Older people and voting participation: past and future
Contemporary politicians and their advisors focus on older voters as a pivotal segment of the American electorate. Some analysts predict that this preoccupation will intensify in the years ahead and the demands of older persons will dominate American politics. One reason for this focus on older voters is that they constitute a substantial proportion of voters today, largely because of age-group differences in voting turnout rates, and they will be a considerably larger proportion in the future because of the aging of the baby boom cohort. This article examines the voting participation of age groups in past presidential elections and explores what the voting participation of older persons could be like when the baby boom cohort reaches old age. The political significance of older persons being a large percentage of voters is considered with respect to both the past and the future.

Key Words: Age-group voting, Political participation, Politics of aging

Older People and Voting Participation: Past and Future

Robert H. Binstock, PhD

With the 2000 elections for president and Congress drawing near, Democratic and Republican strategists and pollsters are once again focused on older voters as a pivotal segment of the American electorate. As a Democratic pollster has perceived the situation: “It’s virtually impossible to take back the House or win the presidency without taking back seniors. . . . That makes them the key battleground, and both parties know it” (Toner, 1999). Accordingly, the parties are continually attempting to position themselves favorably with competing proposals affecting Social Security, Medicare, and long-term care financing—areas of public policy that they perceive to be of most concern to older voters (Feldmann, 1999). Some analysts (e.g., Thurow, 1996), anticipating the decades when the 76 million persons in the baby boom cohort will be old, have suggested that such preoccupation with older voters will intensify in the years ahead and that American politics will be dominated by the demands of older persons in the first half of the 21st century.

Why is the “senior vote” being courted so assiduously, and why might this practice intensify in the future? One reason is that persons aged 65 and older constitute a substantial proportion of voting-age Americans today, and will be a considerably larger proportion throughout the first half of the 21st century. In addition, the percentage of the total vote that older people have cast in national elections from the 1970s through the 1990s has exceeded their proportion of the voting-age population and may continue to do so in the decades ahead. And another reason is the assumption that the avowed positions of candidates regarding old-age policies can be major factors in “swinging” the voting decisions of older persons from one candidate to another.

This article examines the past voting participation of age groups in presidential elections (see Appendix note)—the political arena in which issues involving Social Security, Medicare, and other federal policies on aging are most salient—and considers what the voting participation of older persons could be like when the baby boom cohort reaches old age. It begins with an analysis of age-group participation in national elections from 1966 to 1996. Next, it discusses the political significance of the facts that the proportion of votes cast by older persons is large, growing, and exceeds their percentage of the voting-age population. Then it speculates about the politics of older voters in the future by: setting forth the percentages of the voting-age population that older people are projected to constitute during the first half of the 21st century; modeling some projections of the proportion of votes cast by older persons; and laying out some scenarios that might affect the voting preferences of baby boomers when they are old. A brief final section summarizes the facts and the conclusions reached in this article, and puts forth some observations about the probable voting behavior of older persons in the future.

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Over the past 30 years, the proportion of votes cast in national elections by persons aged 65 and older has grown continuously. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of total votes in presidential elections cast by persons aged 65 and older increased by 4.9 percentage points, from 15.4% of all votes in 1968 to 20.3% in 1996.

Older People as a Percentage of the Voting-Age Population.—Contrary to a conventional assumption, the steady rise in older persons' component of the vote over the past 30 years cannot be attributed primarily to an increase in the elderly population. Although the number of people aged 65 and older swelled by nearly four fifths (78.9%) during this period, from 17.8 million to 31.8 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1966-1996), Figure 1 indicates that older people's proportion of the voting-age population grew by only 4.4%, from 15.8% to 16.5%.

In fact, Figure 1 makes it clear that the largest age-group rise in the percentage of voting-age citizens took place in the 25–44-year-old category. The growth in this age group's proportion was 8.8% (from 39.6% to 43.1%), double that for persons aged 65 and older. The entrance of the baby boom into the 25–44-year-old range accounts for the increase in voting-age population in this age group. The slight decrease (from 43.8% to 43.1%) that this category experienced between 1992 and 1996 is due to the fact that the leading edge of the baby boom moved on into the 45–64-year-old bracket. Accordingly, this latter group increased slightly over the same 4-year period.

