Older Voters: A phantom tyranny of numbers?

A response to Berry: Young people and the ageing electorate: breaking the unwritten rule of representative democracy

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Abstract

This article is a response to Berry’s arguments on the impact of population ageing as potentially marginalising younger people in the democratic process. Berry constructs a pessimistic account where a powerful grey vote will enact an age-based ‘majority rule’ and posits this as a ‘democratic deficit’ that contravenes the ‘unwritten’ rules of democracy. This response argues that automatic assumptions of age-related majority rule are frequently based upon a highly flawed grey power model and the need to incorporate intergenerational and intra-family solidarity, as well as life-cycle factors into these debates. This response agrees that older voters are likely to become much more important in electoral politics, but not because they will vote as a bloc or aggressively pursue material self-interest, but because ageing policy challenges may increasingly attain the status of valence issues in future elections.

Introduction

The ageing of the electorate can be viewed as one of the great progress indicators of success in human society. Social and scientific advancements in combating child mortality and increasing life expectancy alongside more recent reductions of the poverty rates in later life should be reasons for national pride. Yet, there is an apparent absence of any sense of celebration of these advances by many writers and protagonists who choose to centre their research and writing on the implications of an ageing society.

Ageing is frequently presented as a severe threat to future economic prosperity. The ‘strain’ on public spending is predicted to lead to political resentment and struggles between younger and older recipients of state spending (Sinn & Uebelmesser 2002; Kotlikoff & Burns 2004; Willetts 2010) and now with Berry, a profound threat to democracy.

Over the whole course of his article Berry constructs a pessimistic account of the implications of population ageing for the democratic process. A powerful and organised grey vote is assumed to exist and is then associated with the enactment of an age-based ‘majority rule’, that is harmfully impacting on the process of democracy. The victims of this social change are young people. Berry attributes the marginalisation of young people, not to the wider structural economic variables, but
instead as ‘possibly’ a product of population ageing which represents a ‘profound’ threat to representative democracy. Elsewhere, by err of numbers, Berry posits this as a ‘democratic deficit’ that contravenes the ‘unwritten’ rules of democracy.

The age transformation of the electorate is undoubtedly a significant challenge for public policy makers and for election strategists alike. However, a response to Berry is needed as I will argue that there are several dangers in accepting some of the common assumptions that are used to argue the possibility of an impending age-based majority rule. In particular, this response will focus on the flaws in the senior power/grey power models, the critical importance of intergenerational and intra-family solidarity and transfers, as well as the complex utility of incorporating life-cycle variables into these debates. The response will also argue that an orientation to the social-economic needs of the expanding number of older people should be considered not as democracy in peril, but rather democracy in action and that the concept of valence may be much more helpful in understanding the new electoral politics of our ageing society. In doing so, this response will also argue that in spite of Berry’s recognition of several nuances, the narrative his article is developing should be considered as a family relation of wider recent discourses that seek to posit intergenerational conflict and assign various negative character traits to older cohorts of voters, especially the Baby Boomers.

**The flaws in assuming the existence of senior or grey power**

In discussing the size of cohorts, surprisingly, Berry, in my view, translates the relative sizes of different age cohorts directly into ‘voting power’. In the future cohorts, according to Berry, that are smaller ‘will be particularly disadvantaged’ – note, not possibly, potentially or may be, but ‘will be’ – it is these proclamations that stretch far beyond the available empirical evidence that I would argue undermine Berry’s sensible call to consider younger voters’ perceptions of voting efficacy in an ageing electorate.

Berry’s framing of the politics of ageing is significant for how it resonates with other streams of thinking. Particularly that the interests of the young and the old are mutually exclusive and somehow in competition. Sinn and Uebelmesser (2002) have warned against a ‘gerontocracy’. Thurow has similarly portrayed older people as a threat to democracy through their development into a dominant bloc of selfish voters who seek constant improvement to age-related benefits:
'Universal suffrage...is going to meet the ultimate test in the elderly. If democratic governments cannot cut benefits that go to a majority of their voters, then they have no long-term future....In the years ahead, class warfare is apt to be redefined as the young against the old, rather than the poor against the rich.’ (Thurow, 1996, p. 47)

The current or future existence of grey power is typically predicated not on the results of empirical research, but on the range of assumptions deployed in building economic rational choice voter theories alongside the development of the concept of the market oriented party. However, although grey power is frequently predicted it is infrequently observed.

