December 1981

The Political Influence of Older Americans

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**Recommended Citation**

Williamson, John B.; Evans, Linda; Powell, Lawrence A.; and Hesse-Biber, Sharlene (1981) "The Political Influence of Older Americans," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 7. Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol8/iss4/7

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the future prospects for the political influence of older Americans. Some analysts contend that the next fifty years will bring a marked increase in the political influence of the elderly. Others argue that the aged are unlikely to become a significant political influence at any time in the foreseeable future. We review the relevant evidence and conclude that it is not entirely consistent with either of these positions. Our analysis suggests a third alternative, that there will be a marked increase in the political resources of the elderly, which will not necessarily translate into an increase in political influence.

Two of the questions that most intrigue political gerontologists are: (1) how much political influence do older Americans have today and (2) how much political influence are they likely to come to have in the years ahead. There is a tendency for those who believe that older Americans have relatively little political influence today to also believe that there will be little if any increase in their influence for the foreseeable future (Maddox, 1978; Campbell, 1971). Similarly, those who would have us believe that older people are a significant political block today tend to foresee an increase in the political influence of older people during the next fifty years or so (Peterson et al., 1976; Butler, 1974). Our analysis of the evidence suggests a third alternative. Due to increasing levels of education, advances in telecommunications, the changing

patterns of labor force participation for women, and a number of other such trends, we see a substantial increase in the political resources of older people. However, it is not possible on the basis of available evidence to determine whether this increase in resources will lead to a significant or insignificant increase in the actual political influence of older people. In this essay our goal is to analyze the various factors which are likely to influence the magnitude of any shift in the influence of older Americans in the years ahead.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO AN INCREASE IN THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF OLDER AMERICANS

Few analysts question the demographic trend data that point to an increase in the proportion of the population over age 65 during the next fifty years. These older Americans constituted 11 percent of the population in 1980 and will come to constitute approximately 18 percent of the population by the year 2025 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979b). In view of these projections it is reasonable to expect at least some increase in the number of elderly voters. During the 1970's older Americans made up approximately 15 percent of voters and one reasonable projection is that they will make up 20 percent of voters fifty years from now (Hudson and Binstock, 1976).

In addition to the increase in the number of elderly people there are an increasing number of people in their middle years who can identify with the elderly on many issues because of similar life circumstances (Neugarten, 1974; Binstock, 1976). One factor contributing to this is the trend toward earlier retirement. In 1900, 63 percent of men over age 65 were still in the labor force, but by 1977 the figure had decreased to 20 percent (Atchley, 1976; Schulz, 1980). There has been a similar trend with respect to persons aged 55 to 64 (those in late middle age); in 1950, 87 percent were in the labor force, but the projected figure for 1990 is 70 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976; Williamson, Evans, and Munley, 1980). Both the retired elderly and retired persons in the late middle age are living on reduced and relatively fixed incomes; both share a concern with the consequences of inflation and tax increases; and both would find it difficult to reenter the labor force. Similarly, neither group continues to have the social roles and social status that work provides.

People with elderly parents support the interests of the elderly on many issues in part because they feel burdened by responsibilities toward their parents. They are likely to support efforts to increase Social Security, SSI, and other such benefits which help their parents maintain independent households. Some of these people are seeking relief from the present burden of providing economic support and various support services to their aging parents; others are looking to the future and hoping to minimize the burdens they see coming (Riley and Waring, 1976).

Persons working in industries which provide services to the elderly have a direct economic interest in government spending on various programs for the aged. This includes those who work in nursing homes and other such long-term care facilities. It includes the administrators who work in the various federal, state
and local agencies that provide services for the aged as well as the various Area Agencies on Aging. These agencies are sometimes referred to as the "aging network" (Estes, 1978). It includes those who administer nutrition programs as well as those who provide transportation services, homemaker services, protective services, legal services, counseling, and home health aid services.

