

# Chasing the next generations

## The 2008 election could mark a transition from the baby boomers

BY ANN FISHMAN AND JAMES STROCK

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Much of the attention in the preliminary phases of the 2008 national campaign has focused on a possible first African-American president (Barack Obama), woman president (Hillary Rodham Clinton) or Mormon president (Mitt Romney). But it well may be that generational change - rather than racial, gender or religious identity - will be a deciding factor in the race.

The political climate of the past two decades - marked by extended polarization - has been part and parcel of the Baby Boom generation. It is often called the Me Generation for its focus on one's own values. Boomers are the huge wave of children born in the aftermath of World War II.

Their parents were at once eager to protect them from the kinds of struggles they had endured in the Depression and World War II, while preparing them for unprecedented competition both at school and in the workplace. Boomers such as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, John Kerry, Newt Gingrich and George W. Bush have tended to place importance on their own values and life experience, with little room for compromise.

Most of the leading 2008 candidates are also boomers. But one top-tier candidate in each major party steps forward with differing generational roots.

Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona hails from what historians Neil Howe and William Strauss call the Silent Generation, born between 1925 and 1942. The Silents, wedged between the World War II Greatest Generation and the Baby Boom generation, have not produced a president. McCain embodies the honesty, the dutifulness and the courage of his generation - one that ignited the civil rights and the women's movements. At his best, McCain could be a bridge for the values of the World War II Greatest Generation to be rediscovered in our time.

Obama represents the transition from the Baby Boom to Generation X. In declaring his exploratory campaign, he spoke of a post-boomer sensibility, of moving beyond the divisions exacerbated by undue self-focus.

"A change in our politics can only come from you," he said. "Engaged citizens working together can accomplish extraordinary things."

Obama, like other Xers, born between 1961 and 1981, grew up after the great changes

of the 1960s. Xers might well pride themselves on being the first generation able to elect a minority member or a woman as president.

Yet, the Xers, whose early years sometimes included fending for themselves as "latchkey children," are often skeptical, if not cynical, about the realities behind great claims and grand schemes. They tend to be media savvy and quick to spot manipulation.

Will that generation's cynicism focus on Obama? As one Xer told us, "I wouldn't let a doctor with two years of experience do a brain operation or heart surgery, but this man, with just two years of national experience, wants to be the most powerful man in the world." Will Obama's celebrity and the excitement he engenders create its own resistance among some Xers?

Xers will make extensive use of the Internet to vet candidates and then chat with each other over blogs and share information in rapid, viral streams. Their receptivity to new media and approaches and their rejection of "spin" mean that Xers could shake up the best-laid plans of campaigns too reliant on recent election experiences.

The electoral calculus is tantalizing. In 2008 Xers, with some help from the next younger generation, Generation Y, born between 1982 and 2000, could numerically outvote all older generations combined. Xers and still younger Ys, with their lack of unwavering affinity for the Democrats and Republicans, may constitute a decisive swing vote.

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