

Intergenerational Dynamics and Political Outcomes

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between intergenerational dynamics and politics outcomes in several distinct contexts. It is motivated by the remarkable demographic shifts exhibited by people in advanced countries over the past several decades. Individuals on average have longer lives and fewer children than ever before. Combining these shifts with the large intergenerational public policies that exist in many such states (education, old-age social welfare, healthcare) provokes several distinct yet related research questions addressed in the chapters below. First, do political traits matter for fertility behavior? If so, could the presence of differential fertility behavior across political groups lead to a shift in the position of the future median voter? Second, what are other significant determinants of fertility in contemporary Europe and the United States? Does more recent data support the findings of established “determinants of fertility” models? Finally, does the relationship between age and Social Security benefit preferences (and confidence in the Social Security system) seem to suggest the potential for intergenerational conflict over Social Security? The chapters below tie together disparate bodies of literature from multiple academic disciplines and use empirical evidence to answer these research questions. The results suggest political traits are significant determinants of fertility in some cases. The results also demonstrate that the relationship between wealth/education and fertility in many European states is positive – in contrast to much of the literature on this relationship and the common wisdom. Finally, the last empirical chapter illustrates the existence of potential age-based political conflict over Social Security in the United States.

Keywords: *Intergenerational Conflict, Fertility, Social Security, Intergenerational Political Socialization, Old-Age Social Welfare*

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Background to the Study

This dissertation examines intergenerational dynamics and their relationship with political outcomes. This interest area and subsequent research questions are stimulated by significant demographic and policy changes witnessed in the advanced world over the last 50-100 years. The demographic changes are numerous: fertility is lower, mortality is lower, old-age life expectancy is higher, and migration is in many ways more attractive to large numbers of people. There have been many significant policy changes over this time, but of special interest here is the expansion of policies with intergenerational components. Public old-age pensions, publicly funded K-12 education, public debt, and publicly funded environmental protection can all be described as policy ventures with intergenerational features: payments and/or benefits cut across different generations. These significant changes motivate the empirical core of this dissertation, which addresses two distinct but related research questions. First, are political characteristics significant determinants of fertility behavior in the United States and Europe? Second, does there appear to be the potential for intergenerational conflict over Social Security in the United States? Before visiting these questions in more detail, the following paragraphs provide a brief examination of the aforementioned changes in demographics and policy that motivate this dissertation.

Research on the Formation of Political Preferences and the Determinants of Fertility

Policy Preference Formation Literature: In order to understand the implications demographic shifts can have for policy preferences and outcomes, it is necessary to consider the mechanisms behind the formation of individual political preferences. This section summarizes several pieces on preference formation. General preference formation literature is examined below, along with research that considers age, income, education, and parental factors (intergenerational political socialization).

Much of the literature on public opinion is marked by a discussion on the rationality (or lack thereof) of the American public. Page and Shapiro (1992) provide evidence of collective rationality and meaningful shifts in American public opinion. The authors discuss the work of Lippman (1925) and Converse (1970), who argued that the public seemed to display highly unstable preferences over public policy. Page and Shapiro follow up on the work of Key (1961) in finding evidence of meaningful and consistent positions among the American public. The authors use a variety of polling data to show that collective policy preferences are generally coherent, stable, and change in predictable ways. They mention that information asymmetries can allow public opinion to be deficient in some ways: political education can be improved, and elites are capable of misleading the public and manipulating policy preferences in some cases.

Franklin (1984) argues that individual partisanship adapts to fit with individual policy preferences, in contrast to the traditional view, articulated in *The American Voter*, 20 which argued that partisanship is largely fixed in childhood and stable throughout life (Campbell et al, 1960). Franklin concludes that policy/issue preferences explain both partisan preferences and the stability of partisanship throughout later periods of life.

Druckman and Lupia (2000) examine the roots of political preference formation. They argue that most preferences occur due to individual encounters with environmental factors. The authors review literature on both the mechanism of preference formation and the impact of external factors on individual preferences and behavior. Druckman and Lupia conclude that it is important to consider strategic interactions when studying preferences: political preferences are not formed in isolation, but often in anticipation of the behavior of other actors.

Krosnick (1988) uses polling data to show that policy issues considered more important by voters have a larger impact on voter preferences for presidential candidates than issues perceived as relatively unimportant by those voters. The author suggests that this difference could be due to the greater memory accessibility of important issues, and notes that people are more likely to perceive larger differences between the candidates on issues that are relatively more important to them.