This segment of the senior movement is small by comparison with the others considered so far, but it is a strategically placed group of advocates on behalf of programs for the elderly. Some of these people are in a position to influence those who shape old age policy and programs. This group tends to be very active in the interest group process by which so much government policy is formulated and modified (Estes, 1979). This service sector expanded rapidly during the late 1960's and early 1970's, but it will probably decrease in size during the 1980's given the trend toward cutting back social programs. However, even in the face of limited economic growth and austerity in government spending on social programs, it is reasonable to expect some expansion in this sector over the long run. If for no other reason than the marked increase in the number of the elderly who depend on such services, one would expect at least some expansion in the number of service providers.

Organized labor has become increasingly concerned with old age issues during the past twenty years (Marmor, 1973; Pratt, 1976). As the number of union members who are retired increases and as retirement age declines, old age issues become increasingly relevant to unions. Particularly relevant in this context are Social Security and health care benefits. To the extent that organized labor's support for aging programs increases, there should be a corresponding increase in the ability of the aged to realize their political objectives.

We have considered trends that will contribute to an increase in the size of the elderly population as well as other groups likely to support elderly interests. These trends will increase the political resources of the elderly, and the impact will be particularly significant if there is at the same time a tendency for rates of political participation to increase.

As the elderly grow older there appears to be a drop in voter participation, especially among women (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Brotman, 1977). One of the factors cited to explain this drop is poor health (Milbrath and Goel, 1977); however, there is reason to expect improvement in coming years. There has been a modest but steady improvement in the health status of the elderly since the turn of the century, a trend that is likely to continue. While life expectancy is unlikely to increase at the same rate during the next fifty years as it has since 1900, it is reasonable to expect the increase to continue; and there are some who point to the possibility of a dramatic increase in life expectancy during the next fifty years (Rosenfeld, 1976).

More important than the trend toward improved health and increased life expectancy is the trend toward a more highly educated elderly electorate. Given the evidence that there is very little decline in voter participation among the elderly who are
highly educated (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), this trend should contribute to an increase in voter participation among the elderly.

The absolute economic status of the elderly has been improving during the past forty years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). Looking to the future, it is reasonable to expect continued improvement in the economic status of the elderly (Schulz, 1980). There is no clear long term trend in economic status relative to other age groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976), but during the 1970's there was marked improvement in the relative status of the elderly (Williamson, 1979). It is risky to speculate about long term economic trends and thus about the economic status of the aged in coming years relative to the present. However, given the automatic cost of living adjustment that is written into existing Social Security legislation, the 1974 pension reform legislation, the increasing proportion of the population eligible for private pensions, and the increasing labor force participation among women, it is reasonable to project at least a modest increase in the economic status of the aged in the years ahead. Since people with higher incomes show higher political participation rates (Verba and Nie, 1972), these economic trends should contribute to an increase in political participation.

The stigma associated with being old may decline somewhat in coming years. Among the factors which could contribute to such a decline are: increases in the elderly's level of education, changes in mass media old age stereotyping, improvements in the economic and health status of the aged, the trend away from mandatory retirement and the trend toward voluntary early retirement, and the growth of various organizations committed to improving the image and influence of the aged. To the extent that there is a reduction in the stigma associated with being old, we should expect a corresponding increase in willingness to assume the identity of elderly person. Since there is a tendency for those who identify as being elderly to be more supportive of programs on behalf of the elderly (Cutler and Schmidhauser, 1975; Bengtson and Cutler, 1976), any reduction in stigma could well contribute to an increase in the political participation and influence.

There has been a marked shift in the labor force participation of women during the past thirty years; more women are spending more of their lives at work (Schulz, 1980). This trend along with the more general changes in traditional sex roles is likely to reduce the gap in political participation among elderly men and women. Today elderly women show lower voter turnout rates than do elderly men (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). In addition to the decline in voter participation starts at an earlier age than for elderly men. However, with increased labor force participation (Bednarzik and Klein, 1977) and changing sex roles, it is quite likely that in years to come voter participation rates for women will more nearly approximate those for men (Andersen, 1975). This would contribute to an overall increase in voting rates for older people.

