AGEING DEMOCRACIES?

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Political Participation and Cultural Values Among the Elderly in Europe

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AGEING DEMOCRACIES? POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CULTURAL VALUES AMONG THE ELDERLY IN EUROPE

From Brexit to the rise of Viktor Orbán, Marine LePen and Geert Wilders, Europe's political crisis is often viewed through the lens of an intergenerational conflict. According to this view, the rise of authoritarian political projects, the deterioration of democratic values and hostility to European integration are a consequence of the continent's ageing population. This idea is sustained by a series of myths and deeply held prejudices that depict the elderly as an easily manipulated, fearful and selfish group. But this view is not supported by the facts. Political analysts have repeatedly shown that there is no relationship between ageing and reactionary politics, and that our views are entirely the result of our political experience and education. To share this knowledge and confront these stereotypes about the elderly, the Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona and the Open Society Initiative for Europe have teamed up to produce the Ageing Democracies project, in which five fellows produce works that challenge our assumptions about the politics of ageing.

We are at a critical moment in history. Liberal democratic values are now threatened by the rise of authoritarian politicians like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Marine LePen or Geert Wilders. Xenophobic political parties like Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria or the Law and Justice Party in Poland treat principles of human rights and social solidarity with scepticism or even outright hostility. Meanwhile, Brexit and similar referenda have shown that the integrity of the European Union can no longer be taken for granted.

These dramatic changes are taking place alongside what is likely the most profound, long-term change in Europe's social composition since the expansion of access to education: accelerated population ageing. Powered by the continued growth of average life expectancy, population ageing is one of the most tangible results of social progress. However, it is often treated by pundits, analysts and other commentators as a problem and a source of intergenerational conflict.

The idea that the degeneration of liberal democratic values is somehow related to Europe's older population has absolutely no grounding in the facts. It is the result of uncontested assumptions about ageing and the elderly. Yet time and time again, the idea and the myths that sustain it are repeated and reproduced in public discussions. To confront these prejudices and provide a more thorough reflection on the politics of ageing, the Centre for Contemporary Culture and the Open Society Initiative for Europe have teamed up to produce the Ageing Democracies project.

The Ageing Democracies project brings together five fellows from various backgrounds, disciplines, and European contexts. Its multidisciplinary research team includes a political scientist, a philosopher, a photographer, a filmmaker and a playwright. For the last year, they have analyzed the politics of ageing from a variety of angles, always with a firm basis in the empirical facts, and produced works that tackle common misconceptions about the elderly, their political and cultural views and their role in society. Today, May 8th, we mark the anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe by presenting the project's conclusions and their implications for a more just and democratic future.

Population ageing is a blessing, not a curse

All EU countries are experiencing accelerated population ageing. According to the European Commission's demographic projections, the European Union's population is expected to peak at 526 million people in 2050. By then, nearly 30 percent of the total population will be over 65. By 2060, the proportion of people aged 80 or over will be roughly the same as that of people under fifteen.

Much has been made of the far-reaching economic and policy consequences of population ageing. Public discussions usually highlight the pressure exerted on the welfare state by a larger elderly population through increased public spending on health care and pensions. Indeed, media accounts of population ageing often pose the phenomenon as a threat to the very existence of the welfare state for future generations, effectively pitting Europe's elderly population against the youth.

As a result, the generational dimension of politics has taken on a new sense of urgency. Because population ageing is a very long-term trend, the question of whether and how the views, needs and political behaviour of older people differ from those of other age groups will likely influence democratic processes and deliberation over the next several decades.

The rise of authoritarianism and xenophobia cannot be blamed on the elderly

Immediately after the Brexit vote, many voiced their frustration at the result by suggesting that old people should not be allowed to vote. Over the next several days, the idea of limiting the voting rights of elderly people made its way from the social networks into the mainstream media, including *Time*, *GQ*, *Huffington Post*, *VICE*, *Forbes* and *El País*. Commentators have also blamed the resilience of relatively unpopular governments or the rise of right-wing populism on the growing number of elderly voters.

Blaming the elderly for reactionary, authoritarian or otherwise undesirable political outcomes seems almost like a reflex, and the ageism it implies often goes uncontested. Age-based prejudices are propped up by the widespread, deeply held assumption that people naturally grow more reactionary with age. But is this assumption actually true?

Empirically, the idea doesn't seem to hold up. For instance, the suggestion that support for far-right parties in France and the Netherlands is higher among the elderly is actually false. According to an I&O poll from December 2016, support for Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom was highest among young voters and declined dramatically with age. Less than 5% of voters over 65 supported his xenophobic campaign. Likewise, Marine LePen's National Front was the top electoral choice among French voters under the age of 50, but among the elderly it was the third choice.

Older people being less inclined to support authoritarian or xenophobic politicians may go against assumptions, but it is not too difficult to understand why this is the case. Europe's elderly today still remember World War II and the rise of fascism, and European integration was largely premised on the idea of preventing the horrors of that era. Alarmingly, a recent study by Harvard researcher Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa of the University of Melbourne showed that while more the majority of older Europeans believed that military takeover was never legitimate in a democracy, only 36% of millennial felt the same way. While only 5% of Europeans over 65 believed that having a democratic political system is a "bad" or "very bad" way to run a country, 13% of millennial felt this way. Finally, older Europeans were more likely than European youth to believe that civil rights are absolutely essential to a democracy.

The elderly are as diverse as any other age group

The fact of the matter is that the political and cultural perspectives of the elderly are more complex than we tend to assume. This is the overarching conclusion of the Ageing Democracies project's first outcome, a new report by Dr. Achim Goerres, a leading political scientist specialising in the political participation of the elderly.

The report dispels the myth that the elderly form a single, reactionary constituency, pointing out that the differences between their political preferences and those of younger people in Europe are almost entirely due to the way different political generations grow up, not their age. To the extent that we can generalise, the data suggest that older Europeans are actually less conservative than their younger counterparts when it comes to the economy. The only exceptions to this are in Switzerland and the UK, where they are only slightly more conservative.

In terms of their cultural views, while it is true that the elderly are more conservative in all European countries but the Netherlands, these differences are smaller than generally assumed. More importantly, they are almost entirely attributable to the political generation people belong to. This is something very different than a person's age. People who grew up during the same historical context share similar experiences that shape them in late adolescence and early adulthood. These experiences are very much determined by national circumstances and political history. For instance, being born in 1955 in West Germany shapes an individual rather differently than being born the same year in Catalonia or in the Czech Republic.

In the end, the report shows that people past the retirement age are divided by the very same social inequalities experienced by younger groups. Specifically, elderly Europeans are divided by differences in attitudes and resources related to gender, health, education and income, among other factors. As occurs with all other age groups, these differences structure not only the social position of older people, but also what they do and want politically.

Let us consider the example of household income. While 73% of elderly people believe that the government must decrease income differences between the rich and the poor, when we divide older people by income groups, we exactly the same pattern we see among younger people. Those with higher income support this notion less often than those with lower income. Among older people whose household income is in the lowest 30% of their country's income distribution, the proportion that supports redistribution is 79 %. Among the highest 30%, the proportion falls to 62%.

Socio-economic inequality does not just affect the political views of older people. It can also affect the way that they participate in politics. Health inequalities, which are strongly determined by social inequalities, are quite dramatic among the elderly, so much so that the pension age can typically be divided into a "young old" age and an "old old" age, when health problems severely hamper daily activities. Worse health among the elderly is associated with less political participation of any kind or even no participation at all.

The report concludes that politicians are catering to an imaginary constituency of like-minded elderly voters. Anxieties over the supposedly impending age conflicts brought on by a "grey wave" of "greedy geezers", he finds, are largely the result of media exaggerations with little basis in the current scientific knowledge.

The politics of ageing is the politics of the future

The fact that there have never been as many elderly people in the world as there are today begs a troubling question: have we ever valued the elderly so little? Although the elderly population is growing and the younger population is not, our cultural imaginaries are nonetheless guided by a youth imperative. From the advertising world to the film industry and beyond, our visual culture equates beauty with eternal youth. In pop culture, older people are often depicted as hopelessly outdated, helpless or irritable. Meanwhile, scientific journalism frequently treats ageing itself as a disease to be cured, rather than as a natural part of the lifecycle. Instead of appreciating the tempos of the elderly and privileging their retrospective gaze, society asks that they age "actively" to keep up with the times.

How we age is an inherently political question. We do not age equally, and how long we live is shaped by the social and economic conditions we experience. Life expectancies and quality of life vary both between countries and with-

in them, especially as a result of income and educational inequalities. Thus, the politics of ageing is a topic that goes beyond the electoral behaviour or policy preferences of a given age group. The implications of growing older depend very much on how societies are organised, what priorities they define and what questions they ask themselves.

Ageing Democracies reflects on the politics of ageing with individual works that approach the topic from a variety of angles, extending the discussion beyond the most prevalent tropes and stereotypes. Rather than viewing population ageing as a problem, the project contends that it is the result of undeniable social progress and a democratic challenge that poses a new set of key political questions about how society should be organized for generations to come.

To explore these themes, philosopher Pedro Olalla revisits the oldest classical text on old age, Cicero's *De Senectute*. In a forthcoming book titled *De Senectute Politica*, Olalla positions demographic ageing as an undeniable fact that demands awareness to ensure that society can assimilate, manage and be enriched by its most profound implications. Ageing, he argues, must therefore be understood as an ethical, inherently political endeavour that requires us to question a society that treats the elderly as a drain on public coffers. He proposes instead a new reading of the increasingly popular notion of "active ageing" that dovetails with the democratic ideal of citizen participation and a deep engagement with political life.

But population ageing is not the only major demographic change affecting the politics of ageing. Today's elderly Europeans are part of a society that has been quite dramatically changed by new patterns of international migration. This is dealt with in a subtle new film by Swedish photographer Maja Daniels titled *My Grandma Calls Me Thomas*. It focuses on the seemingly unlikely friendship between Taimaz and Barbro. Barbro had never met a refugee before Taimaz came to visit. Taimaz came to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan. His bond with Barbro is his first relationship with a Swedish person. Their story takes place in Älvdalen, an ageing, depopulating village in rural Sweden with an unrecognized minority language that is facing extinction, putting a human face on the complex implications of Europe's changing demographics.

The political question of how different communities respond to the current challenges of our ageing society is at the center of *I'll See You Up There*, a documentary essay by Catalan producer and film theorist Ingrid Guardiola. Adopting an observational, experimental approach, Guardiola examines life in two vastly different elderly communities in two very different places in Spain. The first is Ciñera, a former mining village in León whose economy has been dramatically affected by globalization. The second is a retirement home in the El Palomar neighborhood of Barcelona. In Ciñera, a strong union culture tries to resist the twin threats of deindustrialization and depopulation. In El Palomar, economic growth has given way to a larger urban population, a larger number of elderly people living in retirement homes and a larger number of workers taking care of them. The film highlights the centrality of work in each of these settings and how the lives that make up these communities differ in how they deal with an ageing population.

Finally, Peca Stefan is one of Romania's most celebrated young playwrights. His new work is an immersive hybrid between a theatre play, a novel and an exhibition. Titled *The New Old Home*, it is an exercise in empathy that invites audiences to inhabit the shoes of Mrs. D and her millennial granddaughter Gina as they depart on a fantastical journey through space and time. The two women reconnect after several years of separation, only to be faced with a situation that propels them on a quest through parallel worlds. Mrs. D's fate depends on how she responds to the conflicts posed by the different possible versions of her life as an elderly woman in present-day Romania, Germany, Spain and a distant future version of Europe. As she's helping her grandmother along the way, Gina must face her own misconceptions and fears regarding ageing, and a series of recurring questions arises. How is an elderly person valued in contemporary democracies? What would the best possible world for Gina and Mrs. D look like?

These are the vital questions posed by the Ageing Democracies project, and they are all the more urgent in light of recent political developments. The Eurozone crisis, the crisis of the welfare state, Brexit and the rise of authoritarianism confront us with future scenarios that we did not expect just a decade ago. These challenges are exacerbating the tensions underlying a much slower but no less profound change in society. And as Europe's population grows older, the politics of ageing will only grow in importance. Its consequences will not be limited to today's retirees. The young are tomorrow's elderly. Whether or not they inherit a democratic culture is being decided today.

THE FACTS

* Eurostat 2017, proportion of populated aged 65 and older, 20-03-2017, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-data/main-tables

1
Accelerated population ageing is occurring all over Europe. According to the European Commission's demographic projections, the European Union's population is expected to peak at 526 million people in 2050. By then, nearly 30 percent of the total population will be over 65. By 2060, the proportion of people aged 80 or over will be roughly the same as that of people under fifteen.

2
The snapshot of population ageing looks very different across Europe. In 2015, 18.9% of the populations of the EU-28 countries were 65 and older. But while only 12.6% of the population of Ireland was over the retirement age, nearly 22% of the Italian population was*.

