



Southern Public Administration Education Foundation



Reforming the Welfare State in Times of Grey Majorities. The Myth of an Opposition between Younger and Older Voters in Germany

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Published in GPS, Vol. 4 No. 2

Is there an antagonism between young and old in the electoral arena that could lead to the obstruction of welfare-state reforms? This article argues that this notion is a myth and lacks empirical evidence for the case of Germany. It is true that (a) there are imminent majorities of voters aged 50 and older; (b) older voters benefit from many welfare state programs and (c) life-cycle interests shape some attitudes towards single public policies. However, these facts alone do not represent an antagonism between young and old in the electoral arena. Firstly, differences in party preferences between age groups are due to generational effects associated with early political socialization. Secondly, life-cycle interests do not shape the German party competition because age is not a political division line (cleavage). Young age/ old age is only a transitional boundary that all of us aspire to cross, meaning that material old-age interests are important to everyone. Finally, grey interests parties are notoriously weak and try to become parties for the interests of all age groups.

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