In recent years there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of voters who identify as being either Democratic or Republican and there has been a corresponding upswing in the proportion who identify as being independents (Nie et al.,
1976). To the extent that voters of any population subgroup including the elderly identify as independents, they cannot be taken for granted by those running for elective office. This trend will give the elderly more political leverage than they have. In the past the elderly have been viewed as a very stable voting group (Campbell et al., 1960). For this reason politicians have generally been hesitant to focus too directly on the aging vote (Riemer and Binstock, 1978). If elderly voters have been supporting a particular party over the years, they have been more likely than other age groups to continue to do so (Hudson and Binstock, 1976). If a party can assume that it is going to get the votes of a particular constituency, this reduces the bargaining power of that constituency; in recent years this has been a problem for black voters who have traditionally voted heavily Democratic. If the trend for the elderly to identify as independents continues, it is likely that this will contribute to an increase in their political influence.

There is a tendency to stereotype the elderly and as a result they are viewed as being much more homogeneous than is actually the case. In fact they tend to be one of the most heterogeneous age groups with respect to a wide range of characteristics. It is often argued that this heterogeneity tends to reduce the political power of the elderly (Harootyan, 1981; Binstock, 1972; Campbell, 1971). However, there is reason to believe that the elderly are becoming more homogeneous in certain respects and that this trend may increase their political influence in the years ahead. One relevant factor in this context is the change in immigration rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979b). There was a lot more immigration into the United States during the first part of the century than there is today. As a result fifty years from now a smaller proportion of the aged will be first generation immigrants and there will be a smaller proportion who do not speak English as their first language. In addition they will have been exposed to the homogenizing influence of television and other mass media for a longer period of time. All of these factors are likely to reduce the heterogeneity among the elderly and this could increase their political influence.

Our focus to this point has been on factors likely to contribute to an increase in the political resources of the elderly in years ahead. Many analysts mention these same factors in connection with the argument that the political power and influence of the aged will be substantially greater in the future than it is today. A major reason that we take issue with the conclusion that the preceding trends will inevitably lead to a significant increase in the political influence of the aged is our recognition that there are a number of other factors that will also affect the magnitude of any shift in the relative influence of the elderly. Here we are referring to the factors which will tend to neutralize those mentioned to this point. These counterbalancing factors, to which we now turn, are often mentioned by those analysts who take the position that for foreseeable future there will be no significant increase in the political influence of older people.
FACTORS INHIBITING ANY INCREASE IN THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF OLDER AMERICANS

No one can deny that the number of elderly people in this country has dramatically increased since the turn of the century, and it is also quite safe to project a continuing increase well into the next century. This argument makes the implicit assumption that the size of a population subgroup is a major source of political power. But if we look around we are confronted with a great deal of evidence that numbers do not always translate into influence. There are more women in the nation than there are men, but again the size of this segment of the population does not translate in any direct way into political influence. Since women have many sources of identity and ideological commitment, they are not politically united as an interest group and they do not have the political influence they would otherwise have. Similarly, there are many more poor people than there are rich people in this country (Williamson et al., 1975), but few would argue that the poor have more political influence than do the rich.

An increase in the proportion of the population who are elderly will not necessarily translate into an increase in political influence. To the extent that the aged remain divided by their allegiance to a variety of other sources of identity such as social class, occupational background, race, religion, and ethnic background, any increase in numbers may be neutralized (Binstock, 1972). If an increase in the size of the elderly population is to translate into an increase in political influence, it would help if there were some increase in "age consciousness," but such a shift may not occur. The elderly have a variety of sources of identity other than age and many of these other sources of identity are much more long standing and more highly valued (Campbell, 1971). For this reason some analysts (Binstock, 1976; Maddox, 1978) argue that the elderly are a relatively weak political force today and that in the future they are likely to remain weak.

While there are trends discussed earlier that may reduce the degree of heterogeneity among the elderly in coming years, there is no credible authority who argues that the heterogeneity will be eliminated. To the contrary, most would agree that the cross-cutting sources of identity, loyalty, and perceived self-interest such as social class, race and ethnicity will remain and continue to affect political attitudes and behavior (Binstock, 1972; Campbell, 1971). Because some of these cleavages, such as social class, reflect very real differences in self-interest, it is going to be difficult to politically unify older people around aging issues and candidates committed to the interests of the elderly (Ragan and Davis, 1978). The heterogeneity of the elderly will continue to inhibit the development of a strong elderly voting block and the evolution of the elderly as a highly organized interest group.