3
Life expectancies vary significantly between and within European countries. If we consider life expectancy at birth, the difference is quite dramatic. For instance, while the EU average is 80.9 years, in Latvia and Bulgaria citizens can only expect to live 74.5 years. In Switzerland and Spain, the average is 83.3 years.

4
The number of retirees per worker is expected to keep growing. In 2014, there were roughly 28 people over 65 for every 100 people between ages 15 and 64. By 2060, there will be just over 50 per 100 working age people.

5
There are more and more elderly people living alone. While nearly 30% of older people in EU member states were living alone in 2011, reaching especially high levels in urban areas. While in the Danish capital region of Hovedstaden, 42.4% of seniors lived alone, only 16.8% did in the more rural Galicia region of Spain. This figure also varies considerably with age and gender, as nearly half of all European women over 85 were living alone.

6
People over 60 are the most politically active age group today. Only 13% of older Europeans are not politically active at all, well below the EU average of 17% and much lower than the 28% of people under 30 who are politically inactive.

7
Different age groups participate in politics in different ways. Older Europeans are more likely than all other age groups to limit their political activity to voting. But 28% of people over 60 combine voting with other forms of political action, roughly the same proportion as people under 30 who do the same.

8
Older people are economically less conservative than younger people in most, but not all, European countries. On average, older Europeans were 13% more likely than younger ones to express support for economic redistribution from the rich to the poor by the government. This varies substantially by country. For instance, in Iceland and Norway, they were respectively 46% and 42% more likely to support it than their younger counterparts. In Switzerland and Great Britain, however, they were 1% and 4% less likely to support redistribution, respectively.

9
Older people are culturally more conservative than younger people in most, but not all, European countries. While the vast majority of Europeans of all ages support free expression of LGBTQ+ lifestyles and preferences, on average people over 60 were 22% less likely than younger Europeans to do so. This varies considerably depending on the country. While in the Netherlands, elderly Europeans were 1% more likely than younger ones to support the free expression of sexual orientation, they were over 50% less likely to in Greece and Lithuania.

10
Older Europeans are less likely than younger ones to support antidemocratic politics. A recent study by Harvard researcher Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa of the University of Melbourne showed that while the majority of older Europeans believed that military takeover was never legitimate in a democracy, only 36% of millennials felt the same way. While only 5% of Europeans over 65 believed that having a democratic political system is a "bad" or "very bad" way to run a country, 13% of millennial felt this way.


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THE PROJECTS

Grandma Calls me Thomas
Documentary film

Grandma Calls me Thomas is a documentary film by Maja Daniels. It takes place in the small town of Älvdalen in rural Sweden. With a median age is well above Swedish average, the community's biggest challenge is to try to get younger generations to remain.

In 2015, Sweden received 162.877 asylum-seeking refugees. This figure represented more than a 100% increase compared to 2014. Some refugees ended up in places like Älvdalen. Could this rural community take advantage of the unusual population increase and stop the current demographic trends that threaten its future existence? The answer may lie in a seemingly unlikely friendship.

Barbro had never met a refugee before Taimaz came to visit. Taimaz came to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan. His bond with Barbro is his first relationship with a Swedish person. After about a year, he calls her his grandmother. He had never had a grandmother before. In fact, she is the first 87 year-old person he has ever met, and he is perplexed about how active and energetic she is, since Sweden's mortality rate is so much lower than in Iran or Afghanistan. *Grandma Calls me Thomas* connects the issues of population ageing and rural depopulation with the potential increased arrival of refugees, showing a positive and inspirational example of the types of everyday action that can prevent social isolation and generational or racial segregation.

Maja Daniels (Sweden) is a photographer based in London. She is regularly commissioned by weekly and monthly press such as *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian Weekend Magazine*, *Intelligent Life*, *Monocle Magazine*, *FT Magazine*, *Der Spiegel* and *Le Monde* and has received numerous awards for her work. Drawing on her background in journalism, photography and sociology, Daniels frequently applies a sociological frame of research to her work.

Grey or Silver Politics in Europe's Ageing Democracies
Report

Grey or Silver Politics in Europe's Ageing Democracies? is the report by Prof. Achim Goerres that is included in this dossier. Its six essays take an empirical look at the political views, behaviour and social conditions of Europe's elderly population, contrasting them with a number of preconceived notions. He attributes political differences between the young and the elderly to four different age-related factors: the political generation one belongs to, the socioeconomic conditions experienced by different age cohorts, the stage of the life cycle someone is in and one's own individual experience of ageing.

Achim Goerres (Germany) is Professor of Empirical Political Science at the University of Duisburg-Essen. He has published extensively on the topics of ageing societies and politics, the political behaviour of migrants, the political psychology of risk, motivations for political and social action, political sociology, comparative welfare state analysis, party politics, comparative politics in Europe, German politics and applied research methods.

Nobody's Home
Documentary film

Nobody's Home is an observational documentary about two elderly communities in Spain: a retirement home in the Sant Andreu de Palomar neighbourhood in Barcelona and an elderly community in the mining village of Ciñera, León. The two settings depict the process of population ageing from different angles. While the former is a response to the growing number of elderly people in an increasingly urban population, the latter experiences accelerated ageing largely as a result of depopulation.

The film deals with the issues of work, care and the fear of disappearing, and how these influence the politics of ageing. By observing daily life in these communities and analysing their past, present and future, the film asks whether ageing has become more of an individual question than a social one over the last several decades.

Ingrid Guardiola (Spain) is a writer, professor, activist and cultural producer. She holds a PhD in Humanities from Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, coordinates the MINIPUT conference on quality television and has participated in a number of television projects in Spain and abroad, including the film essay programs *Soy Cámara* and *Pantallas CCCB* on Barcelona TV.

De Senectute Política
Philosophical essay

A literary reflection on old age, Pedro Olalla's *De senectute politica* is revisits the earliest classical text on ageing, Cicero's *De Senectute* and puts it in dialogue with a demographically and "democratically" ageing Europe. Written in a strictly non-academic tone, the book takes on the increasingly popular notion of "active ageing", contrasting it with the democratic ideal of active citizen participation. For Olalla, demographic ageing is an undeniable fact that demands awareness to ensure that we are able to assimilate, manage and be enriched by this profound change.

De Senectute Politica poses a series of deceptively simple questions. What is old age, really? How should we personally face the passage of time? Is our present society an adequate political space to live, in the best way, the last years of our lives? Can we afford to continue treating our elders as merely a drain on the public coffers?

Olalla's book encourages us to think and act on a wide range of present and future challenges with the awareness that how we age depends, to a large extent, on our personality, our will, our ability to organize ourselves socially and our way of understanding life itself. In the art of living, ageing must ultimately be understood as an ethical, political endeavor.

Pedro Olalla (Spain) is a writer, philosopher and an Associate Member of Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies. Originally from Spain but based in Greece since 1994, he has published over 30 original works in various languages and countries, exploring Greek history and culture from a deeply personal perspective. His most recent work explores the tension between Ancient Greek culture and its current political and economic situation.

The New Old Home
Play

Peca Stefan's *The New Old Home* is an immersive hybrid between theatre play, novel and exhibition. It invites audiences to inhabit the shoes of Mrs. D and her millennial granddaughter Gina as they venture through a fantastical journey bridging space and time. The two women reconnect after several years of separation only to be faced with a situation which—in the style of *The Wizard of Oz* or *Alice in Wonderland*—propels them on a quest through parallel worlds. Mrs. D is confronted with different possible versions of her life as an elderly woman in present-day Romania, Germany, Spain and a distant future version of Europe itself. Meanwhile, as she's helping her grandmother resolve these conflicts, Gina must face her own misconceptions and fears regarding ageing.

As they follow Mrs. D's journey, visitors of the exhibition are presented with various aspects, challenges and political implications of ageing in Europe today, with a focus on how the personal becomes political. Alongside Mrs. D, audiences experience the inequalities and vulnerabilities of ageing, question the misconceptions, contradictions and stereotypes related to the "older voter" and explore the possibilities and limits of political participation. Throughout the journey, recurring questions arise. How is an elderly person valued in contemporary democracies? What would the best possible world for Gina and Mrs. D look like?

Ultimately, *The New Old Home* is an invitation and an exercise in empathy. By looking at the future of demographic change in Europe and helping Mrs. D make a decision at the end of her story, we are also asked to consider our own choices for the future, older version of ourselves.

Peca Stefan (Romania) is one of Europe's most compelling and innovative young playwrights. A former resident of the Royal Court International Residency (2005), his work has been presented across Europe, Brazil and the United States, challenging audiences and bringing them into the storytelling process with an unorthodox, research-based approach.


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GREY OR SILVER POLITICS IN EUROPE'S AGEING DEMOCRACIES? SIX ESSAYS ON POPULATION AGEING, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL PREFERENCES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

BY ACHIM GOERRES

This report is a collection of six essays about population ageing, political participation and political preferences in Europe. It is intended to inform public debate and to put the understanding of politics and ageing in Europe on a sounder footing. Each essay is written to be understandable and useable for discussions on its own.

The public debate about the politics of Europe's ageing democracies suffers from the continuing existence of myths and misunderstandings. Each essay is thus framed to demystify and shed some light on issues from the vantage point of empirical social science. Grey and silver are the two colours that are used in marketing to denote negatively and positively connoted notions of ageing. These six essays show that the perspective needs to be much broader, namely not only about older people, and more nuanced, not to depict older people as a homogenous group of individuals in politics. So, the politics of ageing cannot be "silver" or "grey". They can be one, the other, both or none, depending on what aspect we are actually talking about.

Essay 1 argues that population ageing is not a new phenomenon in Europe. What is new is that we talk about it. In Essay 2, it is shown that the political participation of older people is a multidimensional phenomenon within a changing context of political participation that varies widely across Europe. Essay 3 puts forward the idea that, as we age, we do not grow politically more conservative. Age differences in political preferences are almost exclusively due to the ways different generations grow up in different places. In Essay 4, I show how social inequalities within the group of older people impede the formation of a politically uniform bloc of older people. In Essay 5, I propose that there will never be a political age conflict between the young and the old. Finally, in Essay 6 I come to the conclusion that politicians in ageing democracies are catering to a grey interest constituency that does not exist.

The development of the report has profited immensely from the input of the other fellows and participants in the workshops that were held at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in 2016 and 2017: Susana Arias, Maja Daniels, Carlos Delclós, Ingrid Guardiola, Pedro Olalla and Stefan Peca ("Peca"). Further input was given by Maxim Tucker, Leonie van Tongeren and Jordi Vaquer of the Open Society Initiative for Europe. I also thank Anne-Kathrin Fischer, Hayfat Hamidou and, in particular, Carlos Delclós for helping me to improve this text. The fantastic infographics are mostly the work of Oscar Marín Miró of Outliers.

For me as a political scientist, it was a great privilege to work together with the other fellows from Romania, Spain and Sweden and from totally different disciplinary backgrounds and to get further input on this project from people coming from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. This experience of free and international deliberation and exchange could not stand in starker contrast with other experiences of fellow political scientists, such as in contemporary Hungary, where academic freedom is currently under threat by the government.

It seems particularly worthy to publish the results from such a free and international exercise on the 72th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

Duisburg and Barcelona, 08 May 2017

Prof Achim Goerres, PhD

© Maja Daniels, Still from *Grandma Calls Me Thomas*, 2017.

1.

POPULATION AGEING IS NOT A NEW PHENOMENON IN EUROPE. WHAT IS NEW IS THAT WE TALK ABOUT IT.

In the 2013 Bundestag election, for the first time in the history of Germany, the majority of those voters (51.1 percent) who actually cast their votes were 50 years old and older. If older people are a uniform bloc of voters with like-minded interests, then Germany has since a grey majority. In other words, the majority of actual voters (as opposed to eligible voters) are less than 20 years away from their retirement. In a very provocative effort to put political pressure on the government to reform the country's public pension system, the International Monetary Fund began referring to this supposed tipping point as "the last train for pension reform" in 2004.

In democracies, majorities matter. They decide the allocation of public resources. So the fact that we are now at a stage of the population ageing process where it can be constructed that "older people" are approaching or have reached a majority seems relevant. However, two things are important here. First, despite the size of the elderly population, their political interests vary widely. Thus, the political importance attributed to this majority-approaching stage of population development seems exaggerated. Second, the discussion about population ageing often seems to suggest that it is a new phenomenon. But this is hardly the case. Europe has by and large been ageing for most of the last century and beyond.

Table 1 shows the greatest European success story of the 20th century. It displays the life expectancy at birth for all European countries for which data is available. The indicator we are using describes the average expected life span for a child born in that country in that year. This is one of the central indicators of population ageing. The figure begins in 1913, just before World War I. The differences between countries at that time are remarkable. A child born in Spain could expect to live an average of 42.6 years. Meanwhile, a child born in Sweden could expect to live 58.7 years. This is a cross-country difference of 16 years. Thus, it mattered greatly where in Europe a citizen was born.