Table 1. Votes Cast by Persons Aged 65 and Older as Percentage of All Votes Cast in Presidential Elections, 1966–1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Persons Aged 65+ as Percentage of All Persons of Voting Age</th>
<th>Percentage of Votes Cast by Persons Aged 65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


As a matter of historical interest, it is worth noting that the share of voting-age citizens fell off between 1968 and 1972 in all categories except the youngest, the 18–24-year-old group, which rose sharply from 10% to 18.1%. These occurrences can be traced directly to the adoption of the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1971, which lowered the voting age to 18. (Previously, persons younger than age 21 were only eligible to vote in four states—Alaska, Georgia, Hawaii, and Kentucky.) The impact of the amendment on age-group proportions of voting-age adults has faded over time, however, as baby boom members who were initially in the youngest category gradually moved along to older categories as they aged. Since 1972, the 18–24-year-old per-
Percentage of voting-age citizens has declined by almost one third, from 18.1% to just 12.7%.

Percentage of Votes Cast by Older People.—Examination of age-group shares of the votes cast in elections finds that since 1972 persons aged 65 and older have consistently constituted a larger share of the electorate than they have of the voting-age population, and the gap has grown over time. As Figure 2 indicates, by 1996 older persons accounted for 20.3% of all votes even though they were only 16.5% of the voting-age population.

One factor in the long-term growth in the share of the vote cast by older people has been a decline in the proportion of votes cast by 18-24-year-olds. As depicted in Figure 3, since 1972 the percentage of the total vote attributable to the youngest category has fallen by almost one half, from 14.2% to only 7.6%. However, this decrease does not fully account for the increased share of votes cast by older people because the proportion of votes for which persons in the 25-44 year-old range were responsible rose 8.9% during the same period as this age bracket became increasingly populated by baby boomers (until the 1996 election).

Age Group Turnout Rates.—The most important reason for the long-term upsurge in the portion of votes cast by older people is that turnout rates of the various age groups have changed over the years. Table 2 shows that in 1972, voters in the 45–64-year-old bracket had the highest turnout rate (71%), the youngest bracket had the lowest (50%), and the rates for persons aged 65 and older and 45–64 were roughly comparable (64% and 63%, respectively). By 1996, older voters turned out at the highest rate. The participation rates for all groups fell off in 1976 (perhaps as a reaction to the Watergate scandal), but since then only the rate for persons aged 65 and older has recovered and increased. (The rate for all groups, particularly the youngest, increased temporarily in 1992—a phenomenon discussed below.)

A graphic display of these changes in age-group turnout rates over time is presented in Figure 4. As can be seen, since 1972, voting participation by persons aged 65 and older has increased by 6.5%. In stark contrast, the rates in the other age groups have plummeted—by 34.7% for 18–24-year-olds, 21.5% for 25–44-year-olds, and 9% for 45–64-year-olds.

Why Are There Age Group Differences in Turnout?

Why has the rate of voting participation among older persons increased over the years, while participation rates for the younger groups have declined? This is a particularly difficult question to answer because the various age groups have comprised different birth cohorts over time, and the political context of each election is somewhat unique. Moreover, although the connection between age and voting participation has been investigated a great deal, overall the reasons for the relationship remain a source of controversy (e.g., see Miller & Shanks, 1996; Teixeira, 1992; Strate, Parrish, Elder, & Ford, 1989; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

![Figure 2. Persons aged 65 and older as percentage of voting-age population, and as percentage of votes cast, in presidential elections, 1968-1996. Source: Author's calculations from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20, 1968-1996.](https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article-abstract/40/1/18/720552/1872652)
One contributing factor is age-group differences in voting registration, an essential precursor to voting. Table 3 shows that from 1972 to 1996 the rate of registration in the oldest groups was maintained while the rate in other age groups declined. Persons aged 65 and older did not have the highest rate in 1972. But following a distinct decline in registration rates for all age groups in 1976 (paralleling the decline in turnout rates in that year), the rate for the oldest group returned to its previous level and slightly increased over the years. Although the rates for all other age groups have fluctuated since 1976, they have remained substantially below their 1972 levels. In fact, the 1996 rates for all of the groups younger than 65 years old show a slight decline from the 1976 rate.

A two-stage study of voter registration and turnout in national elections (Timpone, 1998) found that increased age (from age 18 to 88) is monotonically related to being registered (as generally reflected in Table 3). It also found that age was the second most influential factor in distinguishing between registrants and nonregistrants among 21 variables that were grouped by demographics, social connectedness, general political attitudes, election-specific attitudes, and administrative barriers to registration. Another aging-related factor, length of residence in one’s home, also had a substantial influence on registration. These factors may help explain why registration rates of older persons have been maintained over time, in contrast with those of the other age groups. The most important factor influencing registration was education. This may somewhat account for why the rate of registration by older persons has gradually increased, because the birth cohorts entering the aged 65 and older category over the past quarter of a century have received more formal education than the cohorts they have replaced.