The "elderly dependency ratio" (the ratio of persons over age 65 to persons age 18 to 65) has been increasing since the turn of the century and most likely will continue to increase during the next fifty years (Cutler and Schmidhauser, 1975). It reflects the increasing economic burden the dependent elderly will
be placing on the nonelderly. Some analysts argue that the burden could reach a point at which the nonelderly are unwilling to bear the burden (Hudson, 1978). One reaction might be a major tax payer's revolt. It is possible that the "Proposition 13 Movement" of the 1970's will turn out to have been just the opening round for a much more comprehensive revolt. The increasing tax burden on the nonelderly due in part to the cost of programs for the aged could serve to unify this segment of the population against continued government efforts to improve or even maintain the elderly's living standard. Such a tax revolt would represent a major threat to the economic well-being of many who are elderly, and it could serve as a catalyst for political unity among the elderly (Weaver, 1981). But if this unity were to occur in response to a substantial antiaging backlash in the general population, any potential increase in power among the elderly might well be neutralized.

In the not too distant future there might be a marked increase in age consciousness among the elderly in response to certain polarizing events. The most often cited example in this context is an actual or threatened sharp reduction in standard of living available to the elderly (Wilson, 1973). If the nation were faced with a no-growth economy and marked inflation, the standard of living the elderly experience might be undercut. This could produce a strong political reaction on the part of the elderly and lead to an increase in "aging consciousness." To the extent that the elderly have a clear economic self-interest in common, an increase in age consciousness would be quite possible. This in turn could lead to more political unity and possibly to an "aging vote."

However, the preceding scenario fails to deal with one very important argument. It is entirely possible that the conditions which would be necessary to create a marked increase in age consciousness among the elderly would also tend to increase sentiments against the elderly. Age consciousness would probably increase in response to an economic collapse on the magnitude of the Great Depression, but such a collapse would not just impact the elderly; it would have profound effects on all age groups. In this situation there would be a great deal of competition from other age groups with their own needs. These other groups would not sit idly by watching their incomes fall relative to those of the elderly. The severe economic conditions necessary to produce a marked increase in solidarity among the aged would at the same time increase the resistance from other and more powerful segments of the population to resist any increase in the aged's share of the national budget.

Organizations such as the Gray Panthers are sometimes cited as evidence of the elderly's increasing age consciousness. Critics point out that the number of older persons who identify as being "old" or "elderly" is surprisingly small (Riley and Foner, 1968). In one study based on a national sample, only 38 percent of those over age 60 identified as old (Cutler, 1974), and in another only 61 percent of those aged 71 to 79 identified as being elderly or old as opposed to young or middle-aged (Ward, 1979). Furthermore, those who are in the best health and who have the most education are the least likely to identify as being old
With this evidence in mind it is reasonable to conclude that as education levels increase and the economic position of the elderly improves, we may find fewer rather than more of the elderly willing to identify as being elderly. Those who do not identify as being elderly are less likely to support efforts to improve the welfare of the elderly than are persons of comparable age who do identify as being old (Cutler and Schmidhauser, 1975; Cutler, 1974). This could make it difficult for those attempting to organize an old age voting block based on age consciousness.

One of the most frequently used perspectives in discussions of aging policy is that of interest group pluralism (Estes, 1979; Binstock, 1972; Rose, 1965). In the arena of interest group politics economic clout is an important source of influence. Large corporations, unions, and other such well financed interest groups are in a position to employ highly paid lobbyists to make sure the interests of their constituencies are well represented. In this process, the interest of the poor, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups are also represented, but less adequately than more well organized and more highly financed groups. In this process there is no one-to-one correspondence between the size of a constituency and the amount of influence it is able to exert. All other things being equal the larger a constituency the greater its clout; however, most typically all other things are not equal. The strength of the AMA lobby is certainly out of proportion to the actual size of its constituency as is also the case with the lobby for the National Rifle Association and many other such well financed and highly specialized special interest groups. To the extent that the model of interest group pluralism describes the way in which major governmental decisions are made in this country, there is reason to doubt that even a substantial increase in the number of elderly voters will significantly change their political influence.