Over time, we see a general upward trend in life expectancy at birth. There are clear dips during World War I and the influenza pandemic, during World War II and around 1989. In 2015, the minimum life expectancy in Europe was 74.6 years in Lithuania and the maximum was 83.0 years in Spain and Switzerland. The worst context to live in in 2015 was still more than 31 years better in life expectancy than the worst context to live in in 1913. The gap between the country with the highest life expectancy and that with the lowest life expectancy has been reduced to 8.4 years. It still matters a great deal where one grows up, but much less so than a century ago. Overall, this is a dramatic increase in the level of life expectancy across Europe, certainly a good thing, and at the same time an all-encompassing trend towards greater homogeneity in longevity across Europe.

These patterns indicate several things. Increases in longevity happened relatively continuously throughout the 20th century. This alone is a fact worth remembering. Better medical provisions, increasingly widespread knowledge about hygiene, healthier lifestyles and other preventive measures led to an extraordinary increase in the number of years that people can expect to live in Europe. Moreover, while the country one was born in mattered a lot in the 1900s (with Sweden being much more attractive in this regard), it mattered far less at the beginning of the 21st century. The question of where individuals age best is now much less relevant across Europe than it was 100 years ago. Remarkably, the more population ageing has been debated, the less it has mattered where an individual was born in Europe.

However, the fact that the pattern is so clear in this sub-set of countries should not prevent us from seeing that the increase of life expectancy is not absolutely uniform across countries. Two countries are particularly worth looking at: Germany and Russia. Germany is interesting insofar as life expectancy was pretty similar at the beginning of the divided era. In 1956 (when we have the first data), life expectancy at birth was almost equal at 68.8 years in the East and

68.5 years in the West. By 1989 (the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall), life expectancy had risen to 76.0 years in the West, but only 73.5 years in the East. Thus, the fundamentally different political and economic systems in each region affected the duration of life, with West Germany faring noticeably better than the East. After unification, the two regional life expectancies converged, with the East rising to 79.6 years and the West to 80.2 by the end of the 1990s. This suggests that institutions clearly matter in affecting the process of population ageing.

Russia is interestingly a notable exception to the long-term upward trend in life expectancies. In 1968, the country's life expectancy was 69.3 years. By 2008, it had declined to 67.9. Thus, while almost all other countries demonstrated an increase in life expectancy over the last quarter of the 21st century, Russia's not only stagnated, but actually decreased. It recovered to 71.1 years in 2014 afterwards.

In addition to deviations from the dominant upward country pattern, the increase in life expectancy is strongly moderated by the level of education in a country. For instance in Switzerland in the 1990s, the difference in life expectancy at age 30 between men with university education and those with only compulsory education was 7.1 years (Spoerri et al. 2006). We will look at these social inequalities of ageing more closely in another of these essays.

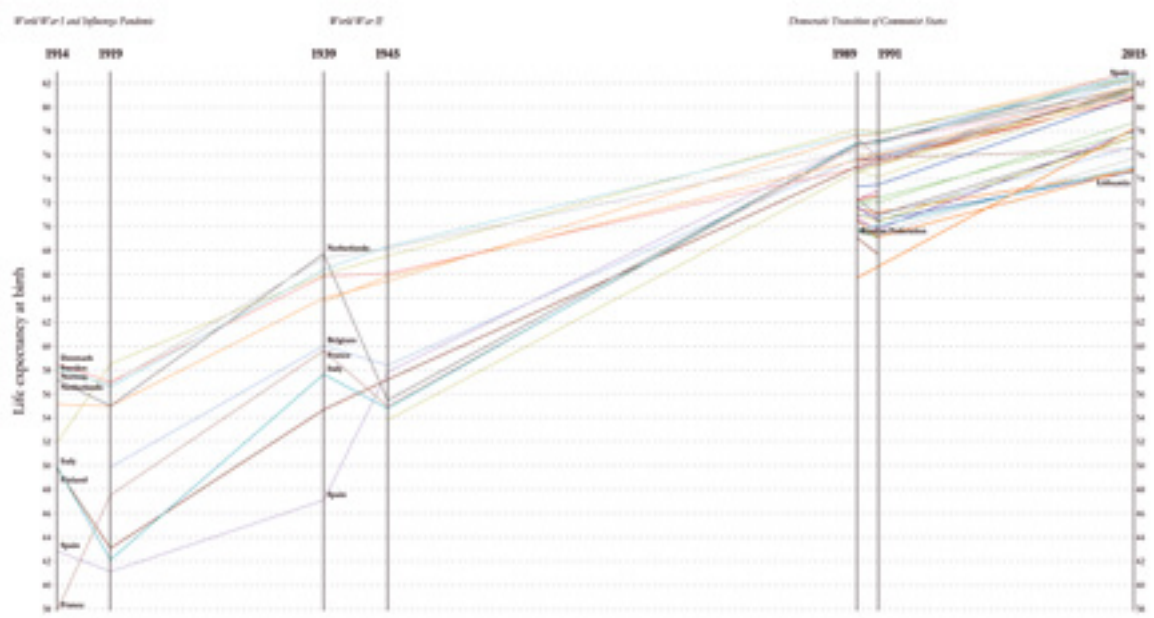

Figure 1: Life expectancy at birth between 1913 and 2015, all European countries.

Source: Generations and Gender Programme (2017) for data up to 2005, Eurostat (2017) for 2006 to 2015.

So why are we concerned with the politics of ageing societies in this day and age? I have indicated one reason above. Many European democracies are approaching a structure of the actual voting population that can be referred to as "grey majorities". It seems reasonable to discuss whether these grey majorities matter. Additionally, the discussion about potential political gerontocracies is tied closely to the fate of the modern welfare state.

The modern welfare state has its roots in the late 19th century in countries such as Germany. But its breadth in coverage and the intensity of its services and payments really rose to promi-

nence after 1945. One important effect of the modern welfare state is that the material well-being of individuals and insurance against health and life cycle risks are no longer tied to the family. Instead, the modern welfare state allows people to be insured against risks through its various programmes. For instance, when people become unemployed, they can draw on payments from it. When they are frail in old age, they can draw on public pension systems and the public health system. Children are thus no longer "needed" as an insurance mechanism.

This institutional development implies that the financing of the welfare state is contingent on the number of people benefiting from its programmes. With an increasing number of pensioners and most public pension systems being built on a variation of the pay-as-you-go logic, it is the expectation of payments from the welfare state that makes the number of older people relevant. Thus, the problem is not simply that older people are more costly for the welfare state per person per year. The challenge is rather that there are more of them and that they live much longer into retirement. Generous welfare state structures cannot be financed in the face of an increasing number of beneficiaries. The problem arises because there are some institutions in place that were not meant for such a demographic set-up. As political institutions change slowly, their change is somewhat overtaken by the change in the population make-up of European societies.

As a thought experiment, imagine an ageing society in a country with no welfare state. In such a system (present-day China or India, for instance), increasing life expectancy is not a problem of the welfare state. It may be a social problem, but it is certainly not directly a problem of the state and its modern functions, as it would be in modern welfare states.

Unfortunately, the media often intensifies discussion of contemporary Europe's supposedly "gerontocratic" tendencies. Population ageing impels journalists and others to make use of a broad variety of handy terms to talk about the implications of a growing elderly population. These include the imagery of the "grey wave" or the parasitic notion of "greedy geezers". But as we will see, these are merely caricatures of a far more complex reality.

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2.

THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF OLDER PEOPLE IS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON WITHIN A CHANGING CONTEXT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THAT VARIES WIDELY ACROSS EUROPE.

At the onset of many liberal democracies, participation in democratic elections was the only political action that citizens would engage in. All other forms of political participation were extremely rare. This has changed dramatically since the 1970s in Europe.

In mainstream political science, political participation is an individual action intended to affect political outcomes. These outcomes can be policies, political institutions or the selection of political personnel. Purely expressive actions, such as waving a flag, do not fall under this definition. Within this definition, there are a wide variety of different political actions. Here, we will only look at four that are among the most common forms of low-intensity political participation: voting, contacting a public official or politician, signing a petition and taking part in a demonstration. They are low-intensity forms of participation because they require relatively low levels of cognitive and physical abilities. The first two are often called institutionalised political participation, since they involve the use of formalised institutions of representative democracy. The second two are often called non-institutionalised participation, since they do not require formalised forms of participation.

Political participation is changing across Europe in manifold ways that vary from country to country. Broadly, individuals are becoming less willing to subscribe to whole manifestoes of political goals, such as those offered by political parties. Instead, they are increasingly interested in single political issues, such as the protection of the environment. There is also less willingness to attach oneself to a specific type of political participation in the long run. This makes non-institutionalised forms of political participation increasingly popular. Voting and some forms of institutionalised participation, like party activism, are on the decline. This is not true for all countries and all parties, but the tendency is clearly there. Across European countries, the levels of non-institutionalised participation seem to depend on the length of democratic epoch in a country. As I will show below, the longer ago the transition to democracy was, the more common non-institutionalised forms of participation are.

How we participate in politics is linked to the patterns we observe today and what we first learned when we were more impressionable young adults. This is a typical cohort phenomenon, wherein older people are different because they belong to a certain birth cohort who shared different social and political experiences at a young age. This is not a deterministic relationship, however. There are certainly very active older people in non-institutionalised forms of participation. But generally, today's older people use these forms less because these forms of participation were less common when they grew up. Nonetheless, this particular participation gap between older and young people is closing. In 1981, the non-institutionalised participation rate of older men in Western Europe was roughly 46% that of men under the age of 30. By 2000, this ratio had risen to 84%. Among women, the change was from 24 % to 52 % over the same time period (Goerres 2009: 129). As I will show below, there are even some European countries, such as Switzerland or Sweden, where the gap has reversed and older people are now more likely to use forms of non-institutionalised participation than young people.

That the manner of the overall participation process is changing is not only remarkable as such, but it carries an inherent message about social inequalities. High-frequency forms of political participation, such as voting, are less unequal than low-frequency forms of participation in terms of the social profile of those who resort to them. Moreover, non-institutionalised forms of participation are also higher education forms of political participation. So even though these forms are becoming more popular, they have a strong bias against people with a lower educational level than voting does. Thus, if older people are more likely to use institutionalised forms of participation such as voting, the social representation of older people is less biased than that of young people, who are more likely to use high-bias forms of participation. The effects of these differences on representation bias are fairly unexplored.

Let us examine age differences in political participation in more detail. We start by identifying four groups: (1) those who are inactive politically (Not active), meaning that they do not engage in any form of political activity; (2) those who only use non-institutionalised forms of participation (only non-institutionalised participants); (3) those who vote and do nothing else (Only Voters); and (4) those who vote and do at least one other activity, whatever that may be (Vote Plussers). For those groups, we use four different political actions that will also form the basis of the more nuanced analysis to follow: voting, contacting a public official or politician, signing a petition and demonstrating in the streets.

	Not Active	Only Non-Institutionalised Participants	Only Voters	Vote Plussers	Total
Older People (60+ yrs)	13	2	57	28	100
Middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	17	6	42	36	100
Young (18-29 yrs)	28	9	36	27	100
Across all Age Groups	17	5	46	32	100

Table 1: Types of political participation across age groups in Europe.

Table 1 shows the four activity groups across 27 European countries weighed by their population size. If you want to know just four numbers for the political participation of older Europeans in free European democracies, they can be found in the first row. Thirteen percent of older people in Europe are not politically active at all. Though this may seem like a lot, it is very little compared to the 28% of young people or the 17% of middle-aged people in Europe who do not participate. Meanwhile, only using non-institutionalised forms of participation is preferred by only a small fraction (2%) of older people. Among the young, however, 9% only use non-institutionalised forms of participation. Taken with the 28% of totally inactive young people, this means that nearly two-fifths of the European youth are not inside the electoral process.

In contrast, the majority of older people (57%) only participate in politics by voting, substantially more than the 42% among the middle-aged or the 36% among the young who participate in this way. Interestingly, however, 28% of older people use voting and at least one other form of political participation, a number that is very similar among the youngest group (27 %), but much lower than for the middle-aged (36%). Thus, it can be said that older people are much more firmly placed inside the electoral process than other age groups (85%), but that the middle-aged show more strength among the vote-plussers. The young are clearly the least active of the three age groups.

