



So, you want to be elected?

ILC-UK Think-Piece by:

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Readers of ILC-UK papers are a cerebral bunch and I'm sure we'd all like nothing better than seeing public policy on ageing crafted in a rarefied environment of evidence and analysis. But in 2010, we all know there's no chance of that. The year ahead will be dominated by votes, politics and elections. Political pundits are already predicting that a clear election result is far from assured with realistic possibilities including a hung parliament, minority government or more than one General Election. With a year of political turmoil ahead politicians of all parties will be chasing voters. And for any of the parties to secure workable majorities then politicians will need to respond to the views and aspirations of older voters.

More than any other previous election, the next General Election will be decided by older voters. This is due to two key factors: first with our population ageing rapidly, there are more older voters about; second, older people are much more likely to vote. At the last General Election, 71 per cent of people aged 55-64 and 75 per cent of those over 65 voted. This compares to just 37 per cent among those aged 18 to 24.

To assess the impact of the 'grey vote' at the next General Election, Age UK commissioned Dr Scott Davidson of De Montfort University to update previous research into the age demographics of parliamentary constituencies. This research assumes that previous turn out rates carry forward and uses the latest available information to bring the electoral map up to date following boundary changes.

The first finding from the research is a significant revision to our understanding of the impact of the 'grey vote' back in 2005. Applying the latest population estimates shows that the electorate in some constituencies was older than previously thought. Overall, people aged 65 and over accounted for 25 per cent of all votes cast in Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland). In three constituencies (Christchurch, Clacton and New Forest West), the over-65s accounted for the majority of votes cast – and they accounted for more than a third of votes cast in 287 constituencies. Turning to people aged over 55, the results are even more startling. Overall, they made up 43 per cent of all votes cast at the 2005 election. This age group accounted for the majority of votes cast in 268 constituencies, significantly more than estimated in previous research based on the 2001 Census.

Projecting forward to the 2010 General Election we can expect a further ageing of the voting electorate. The research estimates that those over 65 will account for the majority of votes cast in five constituencies – as well as 40 per cent of the turnout in 102 constituencies, and a third in 368. Again, the shift in the age profile of the electorate is even more pronounced when we focus on everyone aged 55 and over.

So how should the political parties garner the votes of older people? There is no evidence to suggest that older people vote as a block interest. However, politicians do need to address older people's needs and concerns to show they are in touch with their lives and have answers to the problems they face. With older people increasingly likely to switch their party allegiance and very likely to use their vote, the

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political dividends are clear. If one party is able to address the issues affecting older people in a way that resonates, the impact will register at the next election.

That's not to say that the interests of older voters are set apart from the rest of society – they care about their families' futures, on issues from schools to global warming, as much as issues immediately affecting their own lives such as pensions or social care. When we commissioned a MORI poll on the issues older people consider when voting, we found that the issues which resonated with people aged 24 to 54 were largely the same as the issues of interest to people aged over 55 and aged over 75. For example, all age groups rate the economy as the most important election issue in deciding their vote.

But with public spending expected to take a significant hit following the election, older people may be disproportionately affected by cut backs. Almost a quarter of public spending is dedicated to health, care and social security for people in later life. Any attempts to cut back on benefits for those who are sick or poor will be met with considerable resistance. For example there have already been spirited responses to proposed changes to Attendance Allowance and the Winter Fuel Payment and to the Conservative's suggestion of a rapid increase in the state pension age.

If politicians wish to convincingly show they can manage the economy without damaging older people's interests, they must acknowledge the longer term planning and investment necessary to support an ageing society as well as the importance of supporting people in later life to contribute to the economy. People in later life will have to play a part in the country's economic recovery, as workers, consumers and users of services. Age discrimination in the workplace, in volunteering and in buying consumer goods continues to stand in the way. A promise of equal respect for people of all ages should be part of any political platform. Above all, we want to see all the political parties promise to end forced retirement at 65, which is costing jobs at the height of a recession and will be a brake on economic recovery.

Age UK's 2010 election manifesto check list

Equal respect – an end to upper age limits in work and insurance, support for older jobseekers

Support to stay independent – radical reform of our care system, with protection for today's spending and safeguards for Attendance Allowance

Enough Money – automatic payment of benefits, more help with fuel bills, and the State Pension linked to earnings.

Feeling well – treatment of common illnesses, diagnosis of depression, and healthcare with dignity

Taking part locally – free local travel for all, age-friendly councils, and lifetime homes

The other key issues we want to see addressed are poverty in later life, better health, improved opportunities for participation, and, finally, better support to live independently. Surprisingly it is the last of these where we have seen the political parties making overtures to older voters in the phoney election campaign that has been raging over the last few months. The reform of care and support is one of the

most pressing public policy challenges, but is also one of the most complex, and until recently has been seen as being of little interest to voters.

The ideas emerging from the Government's green paper on social care, the Liberal Democrat's promise of a co-payments system and the Conservative's insurance based residential care guarantee are interesting starting points for a wholesale review of the social care system. However they are insufficient responses as they stand. It is important that the parties keep the momentum going into the election campaign since social care is one issue which, left unaddressed, will ultimately cost the public purse through greater pressures on the NHS. Just as importantly, failure to act will cost frail and disabled people their dignity, with services increasingly unable to meet basic needs as the numbers needing help increase. We want radical reform of care which is affordable for individuals and taxpayers and which enshrines dignity, fairness, autonomy and simplicity. In five years time we will judge any new government on whether it has delivered.

People don't vote for a particular political party because they are a certain age - and the older population is very diverse, both in its make up and in its views. However, people's needs, aspirations and concerns change as they grow older and some key issues will be at the forefront of their minds when they cast their votes: equal respect; enough money; support to stay independent; good health; and the chance to participate locally. We hope that politicians will pay heed to the growing public interest in proposals for care reform and recognise that if they want to be elected, they need to focus on the interests, aspirations and votes of people in later life.

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