The relative power of different interest groups and population subgroups can be measured in many ways. We have already considered the problem with one of these, simply counting up the numbers of voters in the specified constituency. Another alternative is to look at the outcome of the political process. In this context one might consider the proportion of the federal budget in recent years that has gone to programs for the elderly. A trend favorable to the elderly was particularly evident during the late 1960's and 1970's. In 1967 approximately 16 percent of the federal budget was allocated to various programs for the aging (U.S. Dept. of HEW, 1971). By 1980 it has increased to 25 percent and some were projecting it would increase to 40 percent within the next sixty years (Rabushka and Jacobs, 1980). However, there are a number of criticisms that can be made of arguments based on these statistics. One is to question how much of the spending actually reaches the elderly in a form that significantly contributes to an increase in standard of living or quality of life. Another argument is that this trend seems to be changing. In recent years there has been a clear trend toward increasing defense spending while decreasing spending on social programs, including those for the elderly.
A wide variety of new programs and government agencies have been created in recent years to look after the interests of the aged. Of particular relevance in this context are: the Older American's Act (1965), the creation of the Administration on Aging (1965), enactment of Medicare and Medicaid legislation (1965), the 1972 Amendments to the Social Security Act making cost of living increments in pension benefits automatic, the creation of the National Institute on Aging (1974), the 1974 pension reform legislation, and the legislation in 1978 increasing the minimum age of mandatory retirement from 65 to 70. It is clear that in terms of government programs the elderly did quite well between the mid 1960's and the late 1970's. However, there are many who argue that the amount of pro elderly legislation seen during this span of years is not indicative of what we will be seeing in years to come. The argument is that all this legislative activity has transformed the elderly from a constituency generally viewed as neglected to one that many believe is getting more than its fair share and more than the rest of the population can afford to pay for in an era of slow economic growth (Rabushka and Jacobs, 1980). Some analysts (Hudson, 1978) argue that during the 1970's support for efforts to improve the elderly's welfare and relative standard of living peaked.

While some emphasize social programs and legislation in their analysis of outcomes of the political process, others prefer to emphasize trends in income distribution and relative economic status. For many analysts income distribution is the bottom line with respect to power (Binstock, 1972). If we look at the economic status of the elderly relative to other age groups, we see very little by way of movement over the years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). While the economic status of the elderly has improved and the poverty rate has declined significantly (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979a; 1980a), when we look at the median income of the elderly relative to other age groups, we do not see evidence of a dramatic improvement in the status of the elderly (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976). There were some gains for the elderly during the 1970's, but they did little more than compensate for the losses in relative economic status during the 1960's. This evidence coupled with the sense among many analysts that efforts to improve the relative economic status of the aged probably peaked in the 1970's, leads some to conclude that there is little reason to expect a significant shift in favor of the elderly with respect to income distribution in the foreseeable future.8

To the extent that the elderly have been unable to obtain an increase in their income share, it can be argued that they have not obtained the results one would expect if in fact their relative power had increased (Hudson and Binstock, 1976). That is, the lack of gains in relative income is an indicator of little if any increase in political power. Alternatively, it can be argued that if the elderly do not increase their relative income share, they are unlikely to increase their political influence.
The American Association of Retired Persons, the National Council of Senior Citizens, and other such mass organizations of the elderly are unwilling to press for changes in federal programs and policies that would significantly increase the elderly's share of the federal budget or significantly affect the distribution of income. Such organizations always support modest incremental proposals. They must keep their demand in a range that is acceptable to the political officials with whom they deal. As long as their demands are modest, it is easy for politicians to support these demands without hard evidence that the organization is in a position to deliver substantial numbers of votes (Binstock, 1974). If, on the other hand, the organization were to make demands for a major increase in the elderly's share of federal resources, the politicians would be unwilling to support them. This would constitute a call of their "electoral bluff" (Pratt, 1976; Hudson and Binstock, 1976). If in this situation the organization was unable to deliver votes to those who did offer support and was unable to withhold votes from those who did not, their claim to be speaking on behalf of the millions of elderly persons who are members of the organization would be seriously undercut (Binstock, 1972). What little power they presently have would be considerably diminished.