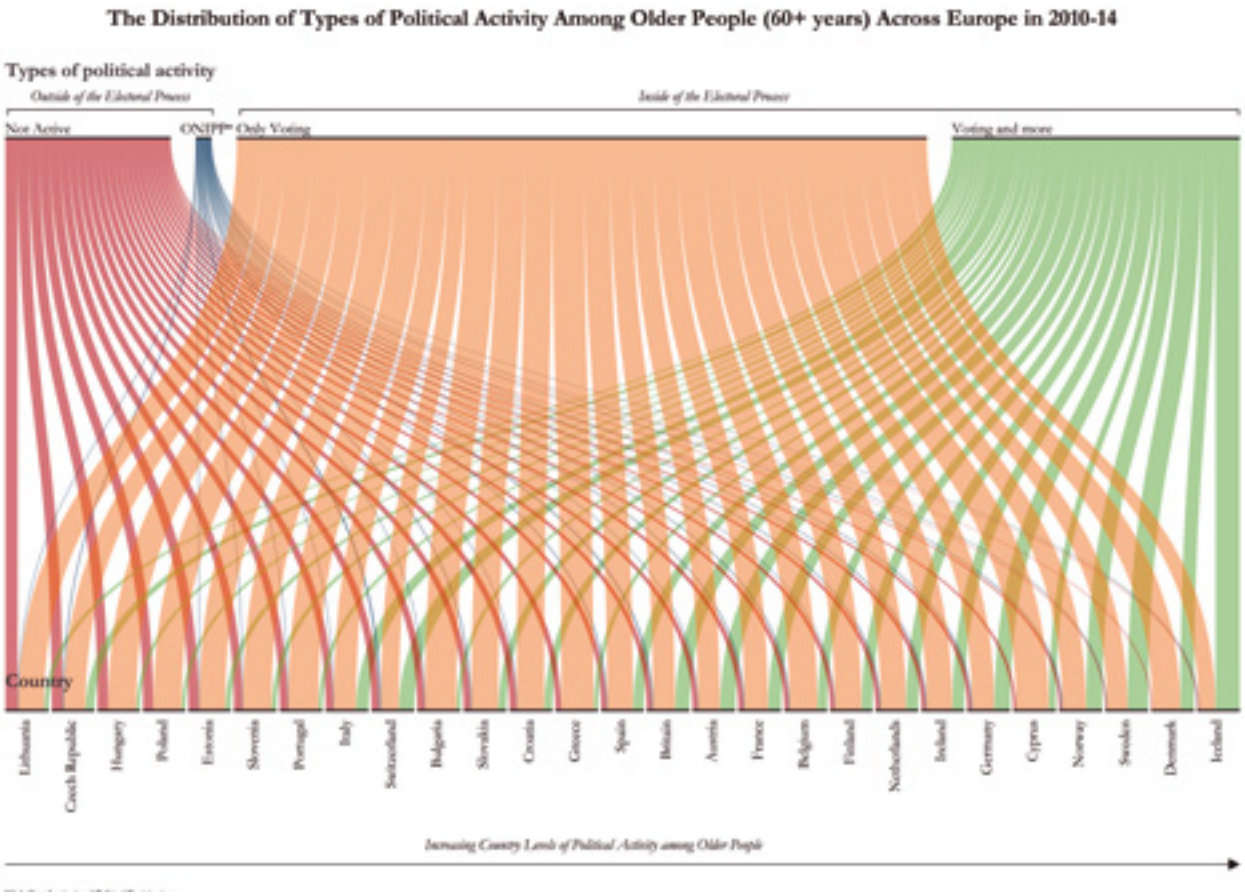

Figure 1: Distribution of activity types across European countries and Europe.

Figure 1 reveals the distribution of these four political activity groups across all 27 European countries. Lithuania has the least politically active older people whereas Iceland has the most active older people on the right. Those who only vote are the dominant activity is most European countries. Those who are active but outside of electoral politics constitute a small fraction in all European countries.

Institutionalised political participation across countries

Let us now turn to some detailed cross-country comparisons. This statistical analysis is based on all European countries that were in the European Social Survey between 2010 and 2014 and considered free democracies, a total of 27 countries. For some countries we have data from three different surveys and for others just from one.

The self-reported voting participation of older people (60+) has a minimum of 70% in Lithuania and a maximum of 96% in Denmark, with a mean of 84% (see Table 2). So while older people have high voter participation rates across Europe, there are strong differences between older people in different countries.

When we look at the ratio of elderly voting participation and young (ages 18-29) voting participation , we see that the ratio stands almost exactly at 1.0 for Italy and Belgium, meaning that in these two countries the voting rates for the two age groups are the same. This makes sense because both countries have mandatory voting with either weak enforcement (Italy) or strong enforcement (Belgium). However, for all other countries, the ratio is above 1 with an average of 1.38 and a maximum of 2.07 in Lithuania. This means that older people in Lithuania are 2.07 times more likely to vote than young people.

Overall in Europe, older people are more likely to vote than young people. The reasons for this are well-known. First, as voters have had more opportunities to vote, they get used to voting (Goerres 2007). The occasional non-voter tends to become a regular voter. This is an age effect that is likely to linger for some time to come. In addition, in many countries older people belong to cohorts that were socialised into a stronger sense of duty to vote compared to more recent cohorts (Franklin 2004). This is a historical trend that can reverse. It could be that, in the future, members of older cohorts will have a lower likelihood of voting than younger cohorts.

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old to young
Lithuania	LT	59	70	60	34	2.07
Britain	GB	71	85	70	44	1.92
Croatia	HR	75	83	81	43	1.91
Ireland	IE	74	88	77	48	1.83
France	FR	73	86	71	48	1.78
Switzerland	CH	66	77	65	46	1.68
Austria	AT	77	87	77	59	1.47
Cyprus	CY	83	92	84	63	1.47
Czech Republic	CZ	63	71	63	49	1.44
Slovenia	SI	71	79	72	55	1.44
Portugal	PT	72	80	70	58	1.39
Iceland	IS	89	95	91	71	1.34
Bulgaria	BG	77	82	76	62	1.34
Slovakia	SK	75	81	76	61	1.33
Estonia	EE	70	74	72	56	1.32
Finland	FI	83	88	82	69	1.28
Netherlands	NL	83	88	83	69	1.27
Greece	GR	81	86	82	69	1.24
Poland	PL	70	75	71	61	1.22
Norway	NO	88	92	89	76	1.22
Spain	ES	80	85	80	70	1.22
Hungary	HU	73	74	77	61	1.21
Germany	DE	83	88	83	73	1.20
Denmark	DK	93	96	94	81	1.19
Sweden	SE	92	95	93	84	1.13
Italy	IT	82	80	84	77	1.04
Belgium	BE	89	88	90	90	0.97
Mean		78	84	78	62	1.41
Minimum		59	70	60	34	0.97
Maximum		93	96	94	90	2.07

Table 2: Voting participation by age groups.

In Figure 2, we can see that the relationship between the ratio of voting levels is strongly correlated with the overall level of reported voting participation. The more common voting is in a country, the smaller the difference is. This is in parts a mechanical effect. If an activity is almost carried out by everyone, sizeable groups in that country cannot differ much in their activity levels. In other words, if the voting differential in participation between young and old is seen as a problem, increasing the overall turnout will tend to narrow the gap here.

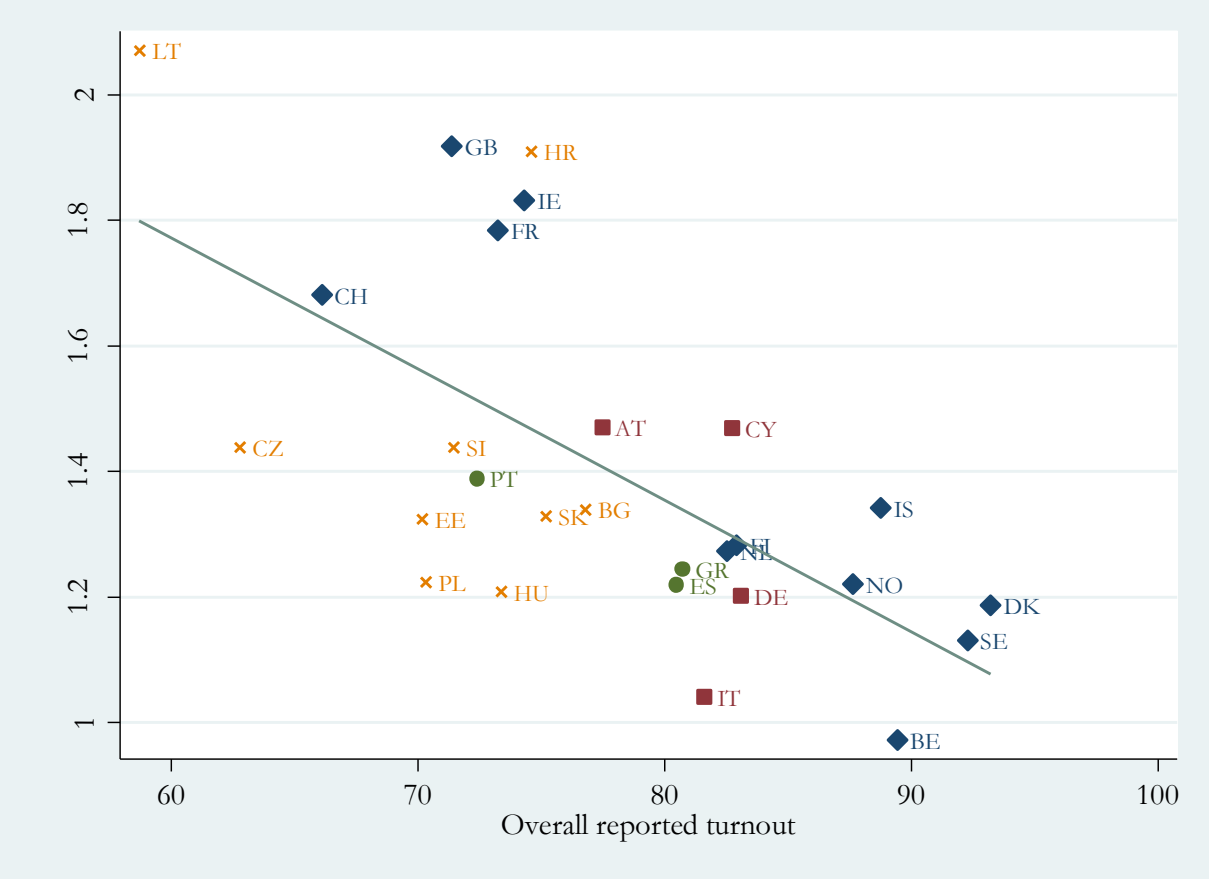

Figure 2: Scatter plot overall level of reported voting and ratio of the levels of older people and young people.

Legend: Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses= democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see Table 2.

Figure 2 also shows the timing of democratisation in each of these countries. Countries that democratised after 1989 tend to have lower levels of voter turnout overall and a stronger distortion of voting in favour of older people. In other words, more recent democracies are characterised by a voting process in which older people play a disproportionally stronger role compared to young people.

Let us turn to the second type of institutionalised political participation (Table 3, with more detailed results in the appendix). Whether people contacted a politician or public official varies a lot between countries. It is used very little in Bulgaria (5%) and very much in Iceland (28%), with an overall average of 14%. Among older people, Croats are the least likely to use that channel (4%) compared to older Icelanders (26%).

When we look at the ratio between the participation level of older people divided by that of young people, we see much more dramatic cross-country differences than we did for voting participation. Six countries show a pattern in which older people are less likely to use this channel of participation. Croatia, for instance, has a ratio of only 0.54, meaning older Croats are 46% less likely to use this form of political action than young Croats. Meanwhile, in Belgium there is absolutely no difference. In contrast, older people were more likely to use this channel in 20 countries. The maximum is in Lithuania, where older people are 2.78 times more likely to contact their public officials than young people.

	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old to young
Mean	14	13	17	9	1.51
Minimum	5	4 (Croatia)	5	3	0.54 (Croatia)
Maximum	28	26 (Iceland)	31	19	2.78 (Lithuania)

Table 3: Contacting a Public Official or Politician by Age Group.

