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INTERGENERATIONAL INJUSTICE AND PARTY POLITICS

INJUSTIÇA INTERGENERACIONAL E POLÍTICAS PARTIDÁRIAS

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Abstract: Intergenerational injustice is becoming increasingly apparent in the voting system in the UK. Recent general elections have witnessed a growing disparity in turnout between younger age cohorts and their older counterparts. This paper argues that the growing political influence of the so-called “grey vote” can be seen in various decisions taken by the present UK government that have harmed the interests of young people, and that there is a danger this could result in a negative feedback effect whereby young people become increasingly alienated from the political system because they feel that it does not serve their interests. The author suggests various steps which need to be taken to restore young peoples’ faith in democracy and to reverse the slide towards the UK becoming a parliamentary gerontocracy.

Keywords: Intergenerational, justice, voting, ageing, politics

Palavras-chave: intergeracional, justiça, votar, envelhecimento, política

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Introduction

In parallel with many other European democracies, the UK is currently experiencing the rapid ageing of its electorate. This trend is highly significant for the future of British democracy, because different age groups also display remarkably different propensities to vote; when added together, the fact that older age cohorts are both more likely to vote and are rapidly increasing as a share of the electorate means that the overall “voter power” of older age cohorts is increasing at the expense of the young. This gives Britain’s political parties a powerful incentive to orientate their policies towards those that they expect will appeal to older voters, such as the protection of pensioners’ welfare benefits; conversely, they are also less likely to feel there is any political risk in designing policies that would negatively impact the interests of younger people. This paper presents evidence to show that the growing political disengagement of the younger generation in UK politics is turning them into the victims of unpopular government policies, and proposes a variety of strategies which could potentially reverse this effect.

The ageing of the UK electorate

Like most other developed countries, the UK has an ageing population. Fig.1 displays the projected increase in the number of people aged over 65 in the UK during the 35-year period between 2012 and 2035, alongside the forecast for the old-age dependency ratio (the number of over-65s who exist for every 1,000 people of working age). The number of over-65s is expected to increase sharply from 10.8 million in 2012 to 17.8 million by 2037, with a corresponding deterioration in the UK’s old-age dependency ratio.

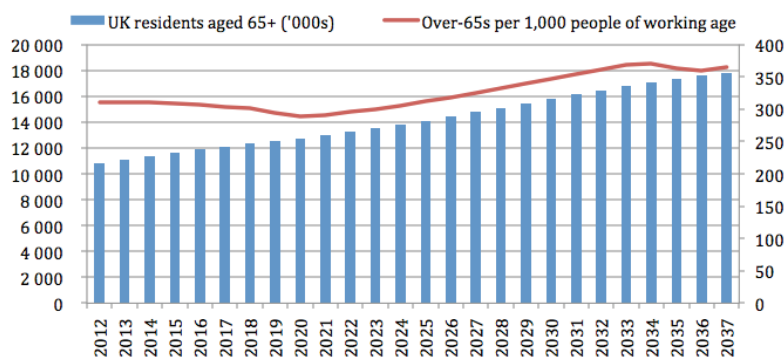


Fig.1 The projected ageing of the UK population, 2012–37²

Population ageing confronts the UK with a number of significant challenges

2. OFFICE OF NATIONAL STATISTICS, *National Population Projections, 2012-based projections*, Newport, 2008

which have received much discussion in the media, especially concerning the financial sustainability of pension and healthcare arrangements, and the increasing demand it will place on adult social care services. However, one aspect of population ageing which has received significantly less comment, particularly in a UK context, is the impact that it will have upon democracy. The ageing population is likely to be an especially significant challenge for the democratic system in the UK because it already suffers from the largest gap seen in any OECD country between the electoral participation levels of older and younger voters (Fig.2).

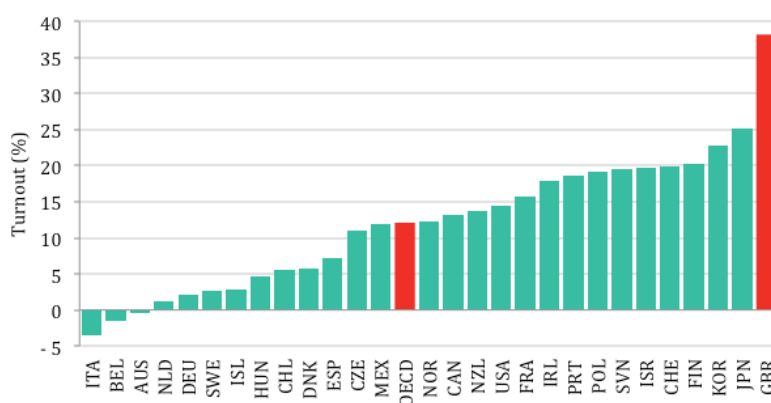


Fig.2 The gap in turnout at the most recent national elections between the youngest and oldest age cohorts within the electorate³

