

The grey vote: Determinants of older voters' party choice in Britain and West Germany[☆]

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Abstract

To what extent do older people vote differently from younger people? This article tests two generational and two life-cycle hypotheses with British and West German data. First, older voters belong to a political generation whose party preferences are shaped by the party fortunes experienced in early elections. The more de-aligned the party system, however, the less strong and clear generational differences seem to become. Second, New Politics parties are less favoured among older generations. Third, there is no evidence that ageing voters prefer to cast their ballots for economically more conservative parties. Finally, in more proportional electoral systems, older people seem to have a preference for larger parties that can leave repeated impressions on them as they age. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Many advanced industrial democracies are ageing. Therefore, the group of older voters, who are usually very likely to vote, is growing in relative and absolute terms. Through their high voter turnout and demographic weight, older voters can have a fundamental impact on electoral results. As a consequence, the topic of the 'grey vote' received a great deal of media attention during recent British and German election campaigns, for example.

This article seeks to answer the following question: to what extent are older voters different from younger ones with regard to their party choice? If you randomly meet two voters in the street, one who is 70 years old and another who is 30 years old, you may view their age differences from two perspectives. On the one hand, they belong to different generations that do not share political preferences because of their differing socialisation experiences. On the other hand, the two are at different stages in their life cycles, a factor that influences their political interests.

Depending on which perspective is more dominant, the electoral outcome in an ageing democracy will be fundamentally different. Generational variations only have an impact until the voters of that particular generation die. If generational effects explain the differences between the grey vote and others, the demographic process of ageing will not have much of a permanent effect

[☆] The British Election Studies are available from the UK Data Archive at Essex University. The *Politbarometer* and German election studies can be obtained from the *Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung Cologne*. The coded data sets can be downloaded from my home page. The author would like to thank Michael Bruter, Simon Hix, David Sanders, Jan van Deth, John Sidel and the ES reviewers.

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because one older generation will be different from the next. The grey vote in one election will vote differently from the grey vote in another election. In contrast, life-cycle differences are stable across generations. They are driven by sociological and psychological forces that make different generations become more similar to each other as they age. If life-cycle effects are dominant, the voting outcome for an ageing democracy — due to the large voting impact of older voters — will be permanently changed. Here, the grey vote constitutes a stable factor in electoral politics. This is the perspective that is assumed by much of the apocalyptic literature about the effects of demographic ageing on politics (see for example, [Peterson, 1999](#)).

This article reviews the existing generational and life-cycle hypotheses and tests them by comparing Britain and West Germany. The four major findings of this study suggest that the two perspectives need to be embedded in the overall structures of the party system if we are to interpret their influence correctly. First, the idea can be refuted that people more often vote for economically more conservative parties the older they become. Second, there are indeed growing generational preferences for New Politics parties, like the German Greens. These indicate that the current older cohort is still less likely to vote for such parties. Third, some parties can leave a more prominent impression on ageing electors through repeated government participation or their relatively large and constant electoral size. This effect only seems to exist to some degree in party systems with proportional representation. Finally, political generations matter more when the party system is characterised by weaker de-alignment. Political impressions made in young adulthood are carried through our lives, but even more so if the overall volatility is low, because the strength of generational socialisation is one observable implication of the state of de-alignment. The combined importance of life-cycle and generational factors that are embedded in the macrofactor of de-alignment and in features of the electoral system shows that the electoral outcomes can be very different in ageing electorates and that neither the life-cycle nor the generational perspectives generally dominate to a degree sufficient to explain older voters' party choice.

Section 1 reviews the most prominent hypotheses about age-related effects on voting behaviour. In Section 2, I present the research design, predictions about differences between political generations, and the data. In Section 3, I first analyse the differences between age groups and political generations across time before I test all hypotheses in various logistic regression models. Section 4 concludes the article.

1. A review of existing hypotheses

There are no existing studies that specifically analyse the determinants of older people's voting choice, neither for Germany nor for Britain. There are a few descriptive contributions to research, but no rigorous analyses ([Bürklin, 1987](#); [Stadie, 1986](#); [Vincent et al., 2001](#)). Some studies look at the impact of voters' age on their political attitudes or voting behaviour. Compared with younger voters, older voters are evidently at a different stage of their life cycle and also belong to a different generation.

1.1. Older voters and the life cycle

The most prominent group of hypotheses from the life-cycle perspective assumes that people grow more conservative with age ([Crittenden, 1962](#); [Glenn, 1974](#)). In this context, electoral conservatism is argued to exist generally in two different forms: first, citizens become economically more conservative as they age and vote accordingly because they accumulate more material goods that they want to preserve ([Binstock and Quadagno, 2001](#)); second, older people become more authoritarian ([Danigelis and Cutler, 1991](#); [Tilley, 2005](#)).

Whereas the early findings of more pro-Republican voting in the 1960s were refuted as cohort effects in the 1970s ([Cutler, 1977](#)), more recent empirical studies have used more elaborate statistical techniques to separate cohort and life-cycle effects. They found small tendencies to favour the conservative Tories in Britain or the Christian Democrats in Germany in addition to generational effects ([Falter and Gehring, 1998](#); [Gehring, 1994](#); [Rattinger, 1992](#); [Tilley, 2002, 2003](#)).

U.S. evidence that seemed to show growing authoritarianism among older people was reassessed as a cohort effect because the attitudes in the issue domains measuring authoritarianism generally shifted toward the progressive side ([Danigelis and Cutler, 1991](#)). [Tilley \(2005\)](#) comes to a similar conclusion looking at British data.

Another life-cycle hypothesis that remains untested can be derived from [Barnes \(1989\)](#). As we age, we develop a stronger bias to vote for parties that are large and/or regularly part of government. As major players in government or the opposition, these parties can repeatedly leave an impression on ageing voters. Consequently, smaller parties are at a disadvantage among older voters because their sustainable legacy in the minds of these voters is less well established. The hypothesised causal chain hinges on the assumption that party identification works differently for larger than for smaller parties. Younger voters should support minor parties disproportionately before they learn which

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