

The young, the old and new policy

Anette Eva Fasang

Demographic changes, brought by migration, mortality, and fertility, affect many regions of the world. In most European countries, the population is ageing, stagnating, or even shrinking, while exponential population growth in the poorest countries of the Global South, means that the average age there is falling. If current growth rates persist, the population of Germany will double within 173 years – with countries like Hungary and Greece actually expected to shrink. In Senegal, by contrast, present growth rates would double the population within 25 years, with Niger expected to grow from 22 to 80 million by 2055 – just 18 years.

Demographic change poses a range of policy challenges at the national and global levels. It greatly alters the problems that policy has to tackle, making questions of providing for the basic needs of a declining or growing population, and ensuring social cohesion in diverse societies more pressing. Demographic change also modifies the composition of the electorate, interest groups, parties and protest movements. In recent years, divisions between the old and young and between people of differing ethnic origins have played a decisive role, for example, in the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump. Assuming a certain degree of equality of opportunity, demographic change will also

arrive in the composition of people working for the government and in public institutions. If government departments or public authorities become more diverse in terms of age, gender, religion, and ethnicity, this could influence processes of policy making and implementation. Some of these fields have already been well investigated, while we know astonishingly little about others.

Let us take a look at some current demographic developments that could have far-reaching implications for political processes. In past decades, life expectancy increased rapidly in most regions of the world. Recently, however, it has started to decline, even in certain groups in prosperous countries. In the United States, for example, the average life expectancy at birth has been falling for a number of years in comparison with other countries. In 1995, American life expectancy was 76, the OECD average. By 2015, it had failed to keep pace and was 78.7 years, far below the then OECD average of 80.3. This trend is particularly stark among white men with a low level of education, for whom mortality in mid-life has sharply increased in recent years. Key reasons for an increase of mid-life mortality among lower educated men include drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related liver mortality. This population group has also shown growing support for Donald Trump

and the Republican Party indicating the importance of demographic shifts on political outcomes. Besides social deprivation, rising fears that whites could lose their majority status in the United States to other ethnic groups play a key role in the attraction to right-wing positions.

The rise of life expectancy in Germany has also begun to stagnate in recent years after a long period of growth. Between 2014 and 2016, it declined slightly from 81.1 to 80.6 years. The gap between former East and West Germany remains considerable. Differences in life expectancy, and hence in people's overall health, can be seen as the most extreme form of social inequality. Only if you are alive can you participate in the distribution and redistribution of all other goods, whether they be income, wealth, or life chances. Moreover, we know little about how differences in life expectancy among the voter base of certain parties affect their success. Education and occupation are closely related to life expectancy and differ markedly between the voters of different parties. Because the average level of education among SPD and Linke voters is lower than among CDU voters, the life expectancy of the former is likely to be much lower. This means that, if voters remain loyal to a party throughout their lives, the CDU will receive more votes over the life span of a voter than would other parties. Further, voters who switch parties tend to adopt conservative positions as they grow older. The CDU could thus benefit from the ageing of the population in two regards.

Family structures and intergenerational relationships have also changed considerably around the world, partly related to population aging. Increasingly, European countries are politically enabling and supporting diverse family forms, whereas other, more conservative countries, notably in Eastern Europe, seek to promote the classical heteronormative nuclear family. First findings from the United States indicate that the family situation across the life course is also related to political participation. More married and childless people vote, while parents and divorcees cast their ballot less often, possibly due to more intense time constraints. More diversity in family structures may then change the political representation of certain groups.

Equally important is the question of how distributive conflicts between generations, especially against the backdrop of population ageing, affects solidarity or conflicts in families. One argument holds that the often invoked "revolt of the young" has failed to materialize because the older generation often pay a substantial portion of their relatively generous pensions to their adult children as monetary gifts and other support. How will growing political polarization between generations in some countries, as we have seen in the Brexit referendum affect solidarity and conflict within families?

And finally, as Helbling and Meierrieks describe in this issue (see p. 48f.), we face what is possibly the greatest global political challenge: exponential population growth in the poorest countries of the Global South and the resulting increase in migration pressure against the backdrop of climate change and increasingly scarce natural resources.

All these questions amount to an important research agenda. In the new graduate programme “The Dynamics of Demography Democratic Processes and Public Policies” (DYNAMICS, spokesperson: Heike Klüver), demographers and political scientists at the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Hertie School of Governance will be addressing these topics together.

Anette Eva Fasang heads the research group Demography and Inequality, and holds a chair in microsociology at the Humboldt University, Berlin.



Three minutes of research: Shorts from the WZB

What determines life courses? Does the passport make the citizen – or is it rather the love for a country and shared values? Why don't some people lie? How will we work in the future? WZB researchers address a broad spectrum of questions using a wide variety of methods. For the short film project “My Research in Three Minutes,” Gabriele Kammerer and Vladimir Bondarenko, let the heads of the junior research groups at the WZB, present information about their work, illustrated by the Berlin designer Fabian Hickethier. The films invite the audience on a journey through both informative and entertaining forays into the wide-ranging fields of behavioral economics, educational research, international affairs, and neuroeconomics. You can find information on young research and new approaches under: <https://vimeo.com/album/5020657>.