Politicians in ageing democracies are catering to a grey interest constituency that does not exist

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Über Politik aus der Wissenschaft

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> "With 20 million voters over the age of 50, isn't it time politicians stopped just kissing babies?"
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> Age Concern England, 2005 British General Election Campaign

The above quotation is a typical example taken from an election campaign by an organisation representing the particular interests of elderly people. In many European countries, there are several of such organisations that provide social help or promote self-help for older people. These social old-age interest organisations tend to have at least small political offices that try to influence political outcomes. However, they are mostly social organisations providing club benefits to its members. There are no systematic analyses of these old age interest organisations across Europe yet. They tend to be much smaller in size and in political influence compared to the Association for Retired Persons in the United States, most likely due to Europe's stronger trade unions. However, some of these organisations have a large number of members benefitting from various club goods, such as cheaper insurance. For instance, DaneAge in Denmark had 650,000 members in 2014 (28% of citizens aged 50 and over). The historical roots of these organisations do not lie in the dynamics of accelerated population ageing since the 1970s, but very often in

the veterans' organisations and pensioners' organisations of the first half of the 20th century (for details see Doyle 2015: chap. 3).

In Europe, there is no evidence that these organisations have any political influence that is close to that of the big political players, such as business interest organisations or trade unions. However, they seem to form an alliance with the media whenever a national election is coming up. What tends to happen is the following: they call attention to the number of older voters in the next election, and they remind the political actors of the cross-age importance of old age issues, such as pensions, health and social inclusion. In other words, they will always point out that these issues concern citizens of all ages, since everyone aspires to become old and is somehow connected to individuals of other ages, usually through their families. Very often, organisations will also contact the older people's spokespeople in the political parties for public events to ensure they hit their messages home. Sometimes, these old age interest organisations are seconded or overtaken by pensioners' parties, i.e. political parties that explicitly appeal to older people. For instance, in 2017, the party 50PLUS entered the second chamber in the Netherlands with 4 out of 150 seats. Senior parties remain notoriously weak, however, and only gain prominence if they shift their programme away from old age (Hanley 2012; Goerres 2009: chap. 4).

The media are keen to cover the initiatives of these organisations or pensioner parties because they can conjure up images of a block of older people that are implicitly or explicitly behind these campaigns. Thus, the media fall prey to a strategic manipulation of public perception because the images that can be sold are much more attractive to the media market than the nuanced tales of heterogeneity and complexity that, for instance, are conveyed in this report and the academic literature.

Another logic that one might speculate about is the disproportionate influence on public discourse of scientists whose primary expertise is in public policies for older people, such as pension policy. Many of these experts know very little about the social and political preferences of older people. Among economists, especially, there seems to be a widespread assumption that older people are united in their interest for public pensions, are happy to change their vote whenever something seems to alter the amount received

and that the salience of this issue is the same for everyone in this age group. The reason for this misconception lies in the fact that all economic models of public policy require untested assumptions. The homogeneity of interests of older people is one such simplifying assumption. However, the fact that it is an untested assumption often remains untold and is instead presented as a fact (example of this assumptions in scientific papers can be found in Sanderson and Scherbov 2007; Sinn and Uebelmesser 2002).

Elected politicians are thus confronted with a public discourse that is tilted towards an image of older people as a homogenous group with a unified political interest in “the” older people’s issues. We know very little about what politicians actually think about the “grey vote”. There is some evidence from Ireland that elected politicians, as reported by interviewed civil servants, seem to have a stronger sense of the need of “age-targeting” social policy, thus catering to older people as one group instead of orienting their social policy efforts at needs that cross-cut age (Doyle and Timonen 2013).

As with any elite group, it is very difficult to survey politicians. Even if one had the chance to ask them about their beliefs regarding older people as a political group, politicians like any other respondent would give a constructed story, possibly with some strategic intention. There is one study about the age segmentation of the voter market by political parties in the 2005 British General election (Davidson 2005). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that politicians have an overly simplistic view of older people as a political group.