The grey power model has been widely adopted for interpreting the politics of population ageing within media and academic circles. The model often relies on assumptions that adapt Downs’ (1957) argument that voters’ support will be derived from how they calculate the personal costs and benefits of whether to vote, and then for which candidate to support. A good example of this approach comes from Sinn & Uebelmesser (2002) who applied rational choice models to changes in pensions provision in Germany. They sought to argue that by the year 2016 Germany would ‘effectively’ become a gerontocracy where the old would ‘exploit the young’. The model for their research was based on the assumption that if a voter financially benefited from a pension reform, no matter by how little, they would favour it and conversely if they were financially worse off from a reform, again by even by a small amount they would be opposed.

Alongside rational choice theory the concept of the market orientated political party within political marketing theory has also contributed to the assumptions that support the grey power model. Within a market orientation parties aim to exchange policy promises to satisfy voter needs. If candidates can match voter needs and deliver on their promises in office, then voter satisfaction will increase in line with the prospects of further electoral success (Cwalina et al. 2011). In Newman’s (1994) model of political marketing parties and candidates can’t appeal equally to all voters, and they must break down the electorate into sub-groups or segments, and then tailor and create policies and relationships to appeal to these segments. An uncritical application of this theory would accept that if the electoral market is going grey then market orientated candidates will do everything they can to satisfy older voters.

The grey power model’s normative nature is contradicted by a range of wider variables and contexts. Firstly, even with population ageing, older voters are not always the largest age group within the
electorate. In the 2008 US presidential elections voters aged 25-44 accounted for 36% of the electorate in comparison to 16% coming from those aged 65 and over (Campbell and Binstock 2011). Berry in his own projections of future electorates notes that that in 2021 there will be very large cohorts of UK voters in their 30s and 50s and in 2031 there will be significant numbers of voters in their late-20s. Despite a history of attempts in US elections to target older voters with age-related senior issues there has been little impact on their electoral preferences. Indeed, in the last ten US presidential elections all age groups except the youngest have distributed their votes to Republicans and Democrats in roughly the same proportions. At the 2010 UK general election it should be noted that while the Conservative Party enjoyed its largest leads amongst older voters, they had only achieved below average swings from 2005 and with Baby Boomer voters aged 55-64 their vote share had actually declined. The Labour Party drew almost equal levels of support from the country’s oldest and youngest voters (Davidson & Binstock 2011).

Quite critically age is only one of many personal characteristics which contribute to the social identity of individual voters. There is little reason to expect that any birth cohort which is diverse in capital resources, class, employment status, health, gender, ethnicity, religion, educational attainment, family position, language and geography, can somehow be homogenised so that the cohort shares identical self-interests and political behaviours. Additionally, ballot papers do not include a list of age-related policies but instead candidates and parties who stand on a range of policy positions and value statements, of which age-related spending will be only one. In his comparative study of European nations Walker (1999) concluded that old age was not a sound basis for political mobilisation. Goerres (2007) investigated German data to explore the hypothesis that a growing number of older people will lead to electoral antagonism between younger and older voters. Goerres argued that there was little evidence for contrasting political preferences or any antagonism between younger and older voters. Life-cycle interests do not shape German electoral politics because age is transitory and individuals were more likely to identify politically with voters of the same socioeconomic status who are in a different age group, than with voters of different backgrounds in the same age group.

The flaws in the wholesale adoption of economic rational choice theories to explain the impact on electoral politics of population ageing are so fundamental that it becomes puzzling as to why their use persists at all. Additionally, as will be seen in the next section there is strong empirical evidence for the existence of intergenerational solidarity and little that suggests intergenerational conflict. Significant claims should require the presentation of significant evidence. Yet the evidence base to
proclaim Sinn & Uebelmesser’s ‘gerontocracy’ or Berry’s age based ‘majority rule’ has not been presented. More circumspection is required.

The notion of market-oriented parties (MOP) has been used in combination with rational choice theory to build the grey power model. I would argue that the notion of the MOP is potentially of higher utility in understanding the electoral politics of ageing than rational choice. That is not to say, that applying theories of MOPs are not without enticements to over-simplify the debate. A MOP uses strategic research to design its behaviour to respond to and satisfy voter demands in a way that meets their needs and wants in a manner which is deliverable in government (Lees-Marchment 2008). This process of researching and responding to public opinion would appear to offer a more promising framework for understanding how ageing may impact on democracy. If the electoral market becomes ‘grey’ then parties will need to adjust and improve their policy offer and be seen to deliver on that offer when in government. However, Ormrod’s review (2011) of the literature to assess the model’s usefulness to academics and practitioners, concluded that the MOP’s existence in real-world politics is hard to substantiate and even if accepted to exist, there is a lack of empirical support to suggest the MOP model is superior for delivering success in elections and may even lead to an electoral backlash. This invites us to be cautious in assuming MOPs that privilege older voters to the detriment of other age groups are a likely strategic response to ageing and nor can we assume such parties, if they existed, would win elections on a regular basis.

