

1. Voting and Representation



Democracy is about representation – giving ordinary people a say in how they are governed, and the power to change things if they disagree. The usual instrument for delivering democracy is the vote, in elections. Voters choose the candidates who will best represent their interests. By the same token, candidates for election will try to win over voters by promising to pursue policies that match the voters’ interests. That is how democracy is supposed to work.

But what happens if one particular group of voters – with a particular set of interests – is numerically dominant? The result is that this group will always prevail in elections, to the exclusion of others. This is a complaint often raised against the British electoral system, where in some “safe seats” the Conservative Party candidate or the Labour Party candidate always wins; those with differing views feel that their vote is valueless, and hence their views are never directly represented in government.

A similar bias can arise if a particular age-group dominates an electoral constituency, or indeed the whole voting system. The interests of that age-group will be prioritised by the government it elects. In Britain – as indeed in most Western countries – the population is getting older. In 1971 the over-60s accounted for 20% of the population; by 2020 that figure is likely to be 33% – or one-third of all UK citizens. Likewise, by 2020 more than half of the electorate will be over 50, and the median voting age (the age of the voter at the midpoint of the entire electorate) is forecast to rise continuously (see Fig. 1).

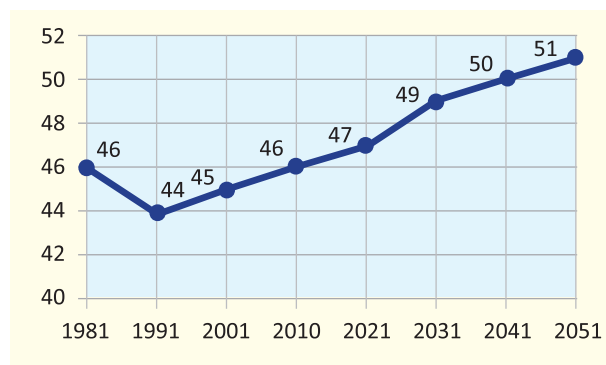


Fig. 1 Median age of potential electorate, 1981–2051 (Berry, 2012)

Older voters have different priorities from the young: it’s in their interest to protect pensions and other old-age benefits (such as winter fuel payments and bus passes), the value of their houses and savings, and public spending on health care and social care (which older people need more of). They also tend to vote in greater numbers. At the 2010 election, 76% of registered voters aged over 65 went to the ballot box; and 73% of the 55–64 year-olds. This compared to 55% of the 25–34 year-olds and just 44% of the 18–24 year-olds.

You have to register to vote: 94% of people aged 65 and over have done so, and 90% of people aged 55–64. But only 55% of people aged 18–24 are currently registered. In other words, not only are young people declining as a share of the overall population, but also too many young people are reducing their collective voting power by rendering themselves ineligible to vote.

This increases the power of the so-called “Grey Vote”: political candidates see that they have more chance of winning if they promise to protect the interests of older voters once in government. That’s where the votes are.

Of course the picture is more complicated than this. Voters do not always vote selfishly: grandparents are also concerned for the interests of their grandchildren. But it can be argued that, since the Second World War, governments have consistently favoured the “Baby Boomers” – voters in the demographic bulges born between 1946 and 1965 – as they have grown older. Different governments have made promises to this generation in terms of unfunded pensions, welfare benefits and tax

advantages that have not been matched by the economic growth needed to sustain them, with the result that national debt, benefit expenditure, pensions liabilities and borrowing for infrastructure (roads, hospitals, schools) will have to be paid for by younger and future generations of taxpayers over the coming decades.

Can this age bias in elections and government be avoided? Changing the voting system might be one answer. The “first-past-the-post” system – under which every voter votes for just one candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins (whether or not they get a majority) – is a fairly blunt instrument, which provides no representation for people who didn’t vote for the winner. Proportional Representation (PR) is an alternative system which awards seats proportionally, according to the overall percentage of votes cast, often taking into account peoples’ second and third (or even more) choices; it produces more nuanced results that reflect (in principle) a broader consensus of opinion. The interests of all age groups across the spectrum might be better represented by such a system, but given that Britain decisively rejected – in a referendum in 2011 – the proposal to introduce another electoral system called the Alternative Vote (AV) for general elections, there seems to be little prospect of change in the near future.

Younger generations could of course help themselves by voting in greater numbers. Their reluctance to vote, or to get involved in politics, effectively deprives them of fair representation in government. Some people have argued that the demographic ageing of the electorate could be counterbalanced by extending the vote to 16 and 17 year-olds – as Austria has already done,

and as Scotland will do for the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. After all, 16 and 17 year-olds are treated as responsible adults in many respects: they can join the armed forces, get married (with parental permission), and pay taxes. Statistically, giving the vote to 16 and 17 year-olds is likely to have only a marginal effect on the outcome of elections: that age group consists of about 1.5 million potential voters (roughly the same as the number of people aged over 85) out of a total electorate of about 46 million. But by introducing voting at school age would – it is argued – provide an excellent opportunity to engage young people in politics and the democratic process, and persuade them of the value of exercising their precious right to vote.

Many young people are put off becoming involved in politics because they feel that political parties and institutions are geared towards older voters, and are disconnected from the concerns of young people. But democracy is open to all, and if young people feel that their interests are not properly represented, they have the power to change that, but only if they are prepared to get involved – and that starts with voting.

Sources:

- Office of National Statistics (ONS): UK Electoral Statistics, 2011 (online)
- Ipsos MORI: How Britain voted in 2010 (online)

Recommended Reading:

- Berry, C. (2012) “The rise of gerontocracy? Addressing the intergenerational democratic deficit”. Intergenerational Foundation (online)
- Age UK (2010) “Electoral power is in the hands of older voters” (online)