

Achim Goerres: *The Political Participation of Older People in Europe: The Greying of our Democracies*

Basingstoke 2009: Palgrave Macmillan, 240 pp.

The social consequences of increased proportions of older people in society are probably the most under-researched social phenomena in contemporary sociology. This worldwide trend of demographic ageing is particularly significant in Europe. Because European politics are based on democracy and universal suffrage, and older people vote in greater proportions than younger people, it is widely assumed that older people's interests will come to dominate European politics. The research reported in this book gives the lie to such simplistic assertions.

Goerres' research takes data from large-scale national and European surveys. He conducts various multivariate analyses on this data and comes to some important conclusions about older people's relationship to politics. However, the book is not about politics as a story of conflict or old people as fully rounded characters with pasts and passions. The focus is essentially about political behaviour in the abstract. It is written within the framework of empiricist political science, in which people are treated as social atoms that inhabit a model animated by variables, but whose motives can only be guessed at. It collates data about rates of voting, party membership, writing letters, going on demonstrations, etc., and creates a statistical model which links these behaviours probabilistically with other variables such as age, religion and household composition. Only in the final chapter do we meet with older people who are fired up and on the streets taking political action; in this case through interviews with older people involved in the British poll tax (community charge) demonstrations of 2004/2005.

The book carries in its structure and

language the clear imprint of the Ph.D. thesis from which it is derived. There are eight chapters. The first sets the scene, sketches the limited previous literature, and then specifies the resources and methods that will be brought to bear to understand older people's political participation. Goerres does an excellent job of unpicking the often-confused nature of 'age' as a variable, and of setting out the differences between age, period and cohort effects. He specifies his extensive use of data from the European Social Survey as well as the World Values Survey, the British Election Studies series (1964–2001) and the German Election Studies (1961–1998). In Chapter Two he goes on to build, in a classically positivist manner, a model of political participation. He uses 'political generation', 'socio-economic cohort', 'life cycle' and 'individual ageing' as key components and outlines four general propositions which he suggests enable us to understand the difference in political participation between age groups:

1. 'Generations differ in their early political experiences...'
2. 'Large-scale social change endows cohorts with different levels of resources and motivation, as well as opportunities and mobilisation exposure to engage in politics...'
3. 'Along the life cycle political preference, resources and motivation as well as opportunities and mobilisation exposure vary...'
4. 'Older people have more political experience and a higher level of satisfaction from compliance with participatory norms.' (p. 37–38).

Chapter three examines voting patterns and concludes that:

- political generation effects are present to explain the difference between old and younger voters;
- socio-economic cohort effects play a subordinate role;

- the social and cultural construction of the life course sets the scene for a higher likelihood among older people to vote.

Goerres suggests that experience *per se* matters – ‘familiarity with the voting situation and similar political constellations in previous elections make it easier for older voters to take the decision to vote’ (p. 67). Chapter Four examines party choice by older voters in Britain and Germany. Chapters Five and Six look at membership of political organisations and non-institutionalised forms of political participation respectively. He finds that life-cycle characteristics, such as length of residence and children in the household, affect increasing institutional participation with age. Another key conclusion is that the older cohorts are catching up with the younger ones in involvement with non-institutionalised single-interest politics. Chapter Seven differs from the others in that it is based on interviews with a set of people who had participated in the English Council Tax Protests in 2004/2005. This is a valuable contribution to the book because it actually places politics in the context of people in a particular time and place and examines their understanding and motivations for participation. In the eighth and concluding chapter Goerres summarises his findings and makes three general statements about political behaviour:

1. ‘There is no simple difference between younger and older people’s political participation.’
2. ‘The difference between old and younger people’s political participation patterns are unstable across time.’
3. ‘The participatory impact of a growing number of older people depends on the social context.’ (pp. 170–171)