Yet, the study also makes it clear that the influences of age and education are moderated when the relationship between registration and turnout is examined. So differences in age-group registration rates may only partially explain why the voting participation rates for the category of persons aged 65 and older have held up over time and perhaps why they have slightly increased.

The theory that persons who are comparatively well informed about politics and public affairs are more likely to register and vote (Palfrey & Poole, 1987) suggests another factor that may contribute to the fact that rates of voting participation among older people have been maintained while the rates for other groups have declined. As McManus (1996) observes, older persons are more likely to pay attention to the news and to rely upon a wider array of news
sources to follow public affairs" (p. 35). More specifically, older people tend to be more generally knowledgeable about politics than younger people (Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Luskin, 1987). In studies and surveys of different cohorts over the years, older persons report the highest level of interest in political campaigns and public affairs, generally (Glenn & Grimes, 1968; Jennings & Markus, 1988; Jennings & Niemi, 1981), and their level of political knowledge shows no sign of decline as they reach advanced old age (Comstock, Chahee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Jennings & Markus, 1988). State and colleagues (1989) found that interest in and knowledge about politics, incorporated in a variable they labeled "civic competence," increases with age and declines only slightly at advanced old ages. They also found that the increase is sharper over time for adults without a college education, and suggested that although such persons had less knowledge and interest to begin with, "aging effects cause substantial gains in civic competence that serve to erode their initial disadvantage" (p. 452).

Still another contributing factor may be the well-established connection between the strength of political party identification and higher rates of voting participation (see, e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964; Milbraith & Goel, 1977; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Strong partisans are most likely to vote (Caldeira, Patterson, & Markko, 1985). And older persons identify with the major political parties more strongly than younger persons (see McManus, 1996; McManus & Tenpas, 1998). By the same token, the decline in turnout rates among younger age groups over time can be at least partially explained by the relationship between political party identification and higher voting rates. Alwin (1998) finds that "the baby boom cohorts are substantially more Independent and less either Democrat or Republican. . . . They are exceeded in this tendency only by the post-baby boom cohorts" (p. 50).

These various factors may provide some understanding of why the turnout rates of age groups have changed. But, in particular, the distinct drop in voting participation among the groups younger than 65 years old, composed of different cohorts in various electoral contests, needs greater explanation. There is a substantial literature on the general decline of voting participation in American elections in recent decades, but no common or wholly persuasive explanation has emerged (see, e.g., Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Miller, 1992; Piven & Cloward, 1988; Shafer, 1981; Teixeira, 1992; Wollinger & Rosenstone, 1980). This remains a promising area for research.

Table 3. Percentage of Voting Age Persons Who Registered to Vote, by Age Groups, in Presidential Elections, 1972–1996

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–44</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–64</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
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What Difference Does It Make?

What is the political impact of the large and growing proportion of votes that older persons cast? Politicians and their advisors pay attention to this phenomenon because they and many others have subscribed to a “senior power” model for interpreting the politics of aging in the last decades of the 20th century (see Binstock, 1995; Cook, Marshall, Marshall, & Kaufman, 1994; Peterson & Somit, 1994). Although this model is flawed, logically and empirically, it continues to thrive in political and journalistic circles, as well as among some academicians.

The Senior Power Model.—The model starts with the fact that older people constitute a numerically significant portion of the electorate and then assumes that their political behavior is guided by their self-interests, and that most of them perceive their interests to be the same. These assumptions have their roots in a view of voting behavior that has its roots in neoclassical economics and statistical decision theory, which predicts that each voter’s decision among candidates is rationally calculated, on the basis of complete and accurate information, to optimize her or his self-interest. Applying these assumptions, one expects older people to be homogeneous in political attitudes and voting behavior and thereby, through sheer numbers, to be a powerful, perhaps dominating, electoral force. Moreover, the senior power model also assumes that interest groups representing older people are very influential forces that can “swing” the votes of older persons and thereby “intimidate” politicians. Based on all these assumptions one can believe that older voters and old-age interest groups are able to exert substantial control over policies on aging. (For fuller discussions of the senior power model see Binstock, 1997a; Pratt, 1993, 1997; Rix, 1999; Street, 1999.)

