

The Baby Boomer Political Agenda

By Stephen F. Barnes, Ph.D.

The idea that Baby Boomers--many of whom grew up in an era of flower power, Woodstock, Civil Rights Movement, environmental justice, and “recreational” drugs--would coalesce into a large and demanding political interest group has not yet materialized. Despite what you might have read or seen on television, even during the height of the Vietnam War protests, almost three-fourths of Boomers were not politically active in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact only 15 percent actually participated in political protests.

Fast forward to 2009, there is no Boomer political consciousness today despite the best efforts of AARP to create one among the older electorate. A 2007 national survey by MetLife revealed leading edge Boomers (born 1946–1955) remain pretty traditional, a lot like their parents in terms of values and lifestyle—educated, married, 2.4 children, in good health, mostly politically conservative, vote regularly. It is true Democrats have a greater party identification with adults at the very youngest voting age and with Baby Boomers, particularly those in their late 50s. Republicans do relatively better with Generation Xers in their late 30s and early 40s, and with “seniors” in their late 60s and beyond.

But digging a little deeper, obviously not all Boomers are the same. According to a 2006 market research study, the generation appears segmented into five identifiable groups based on attitudes, behaviors, and demographics. Here are the groups and a little about each.

- Status Seekers (26 percent) - materialistic
- Traditionalists (23 percent) – conservative political, social, and economic views; smart consumers interested in value, trust, and variety; nearly half go out of their way to “buy American”
- Blue Collar Skeptics (18 percent) – lower end of income scale, distrust big business, stressed about time and money
- Activists (17 percent) – liberal politically, donate a significant amount of time and money to charity, concerned about the environment, brand loyal (about one third are also “green” consumers)
- Achievers (16 percent) – focused on success and wealth, heavy users of new technology

Despite the size of the Baby Boom generation, about 78 million strong, we have not yet seen large voting blocks around age-related or life stage issues. For the time being, at

least, all “politics are local.” One interesting exception to the rule is disenchantment with the two-party system. In a 2004 AARP survey, 56 percent of Boomers said the country needs a new, third political party. Then again, maybe everyone feels that way.

Another interesting phenomenon, with obvious political potential, is the green consumer movement, estimated to engage about 40 million Baby Boomers. Socially conscious values now drive the buying behaviors of more than half of all Boomers, playing out in terms of brand loyalty (i.e., those perceived as environmentally safe) advertising preferences (truthful, information-based messages), and a high purchasing premium on good customer service and locally produced goods.

But many political observers remain convinced Boomers can be united and ignited with the right issue. Clearly, there are some large ones on the horizon—runaway health care system, unemployment and under-employment, immigration reform, climate change, corporate greed, insolvent Social Security system. Perhaps the crouching tiger is not a yet-to-be-discovered *single* political issue but a question of value orientation. Nearly three fourths of all Baby Boomers believe deeply they have a shared responsibility to make the world a better place. And, no previous generation has been so well positioned to make such a profound difference. The current President of the United States, and the First Lady, are Baby Boomers. So were George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. More than 60 percent of the nation’s 56 governors are Baby Boomers. A substantial majority the House of Representatives (n=219), U.S. Senate (n=55), and state houses across the land are Boomers. The “halls of power” have never been more boomerized. But will this trigger a cycle of political reform, renewal, and citizen engagement?

Restating the question slightly, “Is there a Baby Boomer political agenda?” The answer is emphatically, “No—not yet!”

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