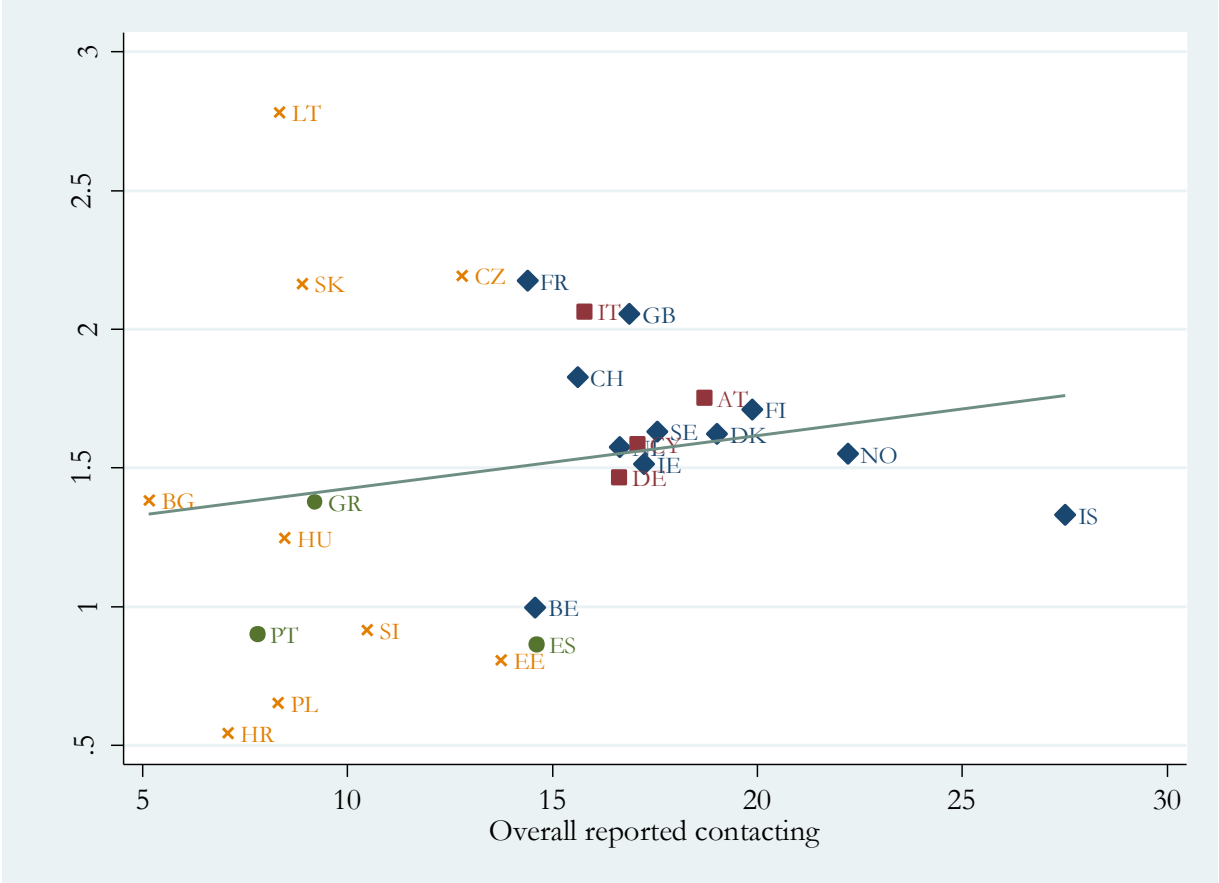

Figure 3: Scatter plot of the overall reported level of contacting a public official or politician and the age ratio.

Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses=democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see Table 2.

Figure 3 shows that there is almost no relationship between the overall level of contacting public officials and politicians and the ratio level of elderly to young people. The fitted line is almost flat. However, we do see that older democracies (i.e. those that have existed since either before Wold War II or shortly after) cluster on the right-hand side of the graph. This means that they have higher levels of contacting public officials and are less heterogeneous in terms of the ratio of elderly to young people using this form of participation. In more recently democratised countries, the level of contacting tends to be lower and the distortion of usage varies dramatically.

Non-institutionalised participation

Signing a petition is the most common form of political participation outside of the established formal channels (Table 4). Here, the range of country averages is very large. Forty six percent of older Icelanders said they had signed a petition in the previous 12 months, compared to only 3% in Hungary and Greece. The ratio is on average tilted below 1 with a mean of 0.69, a minimum of 0.29 in Portugal and a maximum of 1.03 in Switzerland. Of the 27 countries in our sample, 25 reveal a ratio below 1, meaning that older people in Europe are less likely to use this form of political participation.

	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Mean	23	17	25	24	0.67
Minimum	4	3 (Hungary, Greece)	4	3	0.29 (Portugal)
Maximum	57	46 (Iceland)	63	56	1.03 (Switzerland)

Table 4: Signing a petition by age group.

See the appendix for detailed results.

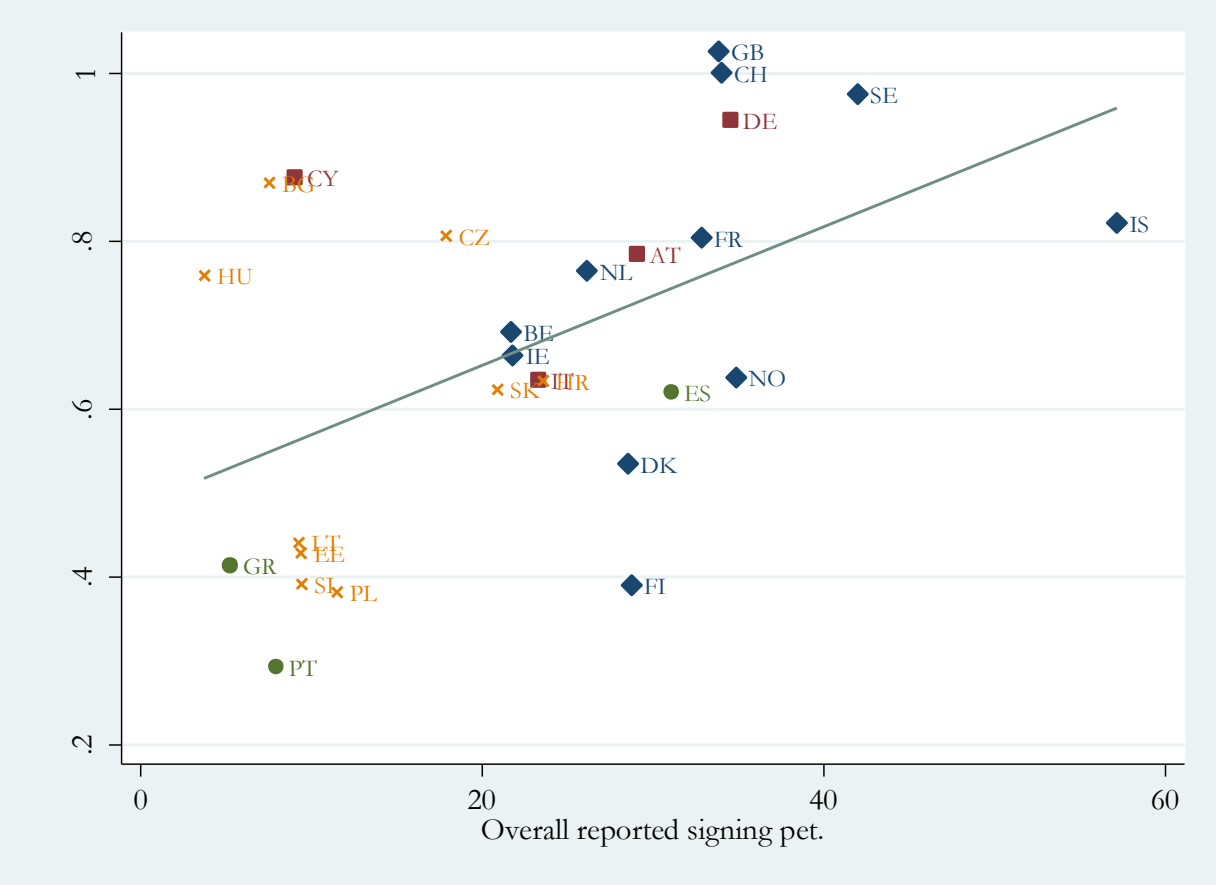

Figure 4: Scatter plot of the overall level of signing a petition and the age ratio.

Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses=democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see Table 2.

In Figure 4 we see that, in contrast to voting, there is a distinct positive relationship between the overall level of this form of political participation and the ratio. This means that the more common signing a petition is in a country, the less difference there is between whether young and older people participate in this way. At the bottom-left of the figure, we can see a cluster of six countries (Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia) that are all characterised by low levels of this form of participation and a low ratio of older to young participation. Here, signing a petition is predominantly carried out by young people and not at all by older people.

Demonstrating in the streets is another form of non-institutionalised participation that is much less used and more demanding in terms of time and energy than just signing a petition. In previous studies of the 1970s, demonstrating was considered a youth thing. This finding has now been partially revised. Demonstrating in the streets is far more common in countries such as Spain or Iceland, especially compared to places like Finland or the Netherlands. This is reflected among older people, too, with the highest participation rate being that of older Icelanders (16%). Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, Finland or Slovenia, only 1% of the elderly took part in demonstrations. In most countries (26 of the 27 in our sample), demonstrating in the streets is predominantly carried out by young people and not by older people. In Iceland, older people are resorting to street demonstrations as much as young people with the ratio at exactly one. The gap between young and older people, however, varies quite substantially across countries.

	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Mean	7	5	8	9	0.53
Minimum	2	1 (Finland, Netherlands, Slovenia)	2	3	0.16 (Finland)
Maximum	22	16 (Iceland)	25	28	1.00 (Iceland)

Table 5: Taking part in a demonstration by age group.

Figure 5 displays the overall level of demonstrating in a country and the participation ratio of older to young people. There is a positive association between the two, but not a very strong one. The more common demonstrating is, the less difference there is between older and young people. The less popular this form of participation is, the more it is carried forward by young people. There is no discernible relationship between the timing of democracy here: countries from all groups can be found everywhere. Two interesting countries stand out, Iceland and Spain. Both show a very high level of participation in demonstrations (18 and 22%). But in Iceland, older people and young people have the same level of participation, thus showing an age gap of zero. In contrast, Spain shows a significant age gap, with the ratio standing at 0.48. Older Spanish people are 52% less likely to demonstrate compared to the level of young Spanish people. Even though both countries show high levels of demonstration, in Spain this is carried out much more by young people than it is in Iceland where this kind of political action is equally popular among young and older people.

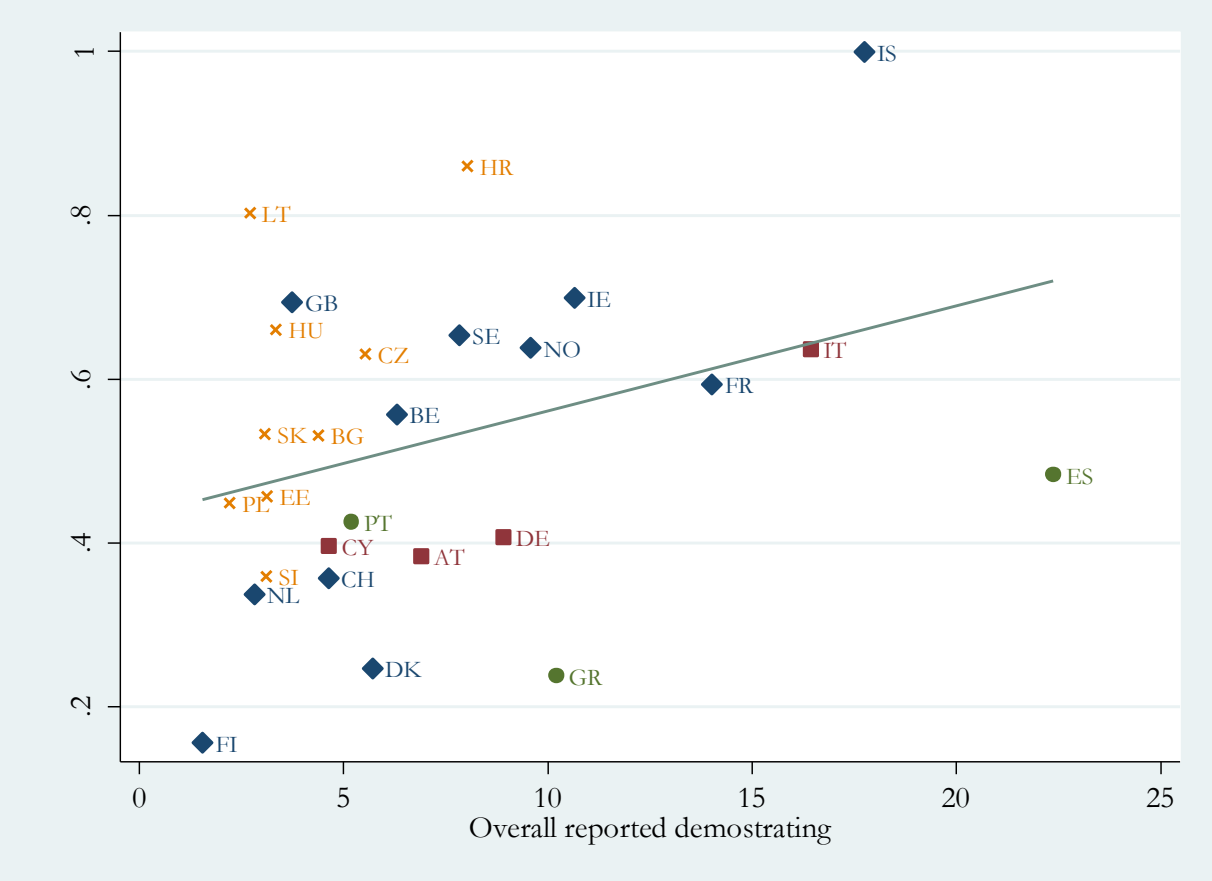

Figure 5: Scatter plot overall level of demonstrating and the age ratio.

Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses=democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see Table 2.

Figure 6 puts our evidence together. Here we see the mean age ratios for institutionalised and non-institutionalised participation in one graph. Where the two lines meet, a hypothetical country would show no difference in participation levels between older and young people in any of the two dimensions. Iceland comes closest to this point. In institutionalised participation, Icelandic older people are a little bit more active than Icelandic young people. After Iceland, Sweden comes closest to this two-dimensional parity. In non-institutionalised participation, it is the other way around. There are four countries where institutionalised participation is almost the same across age groups, but there are also sizeable differences in non-institutionalised participation in favour of young people. These are Belgium, Estonia, Finland and Spain. Britain shows a pattern of relatively small differences in non-institutionalised participation but very strong differences in institutionalised participation. Older British people are not very far from young British people in non-institutionalised participation. However, they are much more active in institutionalised forms of participation. Lithuania is the most unequal in terms of both measures. Older people in Lithuania are much more active than young people in institutionalised forms of participation and much more inactive in non-institutionalised participation. In other words, older and young people in Lithuania differ completely in their patterns of political participation.

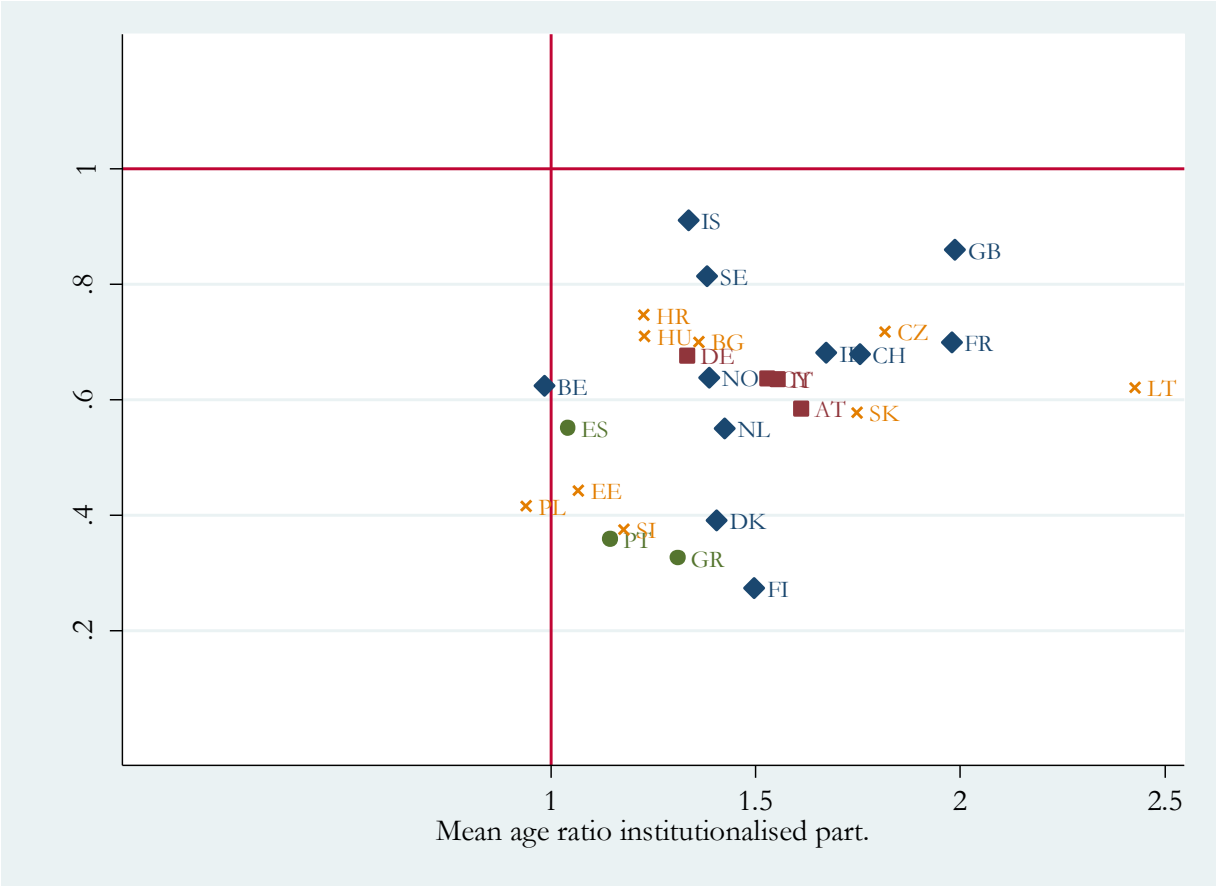

Figure 6: Scatter plot of mean age ratios institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of participation.

Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses=democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see Table 2.

To sum up the findings of this essay, older people's political participation should be considered within a broader picture of mass political participation, since political participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Most importantly, institutionalised participation through formalised routines of representative democracies is used more by older people than young people in many, but not all democracies. Exceptions include Belgium, Poland and Spain. Non-institutionalised forms of participation are characterised by a loose commitment outside of the formal channels of representative democracies. These are favoured more by young people, but in some countries like Iceland, the age gap is practically negligible. Across all modes of participation, there are a lot of differences between countries. Sometimes, there is a relationship between the levels of participation in a country and the size of the age gap. For example, in countries with higher turnout, the age gap in favour of older people is weaker. This pattern is often stratified by the age of a country's democracy with more recently democratised countries showing lower levels of participation overall. Overall, 13% of older Europeans do not participate in politics at all and only 2% limit themselves to non-institutionalised forms of participation. This implies that 85% are firmly embedded in the electoral process.

Technical Appendix

The data are mostly taken from the Eurostat database and were provided by the team of the European Social Survey.

Estimates of participation rates and support for certain political stances are my own, based on waves 5 to 7 of the European Survey. They apply to the years 2010-14. The estimates are weighted by design weight to reflect differences in sampling techniques.

Note that the estimates are based on reported behaviour. Since citizens know that democratic participation is socially desirable, some respondents indicate their having complied with this expectation while actually not having done so in reality. This is due to conscious lying and more importantly to our inner subconscious urge to be consistent with our own image of ourselves and our behaviour.

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Lithuania	LT	8	7	11	3	2.78
Czech Republic	CZ	13	14	14	6	2.19
France	FR	14	14	17	6	2.17
Slovakia	SK	9	10	10	5	2.16
Italy	IT	16	16	19	8	2.06
Britain	GB	17	19	18	9	2.06
Switzerland	CH	16	15	18	8	1.83
Austria	AT	19	20	20	12	1.75
Finland	FI	20	18	24	11	1.71
Sweden	SE	18	18	20	11	1.63
Denmark	DK	19	18	23	11	1.62
Cyprus	CY	17	15	21	9	1.59
Netherlands	NL	17	16	18	10	1.58
Norway	NO	22	20	27	13	1.55
Ireland	IE	17	19	18	13	1.51
Germany	DE	17	16	18	11	1.47
Bulgaria	BG	5	5	5	4	1.38
Greece	GR	9	7	11	5	1.38
Iceland	IS	28	26	31	19	1.33
Hungary	HU	8	7	10	6	1.25
Belgium	BE	15	12	17	12	1.00
Slovenia	SI	10	9	12	9	0.92
Portugal	PT	8	7	9	7	0.90
Spain	ES	15	9	18	11	0.86
Estonia	EE	14	10	17	13	0.81
Poland	PL	8	5	10	8	0.65
Croatia	HR	7	4	9	7	0.54
Mean		14	13	17	9	1.51
Minimum		5	4	5	3	0.54
Maximum		28	26	31	19	2.78

Table 6: Full table of estimates on contacting a public official.

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Britain	GB	34	30	37	29	**1.03**
Switzerland	CH	34	31	37	31	**1.00**
Sweden	SE	42	41	43	42	**0.98**
Germany	DE	35	29	39	31	**0.95**
Cyprus	CY	9	7	11	8	**0.88**
Bulgaria	BG	8	6	8	7	**0.87**
Iceland	IS	57	46	63	56	**0.82**
Czech Republic	CZ	18	13	20	17	**0.81**
France	FR	33	25	37	31	**0.81**
Austria	AT	29	25	31	31	**0.79**
Netherlands	NL	26	20	29	27	**0.76**
Hungary	HU	4	3	4	3	**0.76**
Belgium	BE	22	16	25	23	**0.69**
Ireland	IE	22	17	23	25	**0.66**
Norway	NO	35	27	37	42	**0.64**
Italy	IT	23	18	24	28	**0.64**
Croatia	HR	24	17	26	26	**0.63**
Slovakia	SK	21	15	22	25	**0.62**
Spain	ES	31	19	37	31	**0.62**
Denmark	DK	29	19	32	36	**0.54**
Lithuania	LT	9	5	11	12	**0.44**
Estonia	EE	9	5	11	12	**0.43**
Greece	GR	5	3	6	7	**0.41**
Slovenia	SI	9	5	11	13	**0.39**
Finland	FI	29	15	36	39	**0.39**
Poland	PL	11	6	12	16	**0.38**
Portugal	PT	8	4	10	12	**0.29**
Mean		23	17	25	24	**0.67**
Minimum		4	3	4	3	**0.29**
Maximum		57	46	63	56	**1.03**

Figure 7: Full table of estimates on signing a petition.

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Iceland	IS	18	16	19	16	**1.00**
Croatia	HR	8	6	9	7	**0.86**
Lithuania	LT	3	2	3	3	**0.80**
Ireland	IE	11	9	10	14	**0.70**
Britain	GB	4	3	4	4	**0.69**
Hungary	HU	3	2	4	4	**0.66**
Sweden	SE	8	7	7	11	**0.65**
Norway	NO	10	7	11	11	**0.64**
Italy	IT	16	14	16	22	**0.64**
Czech Republic	CZ	6	4	6	6	**0.63**
France	FR	14	10	16	16	**0.59**
Belgium	BE	6	3	8	6	**0.56**
Slovakia	SK	3	2	3	4	**0.53**
Bulgaria	BG	4	3	5	5	**0.53**
Spain	ES	22	13	25	28	**0.48**
Estonia	EE	3	2	3	5	**0.46**
Poland	PL	2	2	2	4	**0.45**
Portugal	PT	5	3	6	7	**0.43**
Germany	DE	9	6	9	14	**0.41**
Cyprus	CY	5	2	5	6	**0.40**
Austria	AT	7	4	8	11	**0.38**
Slovenia	SI	3	1	4	4	**0.36**
Switzerland	CH	5	2	5	7	**0.36**
Netherlands	NL	3	1	3	4	**0.34**
Denmark	DK	6	3	6	11	**0.25**
Greece	GR	10	4	11	17	**0.24**
Finland	FI	2	1	2	4	**0.16**
Mean		7	5	8	9	**0.53**
Minimum		2	1	2	3	**0.16**
Maximum		22	16	25	28	**1.00**

Table 8: Full table of estimates on taking part in a demonstration.

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3.

AS WE AGE, WE DO NOT GROW POLITICALLY MORE CONSERVATIVE. AGE DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL PREFERENCES ARE ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY DUE TO THE WAYS DIFFERENT COHORTS GREW UP.

One of the great myths about ageing and older people in politics is that individuals become more conservative with age. There is the commonly known *bon mot* that "if you're not a liberal when you're 25, you have no heart. If you're not conservative by the time you're 35, you have no brain." This saying, which cannot be traced unequivocally to one source but seems to have been expressed first with slightly different age groups and adjectives by John Adams in a 1799 diary entry, seems to ring a bell with many observers of our European societies (Shapiro 2011).

The simple and, to some people, very appealing idea behind this is plainly wrong. Yet there seems to be something intuitively accurate about the phrase, which might explain why it has lasted so long despite the fact that there are very concrete empirical problems with it. In modern Europe, the period between an individual's twenties and thirties is one of many changes for many people. They settle into their jobs, maybe they start a family, they start using different services provided by the public and private sector. Thus, it seems to make sense that political preferences change, too, during this period.