Some of the many commentators who share this belief, and who are not advocates for older people, have put forth rather radical proposals for containing senior power. For instance, three decades ago Douglas Stewart (1970) proposed that all Americans be disfranchised at retirement or age 70, whichever is earlier. In 1981, a former Assistant Secretary of Health and Human services, fearing that the “gray lobby” would win a pitched battle against the children’s lobby in a competition for shrinking social welfare resources, proposed that parents with children under the voting age of 18 be disfranchised with an extra vote for each of their dependent children (Carballo, 1981). This phenomenon is not confined to the United States. For example, Peter Peterson (1999, p. 210) reports that a senior minister in Singapore’s government has proposed that “each tax-paying worker be given two votes” to balance the political power of retirees.

Flaws in the Model.—The senior power model, however, has many flaws. As political scientist Hugh Heclo (1988) has observed, “[T]he elderly is really a category created by policy analysts, pension officials, and mechanical models of interest group politics” (p. 393).

The assumption that the political attitudes and behavior of older people are predominantly shaped by common self-interests that derive from the attribute of old age breaks down for a variety of reasons. There is no sound reason to expect that a birth cohort—diverse in economic and social status, labor force participation, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education, health status, family status, residential locale, political attitudes, partisan attachments, and every other characteristic in American society—would suddenly become homogenized in self-interests and political behavior when it reaches the old-age category. Old age is one of many personal characteristics of aged people, and only one with which they may identify themselves.

Moreover, if some older voters primarily identify themselves in terms of their age status, this does not mean that their self-interests in old-age policy issues are the most important factors in their electoral decisions. Other policy issues, altruism, the characteristics of specific candidates, long-standing partisan attachments, and many other stimuli in an electoral campaign can be of equal or greater importance. Even if one assumes that rational self-interest is the major determinant of voting behavior, for older and younger voters, the voter’s vision of his or her self-interest may not be the same as the political analyst’s. The analyst’s “objective” characterization of what is at stake for the voter may not correspond to the voters’ subjective judgment. As Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1985) described the situation of an individual voter:

Differences in the kind of evidence you respond to may have nothing to do with your utility function. Instead, they may reflect the model you have of the world, the beliefs you have formed about the meanings and predictive value of different kinds of available information, and what information has come to your attention. (p. 300)

Finally, the self-interests of older people in relation to old-age policy issues, and the intensity of their interests may vary substantially. Consider, for example, the relative importance of Social Security as a source of income for aged persons who are in the lowest and highest income quintiles. Social Security provides 81.8% of income for those in the lowest quintile, but only 17.7% for those in the highest (Radner, 1995). Some older persons have much more at stake than others do in policy proposals that would reduce, maintain, or enhance Social Security benefit payments.

In view of these flaws in the senior power model, it is not surprising that the model does not hold up empirically. The attribute of old age has had little impact on political attitudes and electoral decisions in the United States. It has been well documented that past and present cohorts of older people have
been diverse in their political attitudes (Binstock & Day, 1996; Campbell & Strate, 1981; Day, 1990, 1994, 1998), supporting the general conclusion stated by political scientist Angus Campbell (1971) some three decades ago:

Because each age cohort includes people who differ profoundly in many important conditions of life it is not likely that any group will be very homogeneous in its attitudes. The evidence which national surveys provide us does in fact demonstrate that attitudinal differences between age groups are far less impressive than those within age groups. (p. 117)

It has also been documented that past and present cohorts of older Americans have tended to distribute their votes among electoral candidates in roughly the same proportions as other age groups do (Binstock, 1997b). As Street (1999) asserts, “There is no credible evidence in the United States that age-based voting blocs are a feature of national election landscapes” (p. 117). The empirical evidence from European nations is similar. Naegele and Walker (1999), summarizing the situation there, conclude that “empirically numerous pieces of evidence [show that old age] is no authoritative means of predicting political opinions and behavior” (p. 202).

One element of the senior power model that has some empirical validity is the assumption that old-age-based interest groups (see Binstock, 1997c; Day, 1998; Morris, 1996; Price, 1997; Van Tassel & Meyer, 1992), casting themselves as “representatives” of a large constituency of older voters, have some forms of power. Although they have not demonstrated a capacity to swing the votes of older persons, they do play a role in the policy process. In the classic pattern of American interest group politics (Lowi, 1969), public officials find it both useful and incumbent upon them to invite such organizations to participate in policy activities. In this way public officials are provided with a ready means of having been “in touch” symbolically with tens of millions of older persons, thereby legitimizing subsequent policy actions and inactions. A brief meeting with the leaders of major old-age organizations can enable an official to claim that he or she has obtained duly the represented views of a mass constituency.