There is evidence of substantial swings from one party to another and from one election to the next, but age does not seem to be a significant variable in accounting for voting swings (Binstock, 1974). These swings show up for the aged, but there is no evidence that special appeals to the elderly get them to swing in a direction that differs from that for other age groups. If there were clear evidence that the elderly were willing to shift from one party or candidate to another on the basis of specific aging issues, this would increase their political influence.

Those predicting a marked increase in the political influence of the aged often point to the growing government bureaucracy responsible for administering aging programs and the expanding network of agencies responsible for providing various services. These agencies constitute a significant interest group lobbying on behalf of programs for the aged. But some critics have begun to raise questions as to whose interests are being served by this lobby (Estes, 1979). While some elderly persons do benefit from such programs, the great majority do not benefit or benefit in only minor ways. Most of the money spent goes to middle class non-elderly administrators and service providers. Some question the cash value to the elderly of the services provided.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

It is useful to distinguish between the short run (5 to 10 years) and the long run (40 to 50 years) in our efforts to forecast trends in the political influence of older Americans. While any effort at social forecasting is potentially problematic, this is particularly true of long-term forecasting (Douglas, 1979).

Considering first the short run, the decade of the 1980's, there is little reason at this time to expect a significant increase in the influence of the age. It is
likely that the elderly will be faced with program cuts and it is unlikely that major new programs will be enacted which tend to enhance their standard of living. It is possible that poverty rates among the aged will increase and that the overall standard of living for the aged will decline somewhat.\(^9\)

If during the next few years the aged are more successful than other interest groups in resisting funding cutbacks, it is possible that by the end of the decade analysts will be attributing more power to the elderly than they do today even if they have made no new programmatic gains. During the decade of the 1980's, the test of power of the aged as an interest group will more likely be reflected in the ability to resist substantial reductions in program benefits than in the ability to get new programs enacted.

Considering the trend for the next fifty years, we anticipate an increase in the political resources of the aged. It is likely that this increase in resources will translate into increases in autonomy and political influence, but such an outcome is by no means inevitable. It is possible that any increase in political influence will be so modest that those who today are forecasting no change in political influence will be able to claim their predictions were essentially correct.

There will not necessarily be an increase in power and influence even if there is a substantial increase in such political resources as: an increase in the size of the elderly population, changes in the level of education among the aged, higher elderly voter turnout rates, less party loyalty, and more social homogeneity among the aged. As we have pointed out earlier, these and other resources will to some degree be neutralized by a number of other factors. It is particularly relevant to bear in mind that in some instances the counterbalancing factor is triggered in response to political and economic gains by the elderly. The more successful the aged are in their competition with the other interest groups for federal monies, the greater the risk of a loss of legitimacy as a constituency that is deserving of further increases in benefits.

An increasing proportion of the federal budget was allocated to programs for the elderly during each decade -- from the 1950's through the 1970's. While it is likely that there will be a pause in this trend during all or most of the 1980's, it is very probable that the trend will continue if we consider the longer time frame of the next fifty years. This can be expected on the basis of the demographic shift which will be increasing the proportion of the adult population who are eligible for Social Security pension benefits. Thus there would be an increase in the fraction of the federal budget spent on the elderly even if there were no real increase in the size of benefits to individual Social Security recipients. While the Social Security program could by itself account for a continuation of the trend, it will not be the only source of the increase. The shift in age structure is also going to call for an increase in the proportion of federal health care dollars spent on the elderly.
It is common to interpret increases in spending on programs for the aged as gains for the elderly. But these programmatic gains have not been without their costs. They have made it possible for a greater proportion of the elderly to avoid dependency on their children. This increase in autonomy and reduction in social control by one's children has been welcomed and has contributed to an improvement in quality of life for many who are elderly. But it is now becoming evident that for many of the elderly the cost of independence from one's children has been an increase in dependence on impersonal public bureaucratic structures and functionaries. The administrators and professional service providers associated with these various programs become agents of social control. The elderly now have Medicaid that pays much of the nursing home bill, but the limit on the amount the program allows for such benefits has implications for the quality of care such institutions can provide. As a result life in these institutions is organized more around the goal of cost efficiency than patient autonomy. Many who in the past would have been taken care of at home in an environment over which they could exert considerable control find themselves recipients of government benefits, but in impersonal institutional settings.

