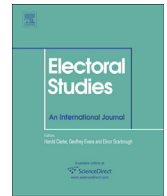




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# Electoral Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud)

## Ageing and generational effects on vote choice: Combining cross-sectional and panel data to estimate APC effects



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 May 2013

Accepted 24 June 2013

#### Keywords:

Vote choice

Britain

Ageing

Generations

APC models

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how ageing and generational formative experiences affect vote choices in Britain. Using a combination of panel data and assumptions about party fortunes we estimate ageing effects. These are then entered into a model using cross-sectional data from 1964 to 2010 to estimate generational differences in vote choice. Ageing increases the likelihood of a Conservative vote substantially, but there is no trend towards lower rates of Conservative voting among newer generations. There are however identifiable political generations corresponding with periods of Conservative dominance: voters who came of age in the 1930s, 1950s and 1980s are *ceteris paribus* somewhat more Conservative. Our method therefore lends some support to theories of political generations, but also demonstrates the considerable impact of ageing on vote choice.

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In keeping with the goals of this special issue we present a method for dealing with the long-standing problem of making inferences about age, period, and cohort (APC) effects on political choices. Our approach is empirical rather than statistical in that it makes use of 'side information' (Glenn, 1976, 2005) to help identify the effects of ageing in panel studies and inputs these estimates into conventional cross-sectional models. The term side information (see also Converse, 1976) simply refers to the use of information from outside of the cohort table to enable interpretation of otherwise under-identified combinations of age, period and cohort influences.<sup>1</sup> By estimating ageing effects using panel data in conjunction with information on aggregate election results we hope to provide side information that uses assumptions that are transparent, as well as defensible, and

that other researchers are able to evaluate. We focus on an unresolved debate in the study of British electoral behaviour for which relatively good quality panel data over a considerable time period is available. Given the growing number of panel studies conducted elsewhere the method has the potential to be applied to vote choice in a range of other democracies. Our aim is also broader than this though. We hope to show that using side information from outside the original dataset in a systematic manner is a good way of trying to disentangle APC effects, as it forces researchers to make explicit the assumptions that are always necessary in this type of endeavour.

Substantively we examine the origins of the relationship between age and vote choice. In Britain age is a strong predictor of vote choice, with older people much more likely to vote for the Conservatives and younger people much more likely to vote for Labour or the Liberal Democrats. This relationship has been a commonly remarked upon feature of the British political landscape for many years. Less clearly understood, however, are the processes that produce this observed association. We discern four types of process that can account for an observed relationship between age and vote. Two relate to ageing itself and two to the process of political socialization, and hence generational effects.

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative approach is to use strong theoretical assumptions about political learning processes such as those adopted by Bartels and Jackman (2014) in this special issue. In general, making such strong theoretical assumptions is often difficult. Certainly in this case we have several different theoretical approaches that suggest competing ageing and generational effects.

Ageing effects can derive from processes inherently related to getting older, such as psychological changes relating to values and preferences. Ageing has been linked with increasing conservatism and authoritarianism (Wilson, 1973; Feather, 1977; Truett, 1993), cognitive inflexibility or close-mindedness (Jost et al., 2003; Kruglanski, 2005) and long-term attitude stability indicative of a resistance to change (Alwin et al., 1991; Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Neundorff et al., 2011). These and other personality-related attributes have been argued to account for the association between age and conservative values (Cornelis et al., 2009) and by extension they could also account for the link between age and Conservative voting.

Age effects can also derive from social changes that occur over the life-cycle, as people get jobs, get married, have children and retire, all of which may influence political orientations through their impact on investments and resources (Binstock and Quadagno, 2001). These changes are also likely to influence perceived interests and levels of stake in the status quo, and thus produce insecurity with respect to changes to that status quo (Williamson et al., 1982). Again, these processes have been thought to make voters likely to support parties on the right.

To the degree that ageing effects derive from either of these psychological or social ageing processes they carry no negative implications for future support for the Conservative party in Britain as they simply imply that each generation gets more Conservative as they age. Indeed, given the ageing demographic profile of the population they could imply the opposite – becoming older makes people more Conservative and the proportion of the electorate that is old is steadily increasing as life spans lengthen.