The symbolic legitimacy that old-age organizations have for participating in interest group politics gives them several types of power. First, they have informal access to public officials: members of Congress and their staffs; career bureaucrats; appointed officials; and occasionally the White House. Second, their legitimacy enables them to obtain public platforms in the national media, congressional hearings, and in national conferences and commissions dealing with old age, health, and a variety of subjects relevant to policies affecting aging. Third, old-age interest groups can mobilize their members in large numbers to contact policymakers and register displeasure when changes are being contemplated in old-age programs.

Perhaps the most important form of power avail-
Political participation and representation of older people in Europe, Walker (1999) concluded that “[old] age per se is not a sound basis for political mobilization” (p. 7).

Persistence of the Model.—Despite these facts, the image of so-called senior power persists because it serves certain purposes. It is marketed by the leaders of old-age–based organizations who have many incentives to inflate the size of the constituency for which they speak, even if they need to homogenize it artificially in order to do so. It is used as a “straw man” by those who would like to see greater resources allocated to their causes and who depict the selfishness of the aged as the root of many societal problems (e.g., Callahan, 1987; Peterson, 1999). And it is purveyed by journalists as a tabloid symbol that simplifies the complexities of politics. A long-standing journalistic cliché is that Social Security is “the third rail” of American politics because politicians who “touch it” will be “dead” (e.g., “The Third Rail of Politics,” 1982, p. 24).

Most important, politicians “share [the] widespread perception of a huge, monolithic, senior citizen army of voters” (Peterson & Somit, 1994, p. 178). This is why they continue to court the votes of older persons. Politicians are eager to capitalize on (and are wary of) the potential cohesiveness of older voters, and still listen to the views of old-age interest groups despite their recent decline in political legitimacy. Incumbents and challengers in electoral campaigns woo the “senior vote.” They strive to position themselves on old-age policy issues in a fashion that they think will appeal to the self-interests of older voters, and usually take care that their opponents do not gain an advantage in this arena. So the large and growing proportion of votes that older persons cast does have an impact on election campaign strategies, and leads incumbents to be concerned about how their actions in the governing process can be portrayed in reelection campaigns.

Older Voters in the 21st Century

The persistence of the senior power model has generated some apocalyptic visions of American politics in the 21st century when baby boom voters will have reached old age. Economist Lester Thurow (1996), for instance, envisions a politics of stark intergenerational conflict:

No one knows how the growth of entitlements can be held in check in democratic societies . . . . Will democratic governments be able to cut benefits when the elderly are approaching a voting majority? Universal suffrage . . . . is going to meet the ultimate test in the elderly. If democratic governments cannot cut benefits that go to a majority of their voters, then they have no long-term future. . . . In the years ahead, class warfare is apt to be redefined as the young against the old, rather than the poor against the rich. (p. 47)

How large a proportion of the electorate will elderly baby boomers be? Are they likely to vote cohesively?

Voting Participation and Elderly Baby Boomers.—Projecting the future voting participation of age groups based on evidence from the past is a highly speculative undertaking. It is possible, however, to make a reasonably solid projection of the proportion of all persons of voting age who will be in specific age categories in the 21st century (if one accepts the fertility assumptions used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census). Figure 5 shows that the percentage of voting-age citizens aged 65 and older is projected to be 17% in 2000 and to increase to about 27% in 2035 when all members of the baby boom cohort will have reached this age category. Yet, knowing the proportion of potential voters in each age category does not tell us what percentage of the total vote will be cast by the respective age groups.

It is possible to construct some models for forecasting the percentage of the total vote that older persons might cast in elections in the 21st century, although, for reasons that will be discussed below, such models are highly problematic. One approach, for example, would be to assume that the 1996 ratio of the percent of votes cast by older persons to the proportion that persons aged 65 and older were of the voting age population in that year would remain static over time. The use of this assumption, displayed in Figure 6, produces a forecast that the number of votes cast by persons in the 65-years-and-older category would be as high as about one third of all votes in the mid-2030s.

