

Whether Clinton or Trump, Baby Boomers will reclaim White House next year



Rick Hampson, USA TODAY

5:05 p.m. EDT May 22, 2016



(Photo: Getty Images)

Ten years ago, a writer named [Barack Obama](#) recalled his fatigue with Baby Boomer politics, as epitomized by the battles in the 1990s between [President Bill Clinton](#) and House Speaker [Newt Gingrich](#), and the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections:

"I sometimes felt," he wrote in *The Audacity of Hope*, "as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation — a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago — played out on the national stage."

Two years later, Obama personally ended a 16-year Boomer lock on the presidency. His campaign emphasis on consensus, dialogue and pragmatism seemed to rebuke the Boomer tendencies personified by his predecessors, Clinton and [George W. Bush](#).

STORY FROM HONDA

[Go faster than you've gone before in a Honda Indycar in 360-degrees](#)

(<http://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/sponsor-story/honda-vr-360/>)

The San Jose Mercury News declared "the end of the baby boomer presidency." [Andrew Sullivan](#), a columnist two years Obama's junior, voiced hope that the new president would move "past the debilitating, self-perpetuating family quarrel of the Baby Boom generation that has long engulfed us."

Next January, however, Obama will almost certainly turn the White House back to [Donald Trump](#) (b. 1946) or [Hillary Clinton](#) (1947), two very different members of the very same generation.

When it comes to political "psychodrama," [Boomers](#) just won't get off the stage.

"It's endless," says [Morley Winograd](#), co-author of *Millennial Momentum: How a New Generation Is Remaking America*. "Everybody wants to see the curtain come down." Amen, says Jayne Clarkson, a 26-year-old New York City production assistant: "I feel like it's time for someone else to have a chance."

Even Boomers are sick of Boomers. Eight years ago, says veteran *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist [Bill McClellan](#), "it seemed the country was done with us. ... Why can't we just go away?"

The Baby Boom, which officially began Jan. 1, 1946, was "the single greatest demographic event in U.S. history," according to Steven Gillon, the historian who wrote *Boomer Nation*. The generation's 77 million members "wrapped our culture around itself like no generation before or since."

The Boomers were followed by Generation X, generally defined as those born from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, and the Millennials, born between the early '80s and around 2000.

Resentment of Boomers spans these successor generations. John Della Volpe is polling director at [Harvard's Institute of Politics](#): "Half of Millennials believe the American dream is dead. And who killed it? Their parents" — Boomers, whose stewardship of Congress, Wall Street and the news media is also blamed for the decline in trust in those institutions.

Unless [Bernie Sanders](#) — born before Pearl Harbor as part of the "Silent Generation" (one that has yet to produce a president) — upsets Clinton, a Boomer will be president. If he/she wins a second term, it would end 32 years after Bill Clinton became the first Boomer president.

Whether this represents a continuation of Boomer hegemony or a return to it depends on whether you view Obama (b. 1961) as Boomer or Xer.

Demographers, who note birth rates rose to 1964, tend to view '61 babies as Boomers; historians and sociologists, focused on culture, generally call them Xers. They say if you can't remember the [Kennedy assassination](#), you're at most a "shadow boomer" or "cusper."

Obama is clearly an Xer in spirit, if nothing else. In his 2008 race against Clinton, for example, he accused her of "fighting some of the same fights since the '60s."

A generation 'at war with itself'

Does the candidates' generation suggest traits that could shape a presidency?

Possibly the Boomer generation's most striking characteristic is its own internal division. "It was always at war with itself," says Gillon, "and the cultural civil war of the '60s is still playing out in the presidential election."

That means more talk about social issues, which tend to defy compromise and make people mad. The irony is that Boomers, about 10,000 of whom turn 70 each day, are affected by other issues — the shortfall in retirement savings, the rising incidence of Alzheimer's — that could get lost in the shuffle, says [Ken Dychtwald](#), an expert on generational change.

He sees in Trump's promise not to touch Social Security the candidate's attention to the sensitivities of fellow Boomers, and one reason why Trump prevailed over those who touted generational change but also promoted entitlement reform. For most voters, a candidate's generation is secondary or tertiary.

Every generation has all sorts of different traits and tendencies. But those who look at the two leading presidential candidates through a generational lens see classic boomer characteristics, even though neither fought in Vietnam or attended [Woodstock](#).

Clinton personifies female Boomers, whom Dychtwald calls "the most educated, powerful, accomplished, complex, outspoken and demanding women in history." A 1964 GOP "Goldwater girl" who became a Vietnam protester and feminist, Clinton also epitomizes the generation's extreme shifts.

Trump represents boomer egocentrism, says Dychtwald: "He makes his own rules. He wants to impress." He's materialistic, brash and confident — classic boomer traits, despite the popular image of Boomers as all about peace and love.

Neil Howe, a prominent generational theorist, agrees: "Trump's ego strength — 'I can fill a stadium!' — that's all Boomer."

Howe, co-author of *The Fourth Turning*, says Boomers have always been better at tearing things down than building them up, and this year the Republican primary electorate "wanted a wrecking ball. Trump is perfect if you believe the system is so bad it shouldn't tweaked or patched."

'This is our time'

For Gen X, the election cycle started out hopefully. Although Boomers Clinton and [Jeb Bush](#) (b. 1953) were the early Democratic and Republican front runners, the GOP field included six candidates born after Obama. Four were unquestionably Xers — [Scott Walker](#) (b. 1967), [Ted Cruz](#) (1970) and [Bobby Jindal](#) and [Marco Rubio](#) (1971).

Rubio, who would have been the third youngest president, played the generation card. He released a web ad, *This Election is a Generational Choice*; derided opponents' ideas as not just wrong but "outdated;" and used the phrase "21st century" at every turn — seven times in the Nov. 10 debate in Milwaukee.

Cruz also boarded the bandwagon, saying, "Gen-Xers, this is our time!"

(The boomers have not talked much about their generational affiliations, although Clinton admitted in one debate that "I come from the '60s, a long time ago.")

In the end, though, the young Republicans — including [Chris Christie](#) (b. 1962) and [Rand Paul](#) (1963) — lost to a man who was born less than six months after the boomer era began; who was the only major GOP candidate born before 1950; and who talked not so much about creating the future as recapturing past greatness.

"My generation just keeps dropping the ball," says Michael A. Smith, a Gen Xer who teaches at [Emporia State University](#) in Kansas.

Xer candidates looked to Millennials, because this is the first presidential election in which people 18 to 29 account for roughly the same share of eligible voters as Baby Boomers. But Boomers vote. In the last presidential election, 72% of people 65 and older cast ballots, compared to 45% of those 18 to 29.

Now, the survivors are Trump, 69, who'd be the oldest person to be first elected president; Clinton, 68, who'd be second oldest (behind [Ronald Reagan](#)); and Sanders, 74, who with his talk of revolution is, Dychtwald observes, "behaving most like a Boomer" and enjoys the biggest following among the youngest voters.

And it's possible the Boomers' reign is nowhere near over. Given their vast numbers, increased longevity and boundless self-confidence, Dychtwald says, "Boomers could conceivably be running for president for years to come."

If Sanders' age is the standard, Boomers [Rick Perry](#) (b. 1950), [Ben Carson](#) (1951) and [John Kasich](#) (1952) could still run eight years from now, in 2024 ([Elizabeth Warren](#) will be 75). [Carly Fiorina](#) (1954), [Mike Huckabee](#) (1955) and [Andrew Cuomo](#) (1957) could run in 2028.

The Xer-in-chief might ruefully describe it as the audacity of hope.

Read or Share this story: <http://usat.ly/1TwlfE0>