I did not find the book easy to read. Partly that was because of the density of the data – it is difficult to be lucid when trying to describe complex relationships between variables. More significantly it was

due to the problem I have with the overall approach taken to the subject. Goerres relies on the methods of behaviourist political science. This approach has been critiqued many times. Key elements of that critique are: That it depends on methodological individualism and cannot satisfactorily incorporate institutional dynamics of political life or other social structural dynamics; that it is ahistorical and over-dependent on cross-sectional survey data; that it treats individuals as lacking agency and undervalues their ability to make multiple meanings out of their situations. For example, Goerres’ statistical analysis enables him to identify a pattern whereby the effect of age on propensity to vote is greater in countries with low overall propensity to vote than in those with higher voter turnout. However, having found a statistical pattern it is necessary to turn to a speculative social psychology to explain it. ‘Thus, a young person in these countries [with low voter turnout] feels less incentive to conform to the voting norm. Over a lifetime, however, a person learns to conform more and more as he or she becomes part of the social context the values that norm.’ (p. 65). I would have found a methodology which explored voters’ motivations in context and let them tell the story of changing relationship to the ballot box preferable. It is unfortunate that only in the final empirical chapter, almost as an afterthought, do we start to get that in-depth social context which locates older peoples political actions as a culturally meaningful social engagement. His behaviourist instincts tend to prevent Goerres from making the most of his interesting research with poll tax (community charge) demonstrators – a very revealing set of people who do not conform to the expectations of his statistical model. There is a tendency to give priority to tallying responses that relate to the models variables rather than exploring demonstrators’ stories or analysing how they present themselves. The way the

informants respond to Goerres' questions bring to mind Binstock's concept of 'altruistic ageism' [c.f. Vincent et al. 2001] – essentially using the image of older people as the 'deserving poor' to generate political capital. Importantly, what this part of the research does show is the lack of common identity formed around being old. Goerres finds, as I did in my own 2001 study, that what motivates people is the policy threat and that there are no unifying symbols around which an old age identity can coalesce. If old people do not think of themselves as having a common identity it is very unlikely they will act together politically.

Goerres makes the best of his data sources but they do have intrinsic limitations. It is very difficult to tell stories of change without longitudinal data. The data Goerres uses does have some historical depth, he is able to draw on repeated cross sectional surveys, but it is very difficult to clearly distinguish ageing from generation effects without longitudinal data on individuals. There is a great deal to be learnt from international comparisons. So a Europe-wide study is to be welcomed. However, cross-national comparisons are extremely difficult, not least because of problems of translation. To be fair to Goerres, he is well aware of the problems and issues. However, I remain sceptical that the premises of methodological individualism hold true for the cross-national data sets – that the same thing is being measured by responses to questions posed in different countries. A simple question such as 'are you a member of a trade union' posed by smart person in a suit from an official agency in Poland, or Sweden, are going to carry different reactions, mean different things, simply based on the political history and the specific trade union history of those countries. The meaning of the 'yes' or 'no' ticked box will be different and the idea that the aggregate percentages represent some unambiguous equivalent numerical

reality for those different countries is an unwarranted assumption of the method.

The book is particularly valuable for one very important negative finding which should be cited often and powerfully. Goerres is able to demonstrate through careful analysis of the evidence, that the fears that an ageing population will lead to democracies being dominated politically by older people using their voting numbers to skew the welfare state and exploit younger generations, is a myth. There is no evidence that older people either increase their political strength or use their greater involvement in political activity to feather their own nest. As Goerres (p. 159) puts it: 'A simple message of the kind "demographic ageing will affect participatory politics in manner X" is false and untenable in the light of the evidence reviewed in this book.' He rightly concludes that diversity in the form of 'societal context' is all important. This is a great service to academics and older people. It means we can shift our attention to why myth is so often and so readily repeated in media and other powerful forums. Why have some commentators gone to extremes such as predicting 'wars' between generations? The answers to these questions lie at an essentially ideological level, a sphere which the kind of behaviourist analysis utilised in this book cannot reach. Such views relate to the motivations of those seeing the world, and demographic ageing in particular, through the lens of financial capital. They see it as an opportunity to be realised by capturing as much of pensions saving as possible within their institutional control. This requires such elites to devalue the welfare state and collective provision for old age and to construct them as a threat to younger generations.

Who are the least valued people of our time? Old people and politicians would both be strong candidates. So a book about older people's politics is not likely to grab a mass audience. What's more there are no

stories in it. The value of the book lies in its summary of the Europe-wide survey evidence and its crucial finding of the absence of evidence of increasing elder power. I wish the book every success as a worthy attempt to tackle a difficult but desperately unfashionable topic. But I doubt it will top the best-seller list.

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