Another approach would be to extrapolate from the 24-year trend (1972–1996) in voting participation rates. As Figure 7 shows, this method projects that the votes cast by older people would be 30.4% of the total vote in 2020 and 41.4% in 2044.

However, neither these nor similar approaches are reliable. The various age brackets will be composed of different mixtures of birth cohorts than they were in the 20th century, and those mixtures will continue to change throughout the decades ahead. In addition, the effects of different historical periods (such as the Great Depression or the era of the Vietnam War) in shaping political attitudes have been mediated somewhat differently by the various cohorts because they experienced those periods at different ages. Consequently, age-category voting participation rates and trends may differ substantially from those in the past as different birth cohorts enter the respective age categories. The turnout rate for older persons has averaged 68.6% in the last three presidential elections (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1966–1996). Williamson (1998) suggests that the participation rate for baby boomers when they reach old age may even be greater because they will on average have better health and higher levels of education and income than the cohorts of older persons that preceded them. It is also possible that more people of all ages will register and vote in the 21st

Figure 6. Projected percentage of votes that would be cast by persons aged 65+ in nationwide elections in the 21st century, based on 1996 ratio of percent of votes cast by persons aged 65+ to proportion that persons aged 65+ were of voting-age population. In 1996 the ratio was 1.23/1 (see Table 1). Source: Author's calculations from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P25 (Middle Series Projections), 1998.

The Politics of Baby Boomers.—Although the senior power model has not held up empirically in the closing decades of the 20th century, it is evidence that persons in the youngest age group in the electorate have historically had weaker identification with the major parties, have been more likely to describe themselves as independents, and have cared less about the actual outcomes of elections than older voters (McManus, 1996). Moreover, through the courses of their lives, older persons have experienced more elections involving the electoral failures of independent candidates than have younger people. Consequently, it is reasonable to hypothesize that they are more skeptical of the value of voting for an independent.

An election campaign that is highly focused on age-related issues to the virtual exclusion of others could also alter trends in age-group voting participation rates. One can imagine a 21st century election in which two presidential candidates take starkly opposed policy positions regarding financing and benefit distributions in the Social Security or Medicare programs. Depending on the details, such a political context might substantially affect age-group turnout rates and thereby sharply alter the long-term patterns in percentage of total vote cast by particular age categories.

In short, all that one can safely predict is that when all members of the baby boom cohort are aged 65 and older, the proportion of the total vote that is cast by older people in national elections probably will be significantly higher than it is today.
possible that it might in the decades ahead? Will baby boomers cast a notably cohesive “senior vote” in the 21st century, unlike preceding cohorts of older Americans? Is it conceivable that Thruow’s specter of class warfare between the old and the young will materialize? A brief review of what we know to date about the politics of the baby boom cohort is a good starting point for exploring these questions.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the baby boom cohort was popularly characterized as a monolithic political group, notable for its liberal activism. As Paul Light (1988) notes, its members had much in common:

They shared the great economic expectations of the 1950s and the fears that came with Sputnik and the dawn of the nuclear era. They shared the hopes of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, and the disillusionment that came with the assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, and the resignations. (p. 10)

Yet, as Light also notes, not all of the baby boomers were protesters on college campuses. Some went to Vietnam instead, and others went straight from high school to work.

Regardless of stereotypes of the baby boom cohort in this earlier period, it is clear that its members have not been politically homogeneous. Alwin (1998) reports that from 1968 through 1978 about 50% of Boomers identified themselves as Independents, 35% as Democrats, and 15% as Republicans. Since 1980, the proportion that has said they are Democrats has remained stable, but there has been a systematic decline in Independent identification and an increase in Republican identification. By 1994, about 30% of baby boomers declared themselves to be Republicans. So far, the baby boom cohort has become somewhat more conservative as it has grown older.

In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, members of the baby boom cohort are diverse just like older age cohorts. In some respects they are more so. As Williamson (1998) notes, baby boomers are made up of two minicohorts, those born between 1946 and 1954 and those born between 1955 and 1964. Williamson goes on to point out that “economic experiences of these two groups have been different (Bouvier & De Vita, 1991). The older boomers have economically benefited from better timing with respect to when they entered both the housing market and the job market (Cormon & Kingson, 1996)” (p. 55). In addition, the baby boom will be more racially and ethnically diverse in old age than is today’s older population. Between 2000 and 2030, the proportion of persons aged 65 and older who are of Hispanic origin will double from 5.4% to 10.9%, and the proportion of Black older persons will increase by nearly one sixth, from 8.3% to 9.7% (Hobbs, 1996).