Age: It is reasonable to expect age to affect preference formation, especially on issues over which age-based cleavages may occur, such as education funding, Social Security, and Medicare. A substantial body of literature examines the importance of the elderly portion of the local demographic for public school funding (Button, 1992; Poterba, 1997; others).

Others have undertaken a broader examination of the importance of age for policy preferences. Day (1990) found an inconsistent relationship between age and policy preferences: the elderly do not always support seemingly “pro-elderly” policies. Rhodebeck (1993) uses American National Election Study data (1972-1988) to study the relationship between age cohort and preferences on political issues that may lead to opposing cohorts based on age group. The author determines that respondent age does not overwhelmingly predict political preferences on age-related issues, such as federal spending on Social Security and health care. Rhodebeck finds that partisanship and income are as important as age in predicting individual preferences. The role of age and policy preferences is discussed in more detail in Section 3, which covers literature on intergeneration conflict and cooperation.

Income: One may also expect income to impact certain political preferences. The “Postmaterialism” work by Inglehart specifies a mechanism by which material security can impact the formation and content of political preferences. Inglehart (1971, 1977a, 1990) suggests that economic security at the period of life in which an individual begins to mature politically can lead to what he terms “Postmaterialism.” Postmaterialists place higher importance on non-physiological needs (such as “self-expression and aesthetic satisfaction”) than materialists, who are more concerned with physical well-being and security (Inglehart, 1990). Inglehart refined this argument to suggest the occurrence of aggregate or society-wide changes in postmaterialist attitudes, particularly an increase in such attitudes in modern industrial democracies (1990).

Dutch and Taylor (1993) use Euro-Barometer data to attempt to evaluate Inglehart's economic security argument. They do not find evidence that economic security at the time of political maturation leads to higher incidences of “postmaterialist” values. The authors do find higher

levels of education to be associated with more postmaterialist tendencies. Other authors have also failed to find support for Inglehart's economic security argument (Davis and Davenport, 1999; Clarke et al, 1999).

Hansen and Tol (2003) assess Inglehart's argument that industrial societies are undergoing a shift toward postmaterialist values by using actual measures of several items on the "Inglehart index" survey item. The authors use actual rates of inflation, crime, and unemployment and find a link between low crime and inflation: both lead to more postmaterialistic valuations. They note that the trend toward postmaterialism in their results is not as strong as that specified by Inglehart after they account for actual inflation, crime, and unemployment.

Education: Education or knowledge can also be expected to impact the formation of political preferences. Much of the early research on political preference formation focused on the knowledge (or lack thereof) held by individuals (Key, 1961; Converse, 1970). While education level seems to be important in forming certain attitudes (Bobo and Licari [1989] found a positive relationship between education level and political tolerance), knowledge of specific facts or concepts has been shown to be an important factor in determining political preferences.

Gilens (2001) argues policy-specific facts (such as changes in the crime rate) can be important in the formation of political judgments. He shows that measurements of general political knowledge do not account for information of this type, and notes that the effect of policy-specific facts is greatest for those Americans with high levels of political knowledge.

Hainmueller and Hiscox (2006) examine the impact of education on individuals' preferences for trade openness. They find that higher education levels are not strictly associated with support for trade openness: economic literacy seems to be more important than personal considerations (such as employment security) in determining preferred levels of trade openness. Education level and political knowledge can be expected to be related to one another, and one may expect them to depend to a great degree on individual background. The next section describes how individual upbringing, specifically parentage, can impact individual political preferences.

Conclusion

This dissertation is motivated by research questions tied to the fascinating and meaningful demographic shifts that have occurred in most advanced countries over the past several decades. Life expectancy (both at birth and at given ages, such as 65) is higher and fertility rates are lower. In most rich countries, people are living longer and having fewer children than ever before. Such an outcome is not only of interest to demographers, but should be interesting to other social scientists as well. These demographic shifts have implications for those who study politics and policy primarily due to the existence of many large public policies with intergenerational components. Education, social welfare, healthcare, environmental protection, infrastructure development, and public debt all distribute costs and benefits across different generations. The rapidly shifting demographics of the advanced world and the presence of many significant intergenerational policies demand a more complete

understanding of the relationship between demographic processes/intergenerational dynamics and political outcomes. This dissertation contributes to this conversation in a meaningful manner.

References

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