



The President of Generation X

By Sudha David-Wilp

President Obama's visit to Berlin brings back memories of a campaign aimed at unifying a divided America. More than a decade later, the United States is more polarized than ever. But political rancor is not just due to the split between conservatives and liberals or rural vs. urban folk, demographic fault lines also play a role.

Enter Robert Francis O'Rourke, otherwise known as Beto, who just launched his 2020 campaign for the White House. This is not a vote for the former Congressman - there is no platform to endorse. But by virtue of his age, he may act as a balm for America's current divisiveness. Beto is a Generation X prototype, who could be a bridge between turn-back-the-clock Babyboomers and Millennial revolutionaries.

O'Rourke was a two-term Congressman from El Paso, Texas who stepped back in 2018 to run unsuccessfully against Republican firebrand Ted Cruz for his Senate seat. Although he lost, he gave Cruz a run for his money in red state Texas. He stood out for his fundraising prowess and his impromptu speaking style. Beto gained national attention for hauling in a record-breaking \$80 million for his senate race and his town-hall defense of football player Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem went viral.

These traits are already helping him in his bid for the presidency. After announcing, he received \$6.1 million in first-day donations, beating Bernie Sanders who had led the pack with \$5.9 million. He also has a media following that is reminiscent of President Trump's coverage on the campaign trail. It is still early days, thus many of these strengths can

fade as quickly as a Snapchat post and voters might get turned off by his sensitive-guy but vain style. But because he came of age in the 1980s and 90s, Beto and other centrist lawmakers who entered Congress during the midterms could be the glue for the tectonic shifts taking place in the United States.

Generation X is sandwiched between the Babyboomers born after World War II until the mid-60s and the Millennials who were born during the Reagan era into the unipolar moment after the fall of the Wall. Born in 1972, Beto and his cohort had a childhood without terrorism and talking heads on cable news. The American dream was still alive, and the country was a shining city upon a hill for many of our alliance partners. Fear limited itself to nuclear war with the Soviets. This experience is not a blanket statement for everyone in this demographic but was the prevailing culture put forth by Hollywood in John



Transatlantic Take

Hughes' hits such as the Breakfast Club or Ferris Bueller's Day Off. But underneath the high school revelry and soul-searching, there was a nagging feeling that America was undergoing fundamental change.

Gen Xer's witnessed increased divorce rates, the advent of Aids, and Black Monday (the first stock market crash since the War). The culture wars of the 1990s over abortion, gay marriage, identity, and political correctness emerged during college or first forays in the workplace. And infotainment slowly infiltrated the airwaves. Although discussed, it didn't seem possible that the generation, which played with Commodore 64s in the basement and mastered dialup internet, or its kids wouldn't earn as much as their parents.

Young adults of this age were understandably cynical and disaffected. Gen X came to be known as the slacker generation, escaping into Kurt Cobain music and indie films. Although civics class was offered in school, nobody smart went into politics because of the specter of Watergate, followed by Iran Contra and the Clarence Thomas hearings. Instead, Babyboomers held on to the levers of power, which is still evident today. President Trump wishes to restore a bygone America and the Senate is full of septuagenarians and octogenarians as showcased during the Kavanaugh hearings last summer. Millennials are already at the barricades, eager to take on the torch. But instead of trying to fix what's wrong, many are enamored with utopian manifestos. They can't be blamed, because their reality has been defined by the financial crisis and never-ending wars.

According to Pew Research, Boomers make up approximately 28% of the electorate followed by Gen X at 25% and the Millennials at 27%. A candidate with knowledge of what worked in the past with ideas for the future could bring some unity between the polarized factions in America today. The demographics in the middle should be well positioned to bridge the generational gap in America.

There are other presidential candidates in their late 1930's to early 1950s, but none of them comes

close to capturing the Gen X ethos like Beto O'Rourke. He checks all the boxes: skateboarder, band member, and postgrad job hopper before his life as an elected official. He still skateboards, and his work in technology during the dotcom wave seems to have made him a natural on social media today. He also hasn't given up on bipartisanship.

A caricature of a Gen Xer is not enough to win the Democratic nomination let alone the White House. The question is whether Beto has policy ideas that connect enduring values of America's past generations, such as opportunity, equality, and openness with today's challenges. Climate change, automation, and migration are just some of the issues that have been creeping up at a slow burn but now being painfully felt by young and old in America.

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