Given the partisan attachments and diverse socioeconomic characteristics of the baby boom cohort, it should not be surprising that its voting behavior has been similar to that of other birth cohorts during the past 30 years. As baby boomers have passed through various age ranges they have distributed their votes among candidates in roughly the same proportions as have other age groups at those times (see Binstock, 1997b). They have not been a relatively cohesive electoral constituency.

Electoral Politics in the 21st Century. In view of these characteristics of baby boomers, what will their voting behavior be like when they reach old age? Answers to this question can be informed by the past, but they also need to be premised on hypothetical political scenarios.

Unless the political context of election campaigns is radically different from what it is today—particularly with respect to issues affecting older people—one would expect that when the baby boom cohort reaches old age it will continue to split its votes among candidates in patterns similar to younger cohorts, just as older voters have done in the past. The baby boom has developed stable partisan attachments. Although baby boomers will come to share the characteristics of old age, this will be only one set of characteristics that individual members of the group will have. As outlined earlier, the baby boom is at least as diverse socioeconomically as the cohorts that have preceded it.

Yet, old age could become the most important characteristic influencing electoral decisions of baby boomers in certain circumstances. In one or more election campaigns, for example, the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates could espouse drastically different positions regarding policies affecting older persons.

In the rare times of crisis in modern American history, as during the Great Depression, politicians have boldly abandoned their incremental approaches and put forward radical public policy proposals. President Franklin D. Roosevelt came forth with bold innovations (for American politics) such as the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and Social Security. These innovations brought him strong and enduring support from a new majority coalition of American voters, as well as virulent opposition from others. Suppose that in 2030 the American economy is in dire circumstances as it was 100 years earlier during the Depression. The platform of one candidate could assert that the United States can no longer afford Social Security and Medicare. The other candidate could vow to preserve the two programs, at all costs, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the economic devastation besetting the country. In this scenario it is very plausible that the proportion of votes given to the latter candidate by elderly baby boomers would be much higher than the proportions from other age groups.

Alternatively, in the same economic circumstances, one candidate might assert that the only way that old-age benefits can continue to be provided by the federal government is to require that all citizens who wish to receive them must reside in government-run
senior citizen communities or reservations. There, with economies of scale, the federal government would provide food, shelter, medical care, long-term care, and various other goods and services necessary for minimum adequate daily living. Programs such as Social Security and Medicare would be abolished. In this scenario, the characteristic of old age would undoubtedly be a very important factor influencing the votes of baby boomers. But it cannot be assumed that their votes would cluster heavily against this candidate. Depending on their economic circumstances, and their views regarding living arrangements and notions of what constitutes a good lifestyle, many older persons might regard residence in such a community to be a reasonable tradeoff for an assurance that their basic needs would continue to be met even in the context of a severely depressed economy. Others, of course, would not consider this tradeoff under any circumstances. And still others would be indifferent because they would not need government support at all in order to maintain their standards of living and lifestyles.

In yet another scenario, a political party comprising older baby boomers might emerge. To be sure, no major old-age parties have yet developed in Western democracies. But a precursor of what may develop when industrialized democracies become “aging societies” occurred in the Netherlands in the early 1990s. Controversial national policies relevant to older people led to the establishment of two national parties, the General Senior Citizens’ Union and Union 55+. Together, in 1994, they won 7 of the 150 seats in parliament (Schuyt, García, & Knipscheer, 1999).

Some social scientists (Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Cutler, 1981; Cutler, Pierce, & Steckenrider, 1984; Torres-Gil, 1992) have argued that an age-group consciousness will develop among older people by the 21st century and that their political behavior will be cohesive. If an old-age group consciousness develops among baby boomers, it might be built on and politically magnified by the creation of, say, a Seniors’ Rights Party. In the context of a severely depressed economy, it would probably seek to maintain the benefits of existing old-age policies. In the context of a prosperous economy, it might espouse new types of government benefits for older people and major expansions of existing ones. It is plausible that such a party might capture a very high proportion of the votes of baby boomers. Even if it did not succeed in winning the presidency or a substantial number of seats in Congress, the party’s efforts could very well foster a genuine intergenerational conflict of the kind envisioned by Thurow and others.

Although some of this increase is attributable to the numerical growth of the elderly population, much of it is due to age-group changes in voting participation rates. As new birth cohorts entered the various age-group categories over the years, the voting turnout rate for people aged 65 and older increased somewhat but the rates for all other age groups declined (especially among persons aged 18–24 and 25–44).