Evidence which has been published by the British think tank Demos suggests that young people in Britain are highly concerned about political and social issues, yet this does not translate into engagement with the formal political process. Strikingly, in response to a survey on methods of political participation which was undertaken by the think tank, only 50% of teenagers said they thought elected members of parliament would be able to “respond to my concerns effectively”.⁴ For their part, politicians appear to take a somewhat narrow view that the responsibility belongs to individual members of the electorate to decide whether they should vote or not, rather than there being any democratic imperative for them to try to achieve as large an electoral mandate as possible by encouraging more people to vote. It could even be argued that members of parliament have a clear incentive to avoid trying to encourage broader democratic participation, as under the status quo they can benefit from only having to target their campaigning activities at the narrow section of the electorate which does turn out, while it cannot be lost on politicians that if more young people did vote they would have

3. OECD, “Voting”, in *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, Paris, 2012

4. JONATHAN BIRDWELL AND MONA BANI, *Introducing Generation Citizen*, London, 2013

to invest time and resources in trying to capture their votes as well

Research undertaken by the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) suggests that differences in turnout between different age groups, combined with the ageing of the electorate, will result in the age of the median person who actually votes rising even more rapidly than the median age of the electorate as a whole will (Fig.3).

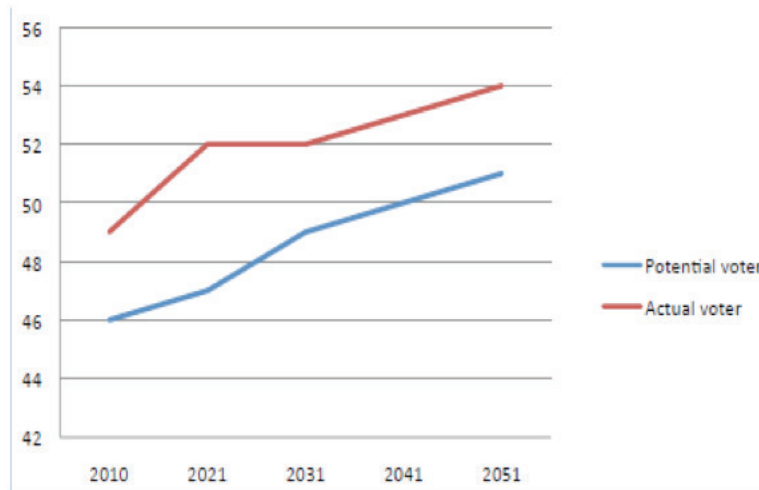


Fig.3 Median age among the share of UK residents who are eligible to vote and people who actually vote (red line)⁵

Fig.3 shows that, at the general election which took place in the UK in 2010, half of the people who were eligible to vote were over the age of 46, but because people in older age groups have higher levels of turnout, the median age among people who actually voted was 49. IF's research forecasts that the median age among actual voters will increase to 52 within the next decade, and could reach 54 by the 2050s.

Age and the 2010 general election

The ageing of the UK electorate appears to have had an especially pronounced impact at the 2010 general election, where the party which gained the highest number of seats, the Conservatives, relied upon the votes of older voters to produce most of the lead they enjoyed over the UK's two other major parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats (although the fact that they did not achieve an overall majority of seats meant they eventually needed to form a coalition government in partnership with the latter party). This is shown in Fig.4:

5. CRAIG BERRY, *The Rise of Gerontocracy? Addressing the Intergenerational Democratic Deficit*, London, 2012

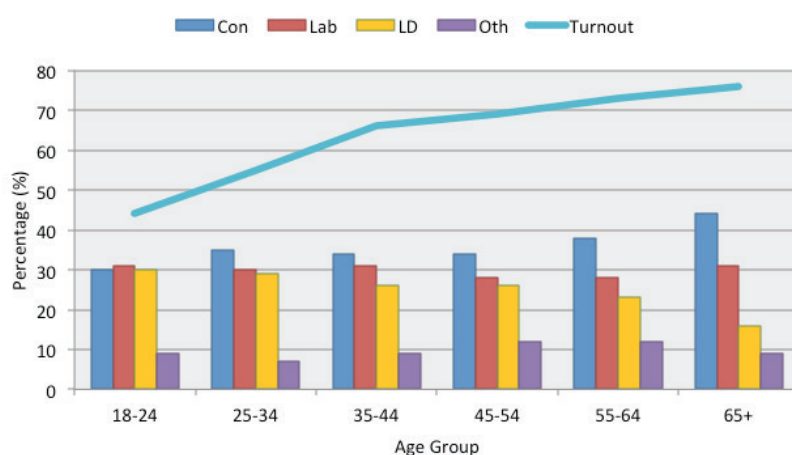


Fig.4 Age and the 2010 UK general election

The fact that older voters were more inclined to vote for the Conservative Party, combined with their significantly higher levels of turnout, meant that the Conservatives have governed since the election with an electoral mandate which is highly dependent upon the political preferences of the older generation. The next section will argue that this appears to have coloured their policies, especially when it comes to targeting of reductions in government spending.

What impact has this had on policy?

The UK’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government assumed office in May 2010, and in June (outside the UK government’s usual fiscal cycle) issued an “emergency” budget in which they announced that they intended to achieve financial consolidation worth £40 billion in each year of the new five-year parliament, with the desired aim of producing a cyclically-adjusted current account balance by 2015–16. They stated that £32 billion of this financial consolidation would be achieved through public spending cuts, with the remainder coming from tax increases.⁶

In practice, it is impossible to design a programme of cutbacks which doesn’t hit some groups harder than others, so public spending cuts inevitably create winners and losers. Since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government began implementing its programme of financial consolidation, academics, think tanks and journalists have devoted a significant amount of attention to the issue of which groups have been affected disproportionately. A recurrent theme which has been identified is that younger age groups appear to have been much more badly affected than older ones. This is illustrated by the following chart from the respected economic think tank the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS):

6. HM TREASURY, *Budget 2010* London, 2010

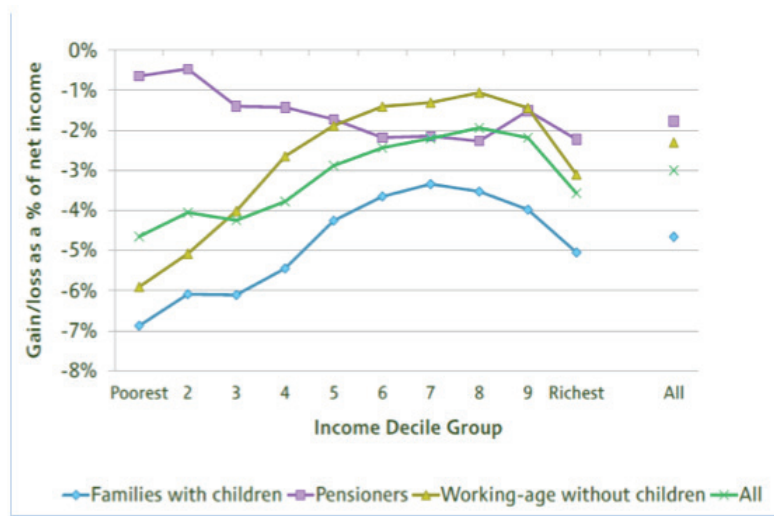


Fig.5 Projected impact of tax and benefit changes introduced between 2010–11 and 2014–15 on different types of household ⁷

This analysis appears to suggest that pensioner households (the purple line) have been the group least affected by government austerity measures at all points along the income spectrum, apart from some higher earning working-age households that don't have children. Working-age families with children have suffered much higher cuts in their incomes. These findings appear troubling in the context of other data which suggests that working-age households with children have the highest poverty rate in the UK (Fig.6).

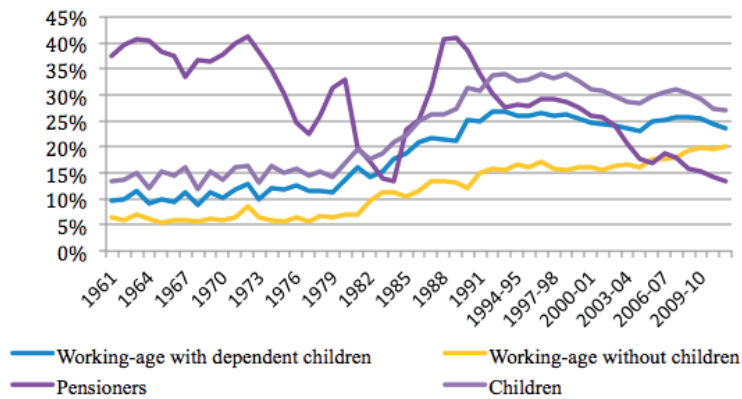


Fig.6 Proportion of households living below the government's official poverty line by age group, 1961–2011/12⁸

