There will never be a political age conflict between the young and the old.

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Über Politik aus der Wissenschaft

This essay is the fifth in a series written by Achim Goerres for the project "Ageing Democracies? Political Participation and Cultural Values Among the Elderly in Europe" financed by the Open Society Foundation. The complete project report with all essays and the reports written by the other project members can be found here. In this essay Achim Goerres argues that there is no such thing as an age cleavage, and that it is highly unlikely to ever become a conflict line along to which the political system organises.

It seems plausible that population ageing in Europe will lead to a permanent conflict between young and old. Most European countries have extensive and therefore expensive welfare states that need to be financed. If an increasing number of pensioners live on the resources being paid into the system, a competition for scarce public resources between them and all other people should result from this. However, I argue that such a conflict does not materialise in the true sense of a political conflict and is unlikely to ever arise.

Social scientists have studied political conflicts for a long time. They have developed the notion of a political cleavage, a permanent line of conflict about material or normative claims. A typical cleavage is the one between workers/employees on the one hand and business owners on the other hand. A cleavage has a number of constituent elements that we will go through one by one in order to see if there really is an age cleavage (Fabbrini 2001). I will show that basically none of the constituent elements is met for an age conflict.

First, we have a clear, objective definition of the groups with opposing interests. Pensioners seem to be a clearly defined group with shared material interests. However, their shared material interests are moderated to a large extent by their overall income situation. Rich pensioners and poor pensioners do not share a lot of interests. And even if they did, who is the opposing group? People of working age may be the obvious answer. They have to pay more into the welfare state while pensioners take resources out of it. However, someone who is within a year of retirement probably has more in common with pensioners than with people in the workforce. Also, the boundary between these two groups is transient. Working middle-aged people aspire to become old and therefore become part of the “opposing group”.

Second, specific demands on the state must be shared within the group and be differed between groups. Many studies have looked at areas of social policy where differences between age groups might be expected (Busemeyer et al. 2009). When you ask people whether they think there should be more, less or the same amount of spending in education, there are some age-related interests, with younger people being more in favour of education spending than older people. However, the differences are remarkably small. In 1996, the highest estimated difference in Europe between pensioners aged sixty and over and those working between ages 30 and 59 was about 12 percentage points for education spending in France. In the same study, the highest difference in spending preferences in education was in Canada, Australia and the USA, where higher education is largely privatized and the welfare state redistributes very little in this area. In some countries, the difference was actually zero, meaning that there were absolutely no attitudinal differences between potentially opposing groups.

Surely, age matters in explaining policy attitudes, but the differences are not that great and they vary significantly across countries, with the largest differences lying outside of Europe. Moreover, the evidence presented stems from a simple survey question where people have to decide on one issue alone with no trade-off towards other issues and no inter-temporal consideration. This is a very rare political situation in actual democratic politics. It is comparable to referenda on social policy issues with age-related relevance. These exist in very few countries with such referenda. In Europe, the most important example is Switzerland. There, studies on referendum voting do reveal a small, but clear

age differences in voting on things such as reforms to pension systems (Bonoli and Häusermann 2009). In other words, these small preferential differences would matter politically in a direct-democratic setting. However, since almost all of Europe consists of representative democracies with only fractions of direct democracy, these differences do not play out.

This argument is not to be mistaken with age differences in referendum results per se. For instance, the early analyses of the Brexit vote showed a higher likelihood to vote "Leave" among older voters (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016). However, these tendencies are more likely to be due to cohort differences, as we discussed previously in the essay 3 on conservatism, as due to life cycle differences. Cohort differences come and go. A real age cleavage necessitates preferences due to life cycle differences.

Third, members of the group need to share an awareness of their mutual material interests. As mentioned in the essay on social inequalities at old age, rich pensioners and poor pensioners are unlikely to share a common perception of the same interests. Among workers, the situation is highly stratified by education, income and education as well. The low-paid, low-skilled worker is unlikely to share interests with a highly-paid, highly-skilled worker. A rich middle-aged person has little interest in state investment whereas a poor middle-aged person does have exactly that interest. So, even when people are in the same position age-wise, they have very different interests in the state paying in the educational area, for instance. The rich person wants to buy education by him or herself and not pay taxes for others to benefit, the poor person wants to benefit from the redistribution of educational possibilities in the public system.

Fourthly, there must be little day-to-day interactions between social groups for a conflict to fully develop (Collins and Annett 1975). Having as little interaction as possible increases the chances of demonising members of the other group and developing stereotypes that further the antagonism between them. In contrast, if people meet members of a socially constructed group in a unforced manner as equals with common goals and no competition (Pettigrew 1998), stereotypes are dissolved.

Social interactions between age groups are rare in everyday European life, a pattern that should facilitate an age conflict. Social circles of friends and work colleagues are often

characterised by a high level of age homogeneity (Verbrugge 1977; Feld 1982). In the former case, this is because we like to surround ourselves by people like us and use age to inform that decision. In the latter case, it is because age correlates with seniority, which often structures the workplace. So, if people were only to associate with friends and work colleagues, age-stereotyping would be facilitated. However, there remains one locus of age-heterogeneous interaction: the family. Within the family, people engage in conversations, in exchanges of money and time across age groups (Albertini et al. 2007). The family is crucial for preventing them from further developing stereotypes about other age groups. This is not to mean that individuals with families do not hold age stereotypes, but these stereotypes are unlikely to demonise family members as members of an adversarial age group with whom one is competing for public resources.

Voluntary childlessness is a very striking development across Europe and could potentially affect this line of argument. If people choose not to have children, the interaction line with the lower age group is broken. However, studies of the social behaviour of childless people reveal that they tend to substitute the lack of their own children with “social children”, often the children of a preferred sibling (Albertini and Kohli 2009; Kohli and Albertini 2009). The patterns of exchange that are observed between the childless and their social children are very similar, albeit less intense, to those observed for parents and their offspring.

Finally, there must be an elite that organises the political interests of the groups in conflict. This elite must be able to claim some sort of leadership to defend the political interests of their group. It must be able to unify the group, increase awareness of shared interests among its members and take political action. Which organisations would do this in case of an age conflict? Trade unions may be the natural representatives of the working population. However, trade unions do not represent the self-employed and sometimes go a long way towards representing pensioners’ interests as well (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). Seniors’ organisations exist in all European countries, but their organisational structures and political power vary quite a lot (see also the upcoming sixth essay of this series on politicians catering to a non-existent constituency). Some countries, like Germany, have a very heterogeneous landscape of pensioner organisations where not one federation or one organisation can claim to represent a homogenous set of

pensioners' interests. Thus, there is no sign of organisational mobilisation for a potential age conflict.

What remains of the supposed political age conflict? Diffuse lines separating potential groups in conflict, little agreement over common interests within age groups, no organisational structures to represent "the old" or "the young". However, there remain some attitudinal differences that can be explained by the position in the life cycle. If political outcomes were only determined by direct-democratic means, these attitudinal differences would matter politically. Since almost all political outcomes are based on decisions in representative democracies, however, this is not the case.

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