The outcomes of this speculated state of affairs are in line with the following findings. Politicians tread very carefully around any changes to the pension system. Changing demographics objectively necessitate changes to systems that were put in place under very different circumstances decades or even centuries ago. For instance, politicians prefer small-scale, swift changes to the pension system over large fundamental ones (Tepe and Vanhuysse 2012). Alternatively, politicians delegate the development of policy proposals to experts in a cross-party alliance. They pursue this strategy if they are convinced that reforms must be enacted, but there is no electoral win from this (Hering 2012). Seemingly, elected politicians are afraid of facing any electoral backlash by the grey vote for implementing out these reforms.

What politicians believe about older people must be extended to the certainty that is associated with it. Even if politicians had a pretty sound idea about what the political preferences of an ageing democracy were, the institutional set-up of representative democracies would always make elected politicians err on the side of caution. Politicians have a maximum of four or five years before the next election. Almost all of them care about re-election. Imagine a policy proposal that would make the pension systems financially viable for the next 20 years. If the elected politicians would expect with 90% certainty that the majority of older people would go with this proposal and with 10% certainty that they would oppose it and as a consequence change their votes, they would not go through with the proposal. The inner logic of liberal democracies requires politicians to think about their personal re-election in the short-term first, a feature that politicians should not be blamed for. They behave very rationally given the democratic system they operate in.

What can be done? There are a variety of remedies that can be taken:

- Politicians and the public need to be educated about older people and members of other age groups. This is a task for social scientists to bring their findings into the public discourse and to repeatedly show the complex reality about social structures and political preferences of all age groups in a society. There is a simple litmus test to see whether politicians and journalists are on a higher level of understanding. If they are aware of the existence of cohort effects versus life cycle effects in political behaviour, there is already progress being made. If they can, for instance, accept that young people can be more conservative than older people due to cohort socialisation (as seen in the vote for the Alternative for Germany in the 2013 Bundestag election or the Front National in the French 2015 local election), this would already be a sign of deeper understanding.
- Politicians and public officials are obliged to understand social structures and political preferences in ageing democracies. Thus, it is also their responsibility to seek out and to try to understand the complex findings of social science research.
- Politicians and public officials must take families seriously, not as a normatively charged term that separates conservatives from progressives, but as an intergenerational transmission belt that keeps age groups together. As long as

voters interact intensively with other age groups in the family, they will always be aware of the political interests of those with whom they are closely connected. Even the growing group of childless people interacts intensively with other age groups, namely their own parents and so called social children. Looking at older or younger people without their family contexts suggests an atomised view of political beings that is not helpful.

- Constitutional rules need to be changed to allow generationally sensitive policy-making. Whereas those who are grown-ups today can seek existing ways of making themselves heard, it is especially children and future cohorts that have yet to be born who are most affected by today's policy decisions. An easy solution is the idea of an elected ombudsperson to represent these groups. These ombudspersons must be given the right to be heard in all legislative decisions and the resources to substantiate their positions. There are a variety of parliamentary commissions on the rights of future generations, such as in Brazil, Chile, Finland, Germany or Israel. However, the way forward should be a single person with a resourceful apparatus that must be heard. This may be the better way to go as it is likely to have a higher impact. Wales (since 2015) and Hungary (since 2012) are currently the forerunners of such an office in Europe.
- There needs to be a shift away from older people in the discussion about the politics of ageing democracies. Population ageing implies that other age groups are changing in size, too, and these changes may affect their social and political positions. For example, in Germany, old age poverty is a vivid image in the minds of many Germans with 57% fearing a much lower living standard at old age (Tagesschau 2016). But old age poverty is a small problem in Germany with only 17.2% of 65+-citizens living in poor households in 2015 compared to a mean of 19.7 % in 27 EU-countries. Child poverty with 18.6 % of all 0-16 year old is a bigger problem that is talked about far less (Eurostat 2017). Also, population ageing does not take place independently of other processes: changes in income inequality, changes in the ethnic composition of a society, changes in the labour market – all of these happen alongside population ageing and are intrinsically interwoven with it. An overly strong focus on older people in the politics of ageing democracies is short-sighted and will likely distort any valid conclusions.

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