7. JAMES BROWNE *The Impacts of Austerity Measures on Household Incomes and Poverty*, London, 2012

8. JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION, *Long-term view of poverty* York, 2013

Fig.6, based on data from housing charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, suggests that rates of poverty among pensioner households have more than halved since the early 1970s, while they have increased among children and working-age households with dependent children. Looking at Figs. 5 and 6 in tandem suggests that the group who have suffered the biggest falls in income from the Coalition Government’s austerity measures have been those who have the highest levels of poverty, while pensioners – who are on average a wealthier group – have been largely protected.

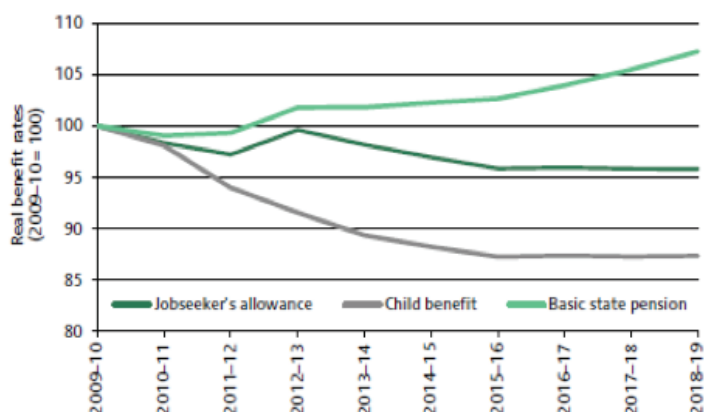


Fig.7 Projected changes in the real value of certain benefits between 2009/10 and 2018/19⁹

Indeed, the value of the basic state pension for retirees has actually been increased by this government through the introduction of a policy called the “triple lock” guarantee, which ensures that it will rise in value each year by whichever is highest out of national wage growth, inflation or a minimum rate of 2.5%. This is in sharp contrast to one of their other key reforms to welfare benefits, which was to freeze cost-of-living increases in most other working-age cash transfers at 1% i.e. below the rate of inflation. This means that the basic state pension is forecast to become more valuable than most other welfare benefits over time (Fig.7).

Young people in England have also been disadvantaged by another of the current government’s flagship policies: the introduction of tuition fees of £9,000 per year for most undergraduate courses at public universities. Research published by IF has shown that this means the average undergraduate will be likely to leave university with total debts of around £40,000 (€50,000), which he or she will then have to spend decades paying off (although the loans are income-contingent and repayments are means-tested). The first cohort of students to enter universities under this system also had to pay interest rates of 6.6% (which began to accrue on their accumulating debt while they are still studying); this is the third-highest level of interest to be charged on publicly-funded student loans in any OECD member state (Fig.8).

9. INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES, *IFS Green Budget 2014* London, 2014

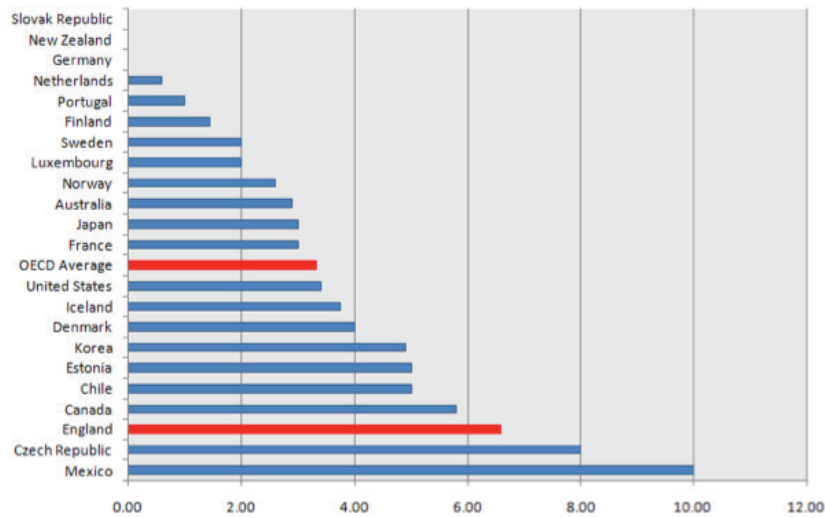


Fig.8 Typical student loan interest rates in OECD member states, 2012/13 academic year

