

## What happens when older voters dominate European electorates



Seen from afar, Europe looks like a “gerontocracy”, an American newspaper reported in 1963. Europeans were young in years and outlook (their median age was just 32). But their leaders included the 87-year-old Konrad Adenauer in Germany; septuagenarian despots in Spain and Portugal; Charles de Gaulle in France (then 72, and destined to hang on to the presidency for six more years); and the baby of the bunch, Britain’s 68-year-old Harold Macmillan, who was soon to quit as prime minister.

Today Europe again faces rule by the elderly. Not because its leaders are all ancient: modern politicians tend to flaunt pregnant wives and school-age children, and disport themselves in cycling shorts and running kit. Now it is the voters who have aged. By 2050, more than a third of potential European Union voters will be over 65. And because older voters turn out more reliably than the young, they could wield crushing power.

That alarms those worried about Europe’s pension and welfare systems. David Willetts, a British Tory, has caused a stir with “The Pinch”, a book accusing baby-boomers (a huge cohort born between 1945 and 1965) of stealing their children’s future. Boomers own more than half of Britain’s £6 trillion (\$9 trillion) of personal wealth, he claims. The causes include a house-price boom and generous company pension schemes that are closed to younger workers. Mr Willetts (born in 1956) fears that an army of retired boomers may vote for whopping sums to be spent on health care and pensions, against the wishes of younger taxpayers who might prefer spending on things like education.

Such fears are inspiring bold thinking. Arji Lans Bovenberg at Tilburg University in the Netherlands (born in 1958) wonders if parents should be given an extra vote at elections for each young child in their charge. An economist at Vienna University, Dennis Mueller (born in 1940) notes that the old have to take driving tests to keep their licences. What about citizenship tests before they are allowed to vote, similar to the civic quizzes faced by many

immigrants? Some political parties, including Labour in Britain, have suggested that the legal voting age should fall to 16.

Such solutions tend to have drawbacks. They discriminate against those who cannot have children. Or they insult older voters who have served their countries for decades. In 2008 Austria became the first European country to allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections. A lot of them promptly voted for far-right parties, which got more support from the young than from the old.

It is easy to be gloomy about the idea of a gerontocracy seizing power in the European Union, a place already struggling to stay competitive. Eurobarometer opinion polls, which survey 1,000 citizens in each of the 27 EU members, offer rich seams of evidence that political and economic preferences vary with age. For instance, older voters are less satisfied with their lives and more pessimistic about the economic future. Older Europeans are more likely to say that the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 made life in their country “more insecure”, a pattern that holds true in both eastern and western Europe.

Overall, Europeans are less entrepreneurial and less mobile than Americans. The averages conceal age differences. A 2007 Eurobarometer found 61% of Americans would rather be self-employed. Europeans under 24 came close to American levels of enthusiasm for the risky freedom of the entrepreneur. But older Europeans preferred having a regular salary, thank you.

And yet a fixation on age risks missing a more serious problem facing Europe. It is true that Eurobarometer surveys show opinions varying with age. But such differences are trumped by those based on nationality. Take enthusiasm for self-employment. Older Europeans are less keen than the young on going it alone, but not by much. Yet at Europe’s extremes the gaps are huge: 57% of Portuguese fancy being self-employed, but only 30% of Belgians. (The survey found Belgians especially keen on fixed working hours, a finding that rings true for anyone needing a Brussels plumber at the weekend.)

## **Golden oldies**

A recent Eurobarometer asked if governments should make it easier for older people to keep working after their retirement age, if they wished. It found small differences by age, but astonishing gulfs by nationality. Almost nine out of ten respondents in Britain, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands said oldies should be helped to work if they wanted. At the other extreme, 55% of Greeks were opposed. That may be because Greeks lead the EU in believing the lump-of-labour fallacy: a huge majority agree that, as older people work longer, “fewer jobs will be available for younger people”. The fallacy that working oldies would automatically steal jobs from the young is also popular in Cyprus, Hungary, Portugal and Italy, even though those countries face very different rates of ageing. In other words, national political cultures matter more than age.

Spain’s government appears scared even to debate a higher pension age. Others are braver. In Nordic countries legal retirement ages are increasingly pegged to life expectancy. Earlier this month a Dutch trade union boss, Peter Gortzak, suggested that workers should be promised a fixed length of retirement, say 20 years, with their retirement dates calculated

backwards from average life expectancy in their sector (i.e., those in tougher trades could retire younger).

Gerontocratic rule certainly poses long-term dangers. But Europe must above all avoid being pulled apart, as some countries tackle ageing better than others. Old age is not the enemy of reform: ignorance, selfishness and timidity are. The old have no monopoly on these vices and may have picked up some wisdom. In the coming decades, Europe will need much of that.

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