

Cohort size matters: democracy is in danger as young people's disenfranchisement accelerates

Blog Admin

As the electorate ages, intergenerational inequality grows. [Craig Berry](#) explains that young people are in some ways being 'out-voted' by older cohorts, a problem that will only get worse and may undermine the legitimacy of representative democracy itself.



Young people are more affected by the outcomes of the democratic process than other cohorts; their youth means that by and large they will live with the consequences of political decisions for longer. Furthermore, young people are at a crucial life-stage – undertaking education and training, embarking on careers, forming families – where the impact of political decisions will have a decisive and cumulative effect on their socio-economic circumstances and life chances across their lifecourses. The growing power of 'the grey vote' appears to have had real consequences for the ability of young people to make themselves heard within the democratic process, but more worryingly, may begin to undermine the legitimacy of democracy itself.

Simply, cohort size matters. [Analysis of the British Election Survey](#) by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel shows that generations tend to be selfish when they get to the ballot box. That generations can act, more or less coherently, to bring about change in social structures was a proposition first put forward by Karl Mannheim in 1923. Mannheim, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, believed that generational change was one of the [main driving forces](#) of political change.

Strangely, this key precept of the discipline of sociology seems to have been largely overlooked by the study of democracy by political scientists. Clearly, this does not mean that life-stage or generational identity determines voting behaviour; intergenerational solidarity is evident across many areas, and there are many forms of political inequality and many determinants of people's political preferences. But age is nevertheless a relevant factor; that young people are in some ways being 'out-voted' by older cohorts should therefore be a matter for concern.

At the 2010 general election, 40-somethings were dominant at the ballot box. The youngest voters, and voters in their early-30s, were particularly disadvantaged. But the voting power of people approaching retirement, whose life chances will be affected by electoral outcomes to a far lesser extent than younger voters, was also highly significant. There were more voters aged 50, 51, 52 or 63 than any single age between 31 and 36, more voters aged 62 than any single age between 32 and 35, and more voters aged 50, 51 or 63 than aged 18.

This inequality will accelerate in coming decades. Due to increasing survival rates, and the ageing of the members of the large baby booms of the immediate post-war era, the overriding trend is towards an older electorate, with greater concentrations of potential voting power among people in their 50s and 60s. There will be only 708,000 18 year-old potential voters, and 702,000 19 year-old potential voters (compared to a single-year age cohort average size of 902,000 for 50-somethings) – single-year cohort sizes across the age distribution will not drop below this level until age 65.

Thirty years later, in 2051, there will be a particularly powerful set of cohorts aged around 60. The average single-year cohort size for people aged 58-62 will be 937,000, yet there will be only 825,000 18 year-old voters, and no smaller cohort up to age 68. The median potential voter was 46 in 2010. In 2021 this will rise to 47. The median potential voter will be aged 50 by 2041, and 51 in 2051. It is worth reiterating that this is a relatively recent phenomenon, or more accurately, one we are yet to fully experience. The median potential voter in 1981 was already aged 46; this fell to actually fell 44 in the ten years to 1991, before rising to 45 in 2001.

Taking voter turnout rates into account shows that the democratic process was even more skewed towards older cohorts. The median 'actual' voter was aged 49 in 2010, three years older than the median 'potential' voter. The median actual voter will be 52 by 2021, rising to 54 by 2051. At the 2010 general election, 40-somethings were largely successful in converting their potential voting power into actual power. But older cohorts had closed the gap significantly. Excluding 40-somethings, there were more actual voters aged 63 than any other age. Given their lower propensity to vote, 18 year-olds exercised less actual voting power at the 2010 general election than 73 year-olds. 45 year-olds exercised 84 per cent more actual voting power than 18-year olds, and 50 year-olds exercised 62 per cent more.

In 2021, 18-year olds will exercise less actual voting power than 79 year-olds. 50 year-olds will exercise 97 per cent more power than 18 year-olds, 55 year-olds will exercise more than double (115 per cent) the power, and 60 year-olds will exercise 95 per cent more. In 2031, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than 84 year-olds. By 2051, if turnout rates persist, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than a typical single-year cohort in their late-80s. (The full results of this research are available from [the Intergenerational Foundation website](#).)

These inequalities do not mean, in any straightforward sense, that young people's vote should somehow be worth more. Democracy's first principle is, and must remain, 'one person, one vote'. Furthermore, it would be wrong to use the disenfranchisement of young people as an excuse to continue neglecting the many avoidable problems that blight the lives of the 'oldest old', such as poverty, isolation and the creaking care system. But that representative democracies with near-universal franchises have only ever existed within populations with [pyramid-shaped age distributions](#) may be one of the hidden foundations of representative democracy. Representative democracy without this demographic bias towards young people is entirely untried – it is into this uncharted territory that we are heading at a rapid pace.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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