**Intergenerational relations within ageing democracies**

The generations who were born and grew up under Britain’s welfare state in the decades following the Second World War have been increasingly framed as drawing a collective benefit from this period but in a manner that has come at the expense of younger cohorts. Berry argues that democratic legitimacy is in peril due to the political marginalisation of younger cohorts. Berry’s article chimes with this wider framing of older cohorts by asserting that cohorts at different life stages have ‘divergent’ interests’ and ‘are able to act, more or less coherently, to satisfy them’. Berry also cites Howker and Malik (2010), Willetts (2010), Beckett (2010) and Coatman and Shrubsole (2012) as documenting from both the left and the right ‘intergenerational conflict’ that may indicate ageing is ‘unravelling democratic legitimacy’. It is hard to untangle Berry’s concern for the fact that younger cohorts may have longer to live with the consequences of policy decision-making than older cohorts with the framing of an age-related majority rule that will benefit older cohorts at the direct
expense of younger cohorts. There has certainly been no effort from the funders of Berry’s article, the Intergenerational Foundation, to separate these economic conflict discourses from the political.

Although ostensibly population ageing is one of humanity’s greatest achievements, it has often been portrayed as a profound political and economic threat. ‘Strains’ on public spending have been predicted to lead to struggles between younger and older recipients of state spending (Turner 1989). To maintain democratic stability the state will need to abandon its guarantees in areas such as pensions and social care (Peterson 1999). President Ronald Reagan’s former economic adviser, Laurence Kotlikoff, who recently wrote the foreword to a publication on intergenerational fairness by the Intergenerational Foundation (Leach and Hanton 2012) has gone as far as associating himself with hyperbolic claims and earnestly predict ‘generational war’:

‘If you look at the number of old people that we’re going to have to take care of in the future, and if you look at the bills that our kids are going to have to pay, anybody that doesn’t think there’s a generational storm and a big generational war coming, must be on Prozac.’

(Kotlikoff quoted from Transcript of BBC 2004 drama documentary If the generations fall out)

This framing of the politics of ageing developed in the US in the 1980s under the aegis of the neo-liberal Americans for Generational Equity and has been criticised by Robertson (1997) as ‘apocalyptic demography’. However, Berry is correct to point out that in recent years in Britain there are now voices who endorse this generational conflict narrative but who would see themselves as being politically on the centre-left. This new impetus to this intergenerational conflict framing now combines the assumptions of the senior power model with portrayals of the baby boomer cohorts as selfish, privileged and vain. As Blacker (2011) observes, within certain media circles it has become fashionable ‘indeed almost obligatory, for public figures in their fifties and sixties to turn on their own generation, and blame it for more or less all of our present problems’.

Higgs and Gillear (2010) argue that debates around intergenerational relations must be put into the context of wider economic trends, citing how over longer time periods wages have risen with the result that successive cohorts of young adults have seen their average income exceed that of their predecessors. These trends also meant that by the 1990s the profound poverty and inequality represented by old age was becoming visibly reformed out of the system. So it may be argued that as long as younger and older cohorts continue to prosper, no matter if this may be at different rates, the predicted conflicts will not materialise. Indeed, as retirement wealth has grown in turn so has
the value of cash and capital transfers from older to younger generations. Crucially Higgs and Gilleard argue that all cohorts benefit from increases in incomes, expansion of certain consumer options, access to education and provision of health care. These are all potential signifiers of social progress. It is the current global financial crisis that threatens the stability of these arrangements and not population ageing per se or, indeed, Berry’s concern regarding the existence of large single year cohorts in the electorate. The new economic instability removes guarantees of income and wealth for significant proportions of all age groups in a period where the clearly defined boundaries between education, employment and retirement are dissolving.

Not only is generational conflict proving to be a rather interpretive and unhelpful framing, the evidence for divergent age interests that will find political expression has thus far been weak. Boersch-Supan et al. (2011) explored variables relating to intergenerational cohesion such as family relations, non-family ties, values and political preferences. They concluded there was no evidence, when measured by old-age dependency ratios, that population ageing could be related to intergenerational conflict. Indeed, they could not find evidence even in the oldest regions of Europe, any exploitation of younger generations by older generations due to their economic or voting power. In the US Plutzer and Burkman (2005) used cohort-period analysis to conclude that every cohort becomes more supportive of educational spending, rather than less, as they reach their 60s and 70s. Results derived from logistic regression models concluded that age is not a strong differentiator of public opinion on US government spending for older people (Hamil-Luker 2001). In the UK Curtice (2006) utilized data from the British Election Study and urged for caution in making forecasts about the impact of ageing on British electoral politics. Curtis concluded that there was no evidence that older voters placed any great emphasis on which party they perceived to be more likely to look after their material interests: ‘Thus it is not clear that the ageing of British society will increase the pressure on politicians that emerges from the ballot box to pay more attention to the interests and needs of older people.’ However, Curtice also discussed the potential significance of a scenario where voters differentiated one of the parties to be significantly better, or worse, on issues relating to older people. This is a scenario I will return to later.