To begin with, political conservatism can mean several things. It can mean a generally held belief or a set of political values that are called "conservative". Political science differentiates between two dimensions along which political preferences are usually grouped in Europe and to which political parties and candidates respond in terms of what they offer voters. The first is the economic dimension, which is associated by most people in Europe with the idea of left and right. Individuals who are more leftist on this dimension tend to believe in a strong role of the state in regulating the economy and redistributing between various social groups, most importantly from the rich to the poor. People who are more rightist on the economic dimension tend to believe in a lean role of the state both in regulating the market and in redistribution. The second dimension is the cultural one. People who are leftist here tend to support diversity with regard to sexual orientation, religion, ethnic background, language and other defining markers, and believe that the state should provide regulations to allow such diversity. Those on the cultural right are more supportive of a dominant way of living one's life that is typically linked to a specific and narrow set of markers, such as one ethnic origin, one type of religion and one family structure. These two dimensions are not fully independent from another. Those people who are more conservative economically tend to be more conservative culturally, the relationship between the two dimensions is, however, not very strong. This is the reason why it makes sense for parties to explore the full two-dimensional room on these dimensions. For instance, the Dutch left-liberal party D66 (Democraten 66) and the right-liberal party VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid and Democraties) are both economically conservative, but they differ on the cultural dimension with the D66 being more progressive culturally than VVD.

We can analyse these dimensions of political values by looking at some public opinion data from 2010 to 2014 from the European Social Survey. To measure the economic dimension, we will use support for the idea that the government should redistribute from the rich to the poor.

Table 1 shows the two demographically oldest European societies and the two youngest alongside support for the above statement as expressed in the European Social Survey. The first column shows estimated support across all age groups, the second the level of support among the 60+ group, the third the level among those under 30 and the last column the ratio of column 2 to 3. Again, if the ratio stands at one, there is no difference in support levels between the two age groups.

In Germany, 70% of the adult population think that the state should redistribute from the rich to the poor, while 73% of older people and 70% of young people think so. So, in Germany, younger people are actually more likely to be economically conservative than older people, but only very slightly. Older people are 1.04 times more likely to be supportive of redistribution than young people. The same pattern prevails in Italy, which is demographically the most similar society to Germany in Europe. It also holds in Ireland and Slovakia, the two youngest societies in our sample.

	Income diff reduce overall	Income diff reduce 60+	Income diff reduce 18-29	Ration old by young
Germany	70	73	70	1.04
Ireland	77	82	73	1.12
Italy	83	85	78	1.09
Slovakia	76	82	73	1.13

Table 1: Support for income redistribution by age group.

Let us now look at the cultural dimension. Table 2 shows similar evidence about whether individuals support the idea that homosexuals should be able to live as they want. The numbers are levels of support for the culturally progressive position. In Germany, for example, 85% of the adult population believe that homosexuals should live their lives as they wish, while 77% of older people and 88% of young people believe the same. Older people are thus 12% less likely to support this view. All four countries show the same inter-age group pattern, namely that older people tend to be culturally more conservative than young people. The only striking difference in Table 2 is between Slovakia and the other three countries, since Slovakia has a strongly culturally conservative populace with stark age group differences and an age ratio of 0.50.

	Homosexual lifest accept overall	Homosexual lifest accept 60	Homosexual lifest accept 18-29	Homosexual accept old by young
Germany	85	77	88	0.88
Ireland	86	78	89	0.88
Italy	73	67	74	0.90
Slovakia	42	27	54	0.50

Table 2: Support for free expression of homosexual life styles in two oldest and youngest democracies.

Figure 2 gives us an overview of all European countries in terms of the differences between older and young people with respect to the economic and cultural views described above. The picture is divided by the two parity lines at the value 1. The biggest quadrant is to the top left: older people are economically less and culturally more conservative than young people. Four countries deviate from this pattern: Austria, Switzerland, Great Britain (i.e., United Kingdom without Northern Ireland) and the Netherlands. In the first three, older people are on average both economically and culturally more conservative than young people. In the Netherlands, however, older people are less conservative than young people on both dimensions, although only slightly so in the cultural dimension.

The countries are also marked by different symbols depending on their time of democratisation. Those countries that have been democratised before or slightly after World War II tend to show a smaller age ratio in the cultural dimension than the other countries. This means that the difference between older people and the young in terms of the cultural dimension is much smaller in more established democracies.

In a nutshell based on our measures, older people are on average and in most European countries economically less conservative than young people. They are also culturally more conservative, broadly, than their young country peers.

Are there any explanations for these patterns? First of all, the distribution of certain social characteristics is different among the elderly than it is among younger people. For instance, the group of older people is more female than younger groups due to gender-specific mortality rates and less well educated due to recent expansions of educational possibilities. Being female and lower educated are both associated with less economic conservatism than being male or higher-educated. At the same time, women and lower educated people are also less likely to be economically conservative, supporting the notion that the differences observed may be due to the composition of the groups.

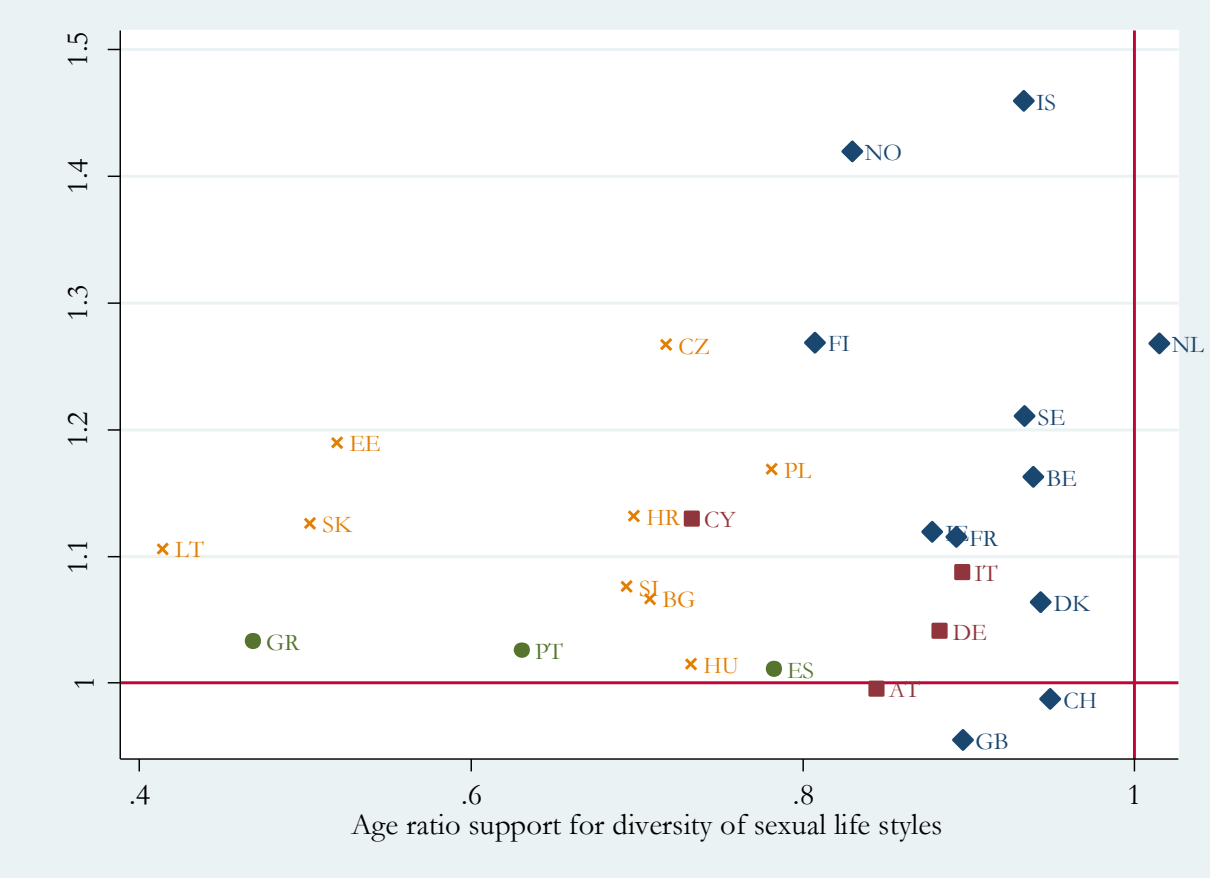

Figure 1: Age ratios of support for redistribution (economic progressivism) and support for diversity of sexual orientation (cultural progressivism).

Legend: Diamonds=Democracies since before 1945, rectangles=democracies since after 1945 and before 1961, circles=democracies since the 1970s, crosses=democracies since 1989. For country acronyms, see appendix.

There are further explanations for age-related differences with regard to political values. Most importantly, older people are members of a different cohort than younger people. This means that individuals who grew up during the same time, given the same historical context, share similar experiences that shapes them in late adolescence and early adulthood. Political scientists use the term

"political generations" to refer to causal mechanism. These common experiences are tremendously shaped by national circumstances and political history. Being a member of a birth cohort in one country can shape an individual rather differently than being the member of the same birth cohort in another country. If these experiences were all idiosyncratic to a national context, we would not see such a common pattern across countries. Instead, there are some cohort experiences that have a similar political effect across European countries. World War II and its aftermath is one such common experience. We know that the experience of death and violence in World War II shaped the collective experience in Eastern Europe and the longing for safety in the European Union.

More importantly in the context of our discussion about conservatism, there have been broad developments in Europe that shaped the ways in which members of different cohorts relate to politics. One of these broad developments is socio-economic modernisation and democratisation (Inglehart 1997). This is a broad development at the social, economic and political level through which individuals grow more individualistic, more cosmopolitan and more accepting of diversity. This development catches cohorts differently, such that it is mostly those cohorts whose members are still young and can still be shaped by this change. When we look at a snap shot of younger and older people as we did with our data, this can explain the varying degrees of cultural conservatism among older people. Their cohorts have been less impacted by this development than cohorts of younger people. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the richer and, according to this theory, socio-economically more developed countries in Europe (Western Europe) tend to be more on the right of the x-axis in Figure 1. The further along societies are in the process of socio-economic development, the smaller the gap in cultural conservatism between younger and older people is. Lithuania, Greece, Estonia and Slovakia show culturally much more conservative older people relative to younger people in their countries because they are, according to this theory, less developed (with GDP per capita being a simple indicator of that). Iceland, the Netherlands and Belgium, in contrast, show a rather low level of difference.

This co-evolution with socio-economic development is remarkable because the social status of older people tends to decline with increasing modernisation. In pre-modern society, the social status of older men (not women!) as the heads of households was still high (Foner 1984). This status declined with increasing industrialisation and was finally removed altogether with the introduction of the modern welfare state, which allowed all individuals to seek their own material fortunes without the family having to be the main safety net.

In other words, if older people are more conservative than younger people, this is much more likely due to their cohort membership than to where they are in the life cycle. But these differences are not stable across time. For instance, analyses of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom demonstrate that older people in 2016 were much more likely to vote for the Leave option than for the Remain option, most likely because older people belonged to cohorts that were more fond of the traditional nation-state than the supranational structure of EU governance (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016).

So, is there anything left to say about older people and conservatism? There is some evidence about voters being more open to newer parties in the first elections of their lives. Later, if these parties do not make it into the establishment, they tend to shift to more established parties. As voters have had more opportunities to cast a vote, they grow increasingly disenchanted with wasting their votes on new parties. However, this effect, which one might call status-quo conservatism, is small and can only be demonstrated for countries with proportional representation systems (Goerres 2009).

Appendix

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Iceland	IS	73	86	73	59	1.46
Norway	NO	57	66	55	47	1.42
Finland	FI	75	81	73	64	1.27
Netherlands	NL	56	64	54	51	1.27
Czech Republic	CZ	61	69	60	55	1.27
Sweden	SE	68	75	65	62	1.21
Estonia	EE	78	85	76	71	1.19
Poland	PL	78	85	77	73	1.17
Belgium	BE	71	77	70	66	1.16
Croatia	HR	85	88	86	78	1.13
Cyprus	CY	84	90	83	80	1.13
Slovakia	SK	76	82	75	73	1.13
Ireland	IE	77	82	77	73	1.12
France	FR	75	78	75	70	1.12
Lithuania	LT	90	94	89	85	1.11
Italy	IT	83	85	84	78	1.09
Slovenia	SI	87	91	85	85	1.08
Bulgaria	BG	87	91	86	85	1.07
Denmark	DK	39	41	37	38	1.06
Germany	DE	70	73	69	70	1.04
Greece	GR	82	82	83	80	1.03
Portugal	PT	92	93	92	91	1.03
Hungary	HU	87	87	87	86	1.02
Spain	ES	84	86	82	85	1.01
Austria	AT	83	83	82	83	1.00
Switzerland	CH	65	66	63	67	0.99
Britain	GB	63	62	62	65	0.96
Mean		75	79	74	71	1.13
Minimum		39	41	37	38	0.96
Maximum		92	94	92	91	1.46

Table 5: Support for income redistribution by age group.