Generational effects can also be attributed to two distinct sources of influence, with differing implications for the pattern of change. First, there are long-term processes such as increasing social liberalism among younger cohorts (Danigelis and Cutler, 1991; Ford, 2011; Tilley, 2002, 2005) in part, but not only, because of the pronounced growth of tertiary education and its effects on liberal values (De Graaf and Evans, 1996; Evans, 2002). More generally others have pointed to the growing importance of postmaterial values through generational replacement (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1997). This process of generational replacement is potentially significant electorally, as it implies that right-wing parties are fighting against 'the tide of history' on social liberalism – the positioning of the current UK Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party in favour of gay marriage would seem to reflect an acceptance of and response to this tendency. If generational replacement produces a more progressive electorate, as has been argued in the United States (Judis and Teixeira, 2002; Klinkner and Schaller, 2008), then there will be a continued pressure on the Conservative Party to either become more progressive or to accept a likely social democratic hegemony. This process is plausibly at the root of any observed linear cohort effect on vote choice and provides a clear alternative to an interpretation in terms of ageing.

Second, there are specific generational differences that derive from the party political context in the period when people enter the electorate. As voters come of age at times when different parties are successful and different issues are salient, they can be characterized as forming more or less

distinct political generations. Their long-standing political preferences may therefore reflect the dominant political forces present during the period when they came of political age. If a particular party is dominant during a voter's formative years they may carry that predisposition with them throughout their electoral career. This view has typically been elaborated by authors advocating the 'Michigan model' of voting behaviour, for whom voting decisions are derived from long-term affective attachments to political parties learned during early adulthood which stabilize over the life-course.<sup>2</sup> The years in which voters enter the electorate are argued to be highly consequential: 'new voters are flexible/unstable and much more responsive to new events than are older voting cohorts' (Converse, 1969: 143). This view is reiterated on the basis of extensive empirical analysis of more recent US data by Green et al. (2002: 107–108): 'The influences of the political environment are most noticeable among young voters, whose partisan attachments often bear the stamp of the political Zeitgeist that prevailed when they reached voting age' and, from a different perspective, by Erikson et al. (2002: 186): 'When political events favor one party over the other, the response is generally felt among all birth cohorts, with the strongest amplitude among the young.' The presence of such political generations implies that generational differences cannot safely be assumed to favour a monotonic trend, whether socially liberal, anti-Conservative or otherwise. To the degree that the fortunes of the major British political parties over the last century have not varied systematically with cohorts, we would not expect to find linear generational effects.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Previous studies

Previous empirical research into ageing and generations in Britain and the United States has tended to point to the presence of distinct cohorts of voters and to interpret age differences in these terms. As early as the 1970s, most US researchers concluded that differences in partisanship were generational (Glenn, 1974; Abramson, 1976; Converse, 1976). The 'Depression generation' that came of age in the 1930s was different from preceding and following cohorts. The cohorts that came of age in the 1920s and 1940s were moulded by different forces and had not undergone the same experiences of Roosevelt's New Deal. Similarly in Britain, the nature of age-related differences in party choice was first examined by Butler and Stokes (1974), who proposed that these differences were due to differing formative experiences, i.e., generational effects, rather than an ageing process linked to increasing Conservatism. In Britain since then the conventional view has been that there was a World War II (and especially 1945)

<sup>2</sup> Authors in this tradition have also emphasized parental attachments as an important source of party identification for new voters (McAllister and Kelley, 1985; Jennings et al., 2009; Niemi and Jennings, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> The increasing presence of Labour governments in recent decades when compared to the early part of the 20th century can be expected to have moved recent cohorts' political orientations in a left-wing direction, which could in principle account for a tendency for cohorts to be less Conservative over time. A monotonic decline in Conservative vote among very recent cohorts may not reflect long-term value change, but simply the workings of early political socialization under recent periods of Labour incumbency. The estimation of political generations allows this possibility to be evaluated.

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