Berry is aware of the strength of the counter-veiling evidence. Indeed, in places there is a tempering of the main framing by agreeing that there may not be ‘out voting’ of one cohort over another. At this point Berry argues the ‘problem’ is that younger cohorts ‘will internalize a sense of disenfranchisement’, changing the problem to one of potential perception rather than empirical reality. This problem is of arguable importance, but the evidence suggests that it is a case that
requires a moderation of language and a stronger distancing from the proponents of apocalyptic demography and generational conflict.

**Democracy and cohorts**

Age-related variables such generational or cohort effects have long been incorporated into political science research. The generational or cohort effect arises from long term social trends such as the changing role of women or changes in educational attainment which establishes differences between neighbouring cohorts. Cohorts or generations are often used inter-changeably in public discourses to mean essentially the same thing - people who were born and accordingly entered the electorate at the same time. The definition of a cohort should be restricted to single year groups, but in popular practice generations are constructed, understood and discussed as groups born over longer periods of time. The media have a pivotal role in the process of converting a cohort into a generation with the Baby Boomers, Generation X or Millennials being current examples. The habit of constructing and discussing generations in the media is partly an importation of research techniques used in commercial marketing that attempt to combine demographics with psychographics to create age-based clusters of customers, or here, voters.

Berry provides detailed commentary and allocates significance to the projected changes to the sizes of various cohorts in future electorates and collates groups of cohorts into larger entities such as 20 or 50-somethings. His article also draws upon discourses and debates around the place of particular generations such as the Baby Boomers. He argues there is a serious risk of older cohorts disenfranchising the young and creating an age-based ‘democratic deficit’. In considering the democratic and electoral implications of cohorts and ageing, it is worth returning to Butler and Stokes (1969) and their famous discussion of the importance of the physical replacement of the electorate - the permanent cycle of the oldest voters dying off and new younger voters entering the electoral register. Between each general election millions of voters die and others become old enough to vote for the first time. Furthermore, many more move into different life stages, including from childlessness to parenthood and from the labour market into retirement. This raises the intriguing phenomenon of political cleavages gradually entering into and passing through or potentially exiting the electorate, but it also reminds us of why we need to always err on the side of caution when assessing the age-related dimensions of future elections. Established notions of political socialisation allocate great importance to the attitudes and behaviours developed by older voters during their formative years as these are considered to become increasingly fixed over time.
and less open to change. As these formative years are open to different historical events depending on the cohort in consideration, society is constantly evolving a patchwork of cohorts at variance with each other in their reception and engagement with politics. Within this churn and the overall trend of population ageing, clearly there is an important role for the impact of two factors that are often difficult to untangle from each other – the generation voters are born into and the time of life voters find themselves in at any given time.

Berry cites Furlong and Cartmel (2012) research on age differences in political priorities. In their research younger respondents placed unemployment higher as an election issue than older respondents and Berry cites their argument that this was partial evidence for the marginalisation of younger voters’ concerns by older people. It is of clear concern that the current economic crisis has resulted in high levels of unemployment for younger workers. But if we are to focus on cohorts it should also be noted that the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s also resulted in similarly high levels of youth unemployment (including many later Baby Boomers who were in their 20s in the 1980s and subsequently saw the decimation in the value and availability to them of private sector occupational pensions). Younger cohorts have suffered in recessions since the end of full employment in the 1970s and since before the noticeable ageing of the electorate which has taken place in the last ten years. Older voters are rightly attributed no contributory role to this policy outcome in the 1980s and there needs to be compelling evidence to consider them the source of any marginalising of concerns regarding youth unemployment today.