Some of the age-group changes in turnout can be explained by changes in voting registration rates. While the registration rate for older persons has increased slightly over a quarter of a century, the rates for the other age groups have diminished. The theory that persons who are relatively well informed about and interested in politics and public affairs are more likely to register and vote may also help to explain these age-group differences. Studies show that older people, comparatively, have high levels of knowledge and interest regarding public affairs, generally, and political campaigns, particularly. And each succeeding cohort of older persons has been more highly educated than the last. In addition, relatively high rates of voting by older people may be attributed to their stronger attachments to political parties, because there is a well-established relationship between party identification and higher rates of turnout.

None of these factors, however, explain the decline in participation by the groups younger than 65 years of age and older. The reasons for the general decline in voting over the past three decades remain a subject of controversy and debate in the scholarly literature.

The overall political significance of the large and growing proportion of votes cast by older people is complex. On the one hand, older voters have not shown monolithic tendencies in their electoral decision making. Their ballots tend to distribute among candidates in roughly the same patterns as do those of other age groups and the electorate as a whole. They have not proved to be important in determining the outcomes of elections. On the other hand, old-age interest groups have some limited forms of power based on their symbolic representation of a large constituency, and the concomitant possibility that they might, someday, be able to “swing” the votes of a sizable number of older voters. Although the political legitimacy of these groups has been on the wane during the past decade, politicians still do focus on the potential cohesiveness of older voters and attempt to position themselves accordingly when undertaking governmental actions and election campaigns—responses that are politically significant.

When all of the living members of the baby boom cohort are aged 65 and older, they are projected to constitute more than one fourth of the voting-age population. However, predicting the proportion of votes they will cast is problematic. Models that extrapolate from age-group turnout trends from 1972–1996 project that in the fourth and fifth decades of the 21st century persons aged 65 and older might cast from one third to two fifths of the votes in presi-

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dential elections. But the past trends may not persist. Each of the age group categories will be made up of different birth cohorts than in the past, with different aggregate levels of health, education, income, partisan attachment, and other characteristics related to voting participation. New laws and technologies may facilitate both voting and registration among some age groups more than others.

Because the baby boom cohort is heterogeneous in socioeconomic and political characteristics, its members are unlikely to cast their ballots in a monolithic or even cohesive fashion when they are elderly, and they are unlikely to make unified demands on politicians. However, the political circumstances could be very different from today. Hudson (1998), in commenting on changes he perceives in the political context of policies on aging in the late 1990s, has observed that today’s politics of aging “is not your grandfather’s politics of aging” (p. 130). When baby boomers reach old age, American politics may not be their fathers’ or grandfathers’ politics, either. For instance, candidates for office may take sharply different positions from each other regarding policies on aging such as those described in the scenarios of the kind that have been painted in this article. In such a circumstance, the votes of older persons might tend to cohere, thereby enhancing the political significance of the “senior vote.” Barring scenarios of this kind, the votes of older persons might not crystallize into a cohesive stance, the votes of older persons might tend to cohere, thereby enhancing the political significance of the “senior vote.” Barring scenarios of this kind, the major political parties and candidates for office, as in the past, will probably not diverge significantly from one another regarding policies affecting older people and the very large latent constituency of older voters will probably not crystallize into a cohesive political force. Any observations about the future beyond these would be ungrounded.

References


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Appendix

Although candidates for Congress often stake out positions on old-age policy issues in their campaigns, and incumbents have voting records on such issues, congressional elections are excluded from this discussion. In any given election the circumstances affecting voting participation can vary substantially from one congressional district to another and from one state to another. Such circumstances include, for example, legal and other local practices that facilitate or hinder voter registration; whether a congressional candidate’s seat is “safe” or “hotly contested”; scandals or prominent issues that are local in nature; and electoral contests for statewide office that may elicit higher than usual participation or that may be of less than usual interest to potential voters. For an appropriate analysis of age-group voting participation, factors of this kind would have to be explored in 535 electoral contests—435 for the U.S. House of Representatives, and 100 for the U.S. Senate (involving a different one third of the states in each of the three Senatorial elections that take place during a 6-year period.) Although these circumstances are also relevant to presidential elections, and are worth exploring (see Binstock, 1997b), their impact on analyses of data from a single nationwide election contest is more diffuse than in the many separate congressional contests.