart from the most progressive ridings in downtown Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. It's not just about yard signs or partisan loyalties. The very fundamentals of life differ. The diversity of people, the food, the sounds and smells of daily life, and the way neighbours interact all feel distinct.

I spent a number of years living in the United States, and people there often asked me: how different is Canada, really, from America? The thought that has recently solidified in my mind is this: despite our national self-image, progressive Canada has more in common with progressive America than it does with conservative Canada. Downtown Toronto is a lot more like downtown Chicago than it is like Cold Lake, Alberta. And Cold Lake is a lot more like Roberts County, Texas, than it is like Downtown Toronto (except for the weather).

The statistics back this up. From family formation to education levels, from housing affordability to marriage rates to occupational structure, progressive and conservative ridings in Canada are drifting further apart. Each of these divides on its own may seem small, but when added together, they create two increasingly distinct societies living under one flag. It is hard to find a Statistics Canada variable that doesn't show a sharp divergence between the most progressive ridings and the most conservative ones. That divergence is cultural as much as it is political, and it carries risks.

For Canada, the danger is that this growing separation undermines national cohesion. If progressives and conservatives not only disagree about policy but also live fundamentally different lives, with different assumptions about what it means to be successful, stable, or fulfilled, then the ability to find common ground weakens. Politics becomes less about persuasion and compromise and more about defending tribal identities. In that environment, trust in institutions erodes, and the incentive to view opponents as enemies grows.

This is why the demographic divide around children is not just a curiosity but a profound challenge for Canada's future. If left unaddressed, it will shape our politics, our culture, and our sense of shared nationhood for decades to come.

For progressives, the answer for us cannot simply be to lament the trend. It must be to tackle the structural barriers that make family formation harder for younger generations. That means left-of-centre governments across the country should make it a priority to expand access to affordable childcare, lower housing and education costs, strengthen the job market for young workers, and take real action on climate change.

By addressing these pressures head-on, progressives can create the conditions where raising a family is not only possible but appealing.

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