In contrast to cohort effects, the life-cycle effect is based upon the unique experience of the key stages in any individual’s life story such as their education, employment, personal relationships, parenthood and retirement and how individuals as part of the ageing process adapt their outlooks in response to the varying circumstances they encounter over the course of their lives (Zody 1970). This is an important dimension for understanding the shifting age distribution of the electorate. Younger and older voters will not only be from different cohorts or generations they will also be in distinctly different life stages. One life cycle effect that sharply differentiates the young and the old is that in most democracies the average retired person is on a lower income than that average younger worker in their 30s who is in full time employment. While older voters are often relatively poor in terms of income in comparison to younger voters, a significant proportion are also capital rich mainly through the accumulation of property ownership and associated lower housing costs than younger age groups. A proportion of older people will be in excellent health, others will be living with serious long term chronic conditions and the human body is also prone to depreciation in
sight, hearing and physical agility. Yet, the problem of later life is often located in how others start to treat older people differently, be this the struggles of older female journalists to maintain careers in our broadcasting institutions or through findings such as those published in research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2011) into human rights in home care that concluded that many older people were physically abused, suffered disregard for their privacy and patronised. More widely, although the prevalence of elder abuse is difficult to determine due to variations in definitions, a systematic review found that 6% of older people reported serious abuse within the last month (Cooper et.al 2008).

Far from constituting a democratic deficit, it would be highly desirable if a heightened awareness amongst legislators of how these issues affect the quality of life of a growing proportion of voters prompts a firm policy response. It would be perverse if great issues impacting on social justice and quality of life were not attended to, in the context of intergenerational relations this would become problematic if these issues could only be tackled in a manner which removed social and economic opportunities for younger cohorts, for which as we have seen, as yet there is little to suggest that this will be the case.

**Conclusion**

‘It is as though walking down Shaftesbury Avenue as a fairly young man, I was suddenly kidnapped, rushed into a theatre and made to don the grey hair, the wrinkles and the other attributes of age, then wheeled on stage. Behind the appearance of age I am the same person, with the same thoughts, as when I was younger.’

J.B Priestly quote taken from Conway and Hockey (1998)

The J.B Priestly quote is poignant for reminding us that in wider media and publishing industry discourse, highly subjective social constructions of older people are rife. There is an inability to see through age as constituting the only variable that matters in explaining an older voter’s identity, values and behaviour and the resultant constant need to push back against this stripping away of the identity and complexity of older cohorts.

This response agrees with Berry about the importance of the dangers of disengagement from democracy of younger citizens, of improving electoral registration, turnout and of ensuring the policy challenges of an ageing society do not create the potential for intergenerational conflicts to develop. In no way does this response suggest that Berry seeks to purposefully create negative narratives about the roles played by older citizens in our democracy. None the less, as Berry argues
population ageing is a threat to democracy, his work can be seen as a branch in the current network of commentators who are seeking to frame ageing as heralding intergenerational conflict due to the selfish exercise of grey power. It is also relevant to note that Berry’s research was developed with financial support from the Intergenerational Foundation which is organising advocacy work that insists British policy makers have given undue advantages to older generations at the expense of younger generations.

This response has argued the notion that large numbers of older voters automatically translates into age-based majority rule is based upon several flawed assumptions. Theories of rational choice voting and market oriented parties have yet to provide a sound basis for predicting the emergence of grey power. There is more evidence for intergenerational solidarity and support, within families, and across society as a whole than there is for intergenerational resentment or conflict. It is rational to expect that voters perceive their individual interest intertwined with the happiness and welfare of their own extended families, local community and social networks. Age is transitional and temporary and ageing issues are important to all voters as all aspire to become old one day. As Gorres (2007) argues, if age was a cleavage the political interests of older people should be detrimental or of no importance to the interests of younger people, but because of the transitional state of being of a certain age, this is not the case.

In the future the age structure of the UK electorate will see significant concentrations of voters at stages of the life cycle associated with retirement and later life. This is likely to pressure governments into addressing measures that will assist the needs and wants of voters who find themselves passing through these life stages. It would just as likely sponsor a crisis in democratic legitimacy if important social problems related to later life were to be ignored. This article does agree that ageing issues and older voters are likely to become much more important in electoral politics, but not because they will vote as a bloc or aggressively pursue material self-interest. This response argues that valence – political issues where the majority of voters agree about the goals of policies, such as the desirability of economic growth, educational standards or access to healthcare - will help explain the increased importance of ageing issues. If voters, particularly older voters aged 50 and over who will comprise the majority of turnout in most Westminster seats, were to place high value on a particular issue and perceive significant differences between parties and their abilities to enact desired outcomes for these issues, then there would exist a potential scenario for these ageing issues to influence electoral outcomes. This can be argued to be the trait of a functional democracy. Of course, if an ageing issue that attained valence status could only be
addressed in a manner that was of clear and permanent detriment to younger cohorts this may represent dysfunctional democracy. The emergence of clear majority public support for any such state of affairs appears to be an unlikely prospect. However, it would suggest that all ageing policy stakeholders should possess an enlightened interest in cultivating inter-generational solidarity.

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References