These examples suggest that the current UK government has enacted a range of policies which have had a detrimental impact on the finances of young people and working-age families, while the pensioners who make up the key section of their electoral constituency have received preferential treatment. This effect has been compounded by another of their most significant policies, which was the decision to protect funding for the National Health Service (NHS) in nominal terms from their fiscal consolidation. Although the NHS is enormously popular with voters of all ages, some estimates have suggested that as much as two-thirds of the resources it receives each year are consumed by older people, so this can also be interpreted as a policy which has benefitted them disproportionately.

Of course, there is unlikely to be a direct clientalist relationship between older voters and politicians, not least because the interests of the so-called “grey vote” are not monolithic. Many older people are probably more concerned about the prospects of their own children and grandchildren rather than themselves. However, it could be the case that what politicians think older voters want from their policies has a bigger impact on political decision-making than the actual political preferences of older voters. Given the inevitable ageing of the UK electorate, unless more young people can be persuaded to vote then there is a real danger that the UK’s major parties will increasingly tailor their policies to compete directly for the ballots of older voters.

How can young people make their voices heard?

The most important strategy for rebalancing the UK electorate is encouraging more young people to vote. This is a challenging process which must overcome

not only the substantial degree of apathy and disillusionment with the formal political process which exists among young people, but also administrative and institutional barriers. An important starting point would be to get more young people added to the UK's electoral register, from which many young voters are currently believed to be missing (Fig.9).

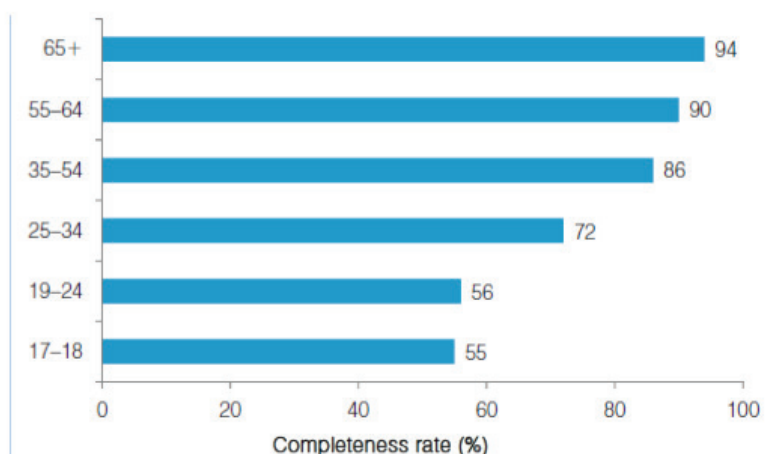


Fig.9 Estimated proportion of each age group which is on the electoral register, 2011¹⁰

Recent reforms to the system of voter registration in the UK may have made this more difficult because individuals are now required to register themselves, rather than be registered by someone else on their behalf as members of a household. However, the new system has also brought in online voter registration for the first time, which could make it easier for schools to orchestrate the registration of young people, for example. Other strategies which need to be pursued to encourage more young people to become active participants in democracy include improving the quality of education about the political system in the national curriculum, and lowering the voting age (which is currently 18 in the UK) so that 16 and 17 year olds could vote in elections. This was recently tried with much apparent success in the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland, and is already the case in elections to the legislatures of the UK's three largest crown dependencies: Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. Traditionally, the youth branches of the UK's main political parties have played an important role in targeting potential young voters, but these have all witnessed a significant decline in their memberships over recent years which has left them looking moribund as a political force. Looking to the future, it seems inevitable that voting will at some point have to migrate online given the extent to which the majority of citizens are now entirely comfortable and familiar with conducting other sensitive

10. UK ELECTORAL COMMISSION *Great Britain's Electoral Registers 2011* Electoral Commission, 2011

business online, which should help to enfranchise the younger generation.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a snapshot of some political events which have occurred in the UK since the last general election to argue that they offer the shape of things to come in the future as the population ages: politics which places an increasingly narrow focus upon serving the interests of the older age groups who will dominate the electorate, leading to public policy which protects them from painful measures at the expense of the politically disenfranchised younger generation. This bleak scenario can only be avoided through the pursuit of a range of strategies which are designed to re-engage today's younger generation with democracy. However, such strategies could only be enacted by politicians – who currently have little incentive to disturb the status quo.