Country Name	Country Code	Overall	Level among older people (60+)	Level among middle-aged (30-59 yrs)	Level among young (18-29 yrs)	Ratio old by young
Netherlands	NL	93	91	94	90	1.01
Switzerland	CH	81	76	84	81	0.95
Denmark	DK	91	88	93	93	0.94
Belgium	BE	86	82	88	88	0.94
Sweden	SE	90	87	91	93	0.93
Iceland	IS	94	87	96	94	0.93
Britain	GB	85	79	87	88	0.90
Italy	IT	73	67	77	74	0.90
France	FR	82	75	84	84	0.89
Germany	DE	85	77	88	88	0.88
Ireland	IE	86	78	89	89	0.88
Austria	AT	76	71	77	84	0.84
Norway	NO	85	76	87	92	0.83
Finland	FI	75	67	78	83	0.81
Spain	ES	84	71	88	91	0.78
Poland	PL	51	41	55	53	0.78
Cyprus	CY	58	49	60	67	0.73
Hungary	HU	47	39	50	53	0.73
Czech Republic	CZ	63	52	65	72	0.72
Bulgaria	BG	56	47	60	66	0.71
Croatia	HR	41	34	41	49	0.70
Slovenia	SI	57	46	60	66	0.69
Portugal	PT	69	54	74	86	0.63
Estonia	EE	43	30	46	58	0.52
Slovakia	SK	42	27	45	54	0.50
Greece	GR	52	32	56	68	0.47
Lithuania	LT	20	13	20	30	0.41
Mean		69	61	72	75	0.78
Minimum		20	13	20	30	0.41
Maximum		94	91	96	94	1.01

Table 6: Support for free expression of homosexual life styles.

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4.

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES WITHIN THE GROUP OF OLDER PEOPLE IMPEDE THE FORMATION OF A POLITICALLY UNIFORM BLOC OF OLDER PEOPLE.

There are various examples of older people's political protests in Europe. In Spain, the Iaioflautas movement is one of older people who protest on multiple political issues related to the labour market, education, health, gender and basic income. They use new modes of swift communication and conduct political actions defying stereotypes of old age, mirroring other older people's social movements such as the Raging Nannies in Canada and the USA (Blanche-Tarragó and Fernández-Ardèvol 2014). In 2004 and 2005 in England, political protests against the Council Tax were mainly led by older people, as they were disproportionally affected by it (Goerres 2009: chap. 7). In the early 1990s, older people in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary protested in favour of acceptable pension deals after the political transitions of their respective countries (Vanhuysse 2006).

But there is a common misperception in the public discourse about political protests among older people. There is an inherent portrayal of older people as a generally homogenous political group. Visuals of older people protesting seem to strengthen this conclusion, since they involve individuals who are united in their common course. Yet, these images only represent a fraction of all older people and only one particular course. To draw conclusions about older people from those images is comparable to seeing a group of top athletes long-jumping and extrapolating from this that all humans can jump that far.

Discussions about the political participation and views of older people could benefit from shifting our focus to the immense social heterogeneity that exists within the group of older people. This social heterogeneity also translates into political heterogeneity, both in terms of activism and in terms of interests. Let us consider four major social lines of stratification that are particularly relevant for politics: education, income, gender and health.

Education and income are the main social dividing lines between individuals across Europe, stratifying the social position that an individual has in a society as well as his or her political preferences and behaviour. A rich, highly educated older person is miles away from a poor, low-educated older person, both in terms of social as well as political experience. The fact that both are pensioners and therefore recipients of public pensions is not a strong bond. For the rich senior, a public pension is likely to be a smaller fraction of his or her disposable income than for the poor senior. The rich, highly educated senior is more likely to have diversified his or her pension income across a diverse set of assets and different kinds of pensions.

Let us look at the relationship between household income and support for redistribution from the rich to the poor by the state. We will use this attitude to get a sense of where people see themselves on the classic economic scale from very left to very right. Across all older people, 73% think that it is the role of the government to decrease income differences between the rich and the poor. However, when we divide older people by income groups, we get exactly the pattern that we see among younger people. Those with higher income support this notion less often than those with lower income. More concretely, among older people whose household income is in the lowest 30% of their respective country's income distribution, the proportion that supports income redistribution by the state lies at 79%. Among the highest 30% of household incomes, that estimate lies at 62%. In other words, income divides older people as to their demand for one of the core functions of the modern state in the same way it divides younger people.

Gender is another factor which stratifies the social experience of modern life to a great extent. At old age, the accumulation of these experiential differences becomes greatest and intersects with different mortality rates. All over the world, women are on average more likely to live longer than men (Barford et al. 2006). The gap in life expectancy between men and women has been decreasing in Europe over the last two decades, yet it still varies widely (Van Oyen et al. 2010). This means that the older the age group is, the more female it is. We know of some gender-related differences in political preferences. Women tend to place more emphasis on some policy issues over others

(Campbell 2004). They are also less likely to vote for right-wing parties (Norris 2005) and more likely to support social policy expenditure (Jaime-Castillo et al. 2016; Hatemi et al. 2012). Thus, the composition of political behaviour and preferences is affected by there being more women at old age.

Health is another important line of division among older people. Health discrepancies in old age are striking. As a result, pension age can typically be divided into a first period, when pensioners are still capable of many things and a second period characterised by multi-morbidity, incapacitating them in many ways. The first period is referred to as the "third age" or "young old" and the second as the "fourth age" or "old old". The age at the time of transition from the first period to the second period varies greatly among individuals. Health is an important predictor of political participation (Mattila et al. 2013; Sund et al. 2016; Söderlund and Rapeli 2015). Yet it predicts participation in different ways. Voting can be made accessible to individuals with health problems in various ways like proxy voting (someone votes for you), postal voting and mobile voting booths (in hospitals for example), mitigating the impact of health problems. But other forms of participation, such as writing letters or demonstrating in the streets, are much more demanding in terms of cognitive and physical abilities. Health inequalities thus translate more into political inequalities among older people for those political actions that are more demanding.

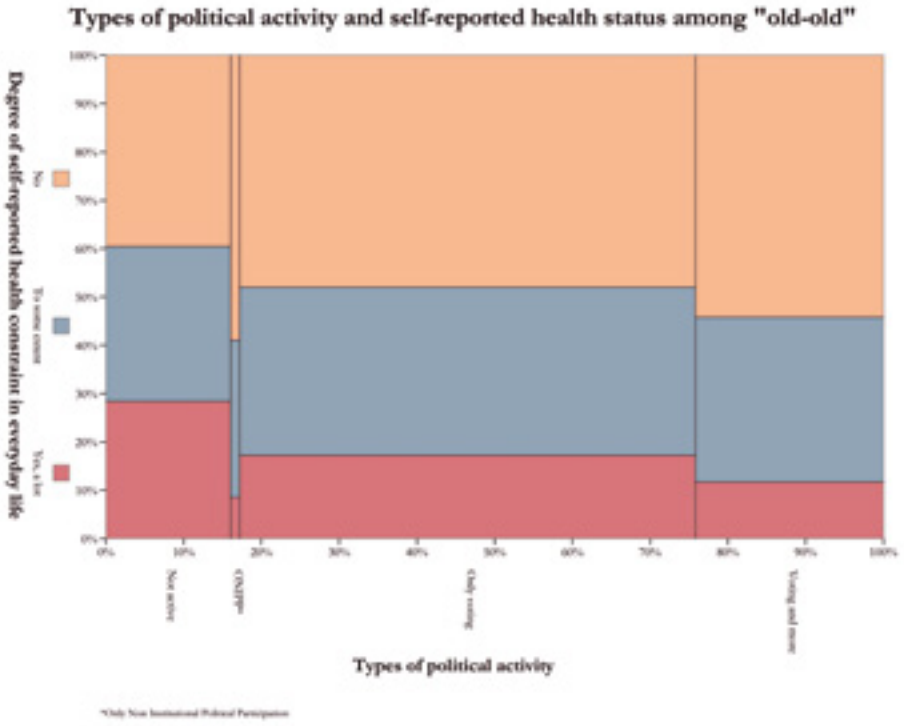
We can explore this using 2014 survey data for 20 European countries. In that survey, people were asked whether they were hampered in their daily activities by any illness or disability. Among the young old (people between 60 and 74 years old), 27% said that they were to some extent hampered, while 9% said that they were hampered very much. In the group of the old-old (people aged 75 and older), 34% said that they were hampered to some extent and 18% that they were hampered a lot. This pattern is mirrored in their political activity levels.

In Figure 1, we can see two mosaic plots that classify four types of political activity and the degree of self-perceived constraint, once for the young-old and once for the old-old. Each tile of the mosaic represents the sub-group of one activity type and one type of self-assessed constraint. The four types of activities are: non-active, only voting, voting and more, and only non-institutionalised political participation.

In the previous on political participation in general, we saw that older people who only vote are the largest group followed by the very active group of voters and more, followed by the non-active and those who only use non-institutionalised forms of participation. In this plot, we can now explore how the different activity types intersect with the level of self-perceived health constraints.

Each tile is the size of the sub-group defined by the two levels of the two variables. So, in each sub-panel, the lowest tile on the left is the group that feels hampered heavily by health issues and is politically active. This share is much bigger in the group of the old-old compared to the young-old. The blue tiles are the sub-groups who do not feel hampered at all in their everyday lives. We see that the unhampered group is represented more in higher-activity groups than in the passive groups. We also see that the largest group among the young-old and the old-old are the ones that feel fine and just go to the polls. These are older people who are not constrained by their health and only partake in politics through voting. However, among the old-old, this group is smaller than among the young-old. Overall, the politically passive and those who only vote are more common among the old-old than among the young -old. The group whose members use voting in addition to other forms of political participation is smaller among the old-old than among the young-old.

In a nutshell, we see that health structures the ways in which older people participate in politics. Worse health is associated with less or no political activity. Non-institutionalised participation plays a small role among older people to begin with, and it becomes almost non-existent among the old-old.



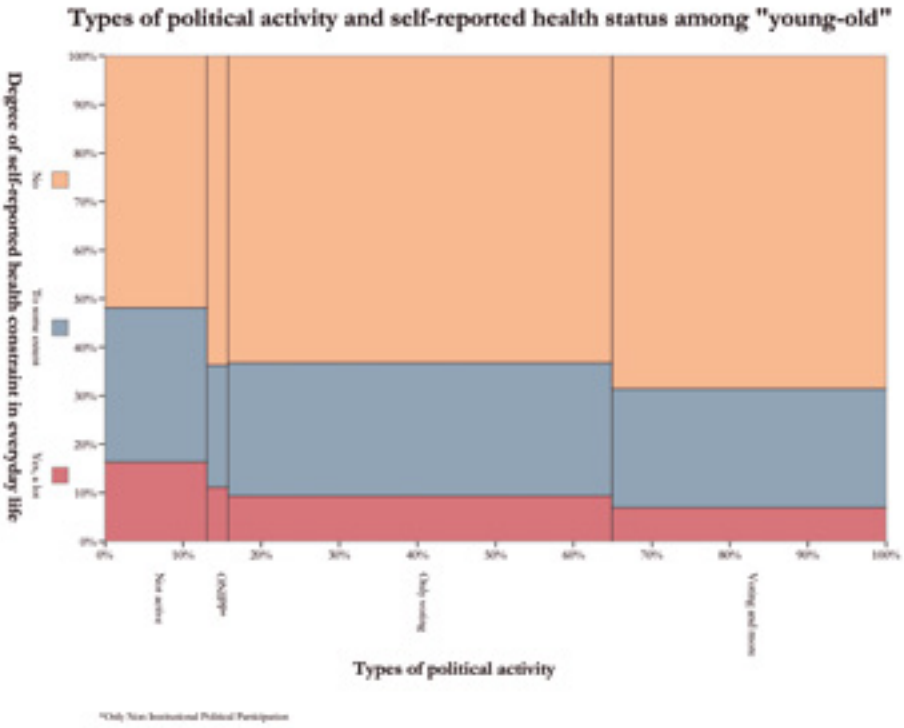


Figure 1: Proportion of sub-groups by activity types and whether they feel hampered by health issues in their daily activities, 20 European countries in 2014.

We have thus confirmed that older people are a divided group. They are divided by differences in attitudes and resources that relate to income, education, gender and health. These differences not only structure the social position of older people, but also what they do and want in politics. Socio-economic inequality among older people translates into political inequality among older people, a fact that is often very much neglected in public debate.

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5.

THERE WILL NEVER BE A POLITICAL AGE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE YOUNG AND THE OLD.

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 essay 6 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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6.

POLITICIANS IN AGEING DEMOCRACIES ARE CATERING TO A GREY INTEREST CONSTITUENCY THAT DOES NOT EXIST.

"With 20 million voters over the age of 50, isn't it time politicians stopped just kissing babies?"
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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