Most of our attention to this point has been on federal government decision making, particularly that related to the allocation of federal monies. Trends in local communities will not always parallel the nation as a whole. This is particularly likely to be true of Sun Belt retirement communities. In certain communities, including some large cities such as Miami and St. Petersburg, the elderly have come to exercise considerable influence on local government decision making (Gustaitis, 1980; Anderson and Anderson, 1981). As we look to the future we can expect this trend to continue. In selected retirement communities the elderly will constitute such a large fraction of the population that they will exercise a great deal more influence than they do in most communities.

We come up with some very different conclusions when we look at trends in power within families, than when we look at the power of the elderly in the political arena. Let us first consider the intergenerational relationships between elderly parents and their adult children. The trend away from multigenerational households (Kobrin, 1976; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979b) and the trend from rural to urban residence (Weber, 1963) have both tended to decrease the control of the elderly over their children relative to what it was one hundred years ago. As we look toward the future it seems that the trend is for more, not less, independence. More of the elderly will be living in their own households and more will be moving into retirement communities or other such age homogeneous living situations. These trends will reduce involvement with children and lead to less influence over them. However, most of the elderly will continue to have frequent contact with at least one of their children and to reside where they had been living prior to old age.

We have focused on the prospects for the influence of the elderly in the aggregate. Such an emphasis presupposes that the elderly can be treated as a relatively homogeneous aggregate, but this is clearly not the case (Binstock,
1974; Campbell, 1971; Ragan and Davis, 1978). There are going to be significant variations in the extent of any change in influence for different subgroups of the elderly. The trend may be quite different for the elderly rich than for the elderly poor. A case can be made that there is likely to be an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and the extent of any increase in influence in the years ahead.

To the extent that relative power is reflected in the allocation of federal monies, one might argue that during the past fifty years there have been substantial relative gains by the elderly poor. However, it can be misleading to put too much emphasis on government expenditures. If we take into consideration the opportunities for tax avoidance that Congress has created for the rich of all ages including the elderly, we are led to a different conclusion with respect to the trend in relative power and influence. Stanley Surrey (1973) points out that federal tax benefits are in many ways equivalent to government expenditures. In this context some have described these opportunities for tax avoidance as "welfare for the rich" (Stern, 1972). If we take these tax benefits into consideration, the value of federal benefits on a per capita basis are far greater for the elderly rich than for the elderly poor, and it is entirely possible that the value of these tax benefits has increased at a greater rate over the years than have Social Security pensions, SSI payments, and other social program benefits.

During the past fifty years the welfare state has been expanding and with this expansion has come at least a modest improvement in the position of the elderly poor. But if we take into consideration tax benefits as well as program benefits, a case can be made that the relative gains have been modest. During the next fifty years we can expect some additional growth in the welfare state although the rate of expansion may be far below that of the past thirty years. However, given the historical evidence with respect to stability in the distribution of income in this country (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979a, 1980a; Pechman and Okner, 1974; Kolko, 1962), it is likely that the relative position of the elderly poor will remain similar to what it is today.

There may also be significant sex differences in the extent of any trend in influence over the next fifty years. We may find that there will be a substantial increase in the influence of elderly women relative to elderly men as the elderly female population becomes more educated and more economically self-sufficient. In the family sphere it is likely that there will be more of an increase in autonomy for women than for men. Women may come to have increasing influence over certain family decisions that have traditionally been considered the male prerogative such as when and where to retire. Similarly, women may take a more active part in family financial planning with an eye to their future economic needs as widows. This increase in the relative influence of women is also likely to be reflected in the realm of electoral politics. There is a good reason to expect that over the next fifty years there will be a marked reduction in the gap between men and women with respect to electoral participation. Increased
labor force participation will contribute to this trend, but an even more important factor will be the increase in level of education for elderly women relative to elderly men.

Elderly women, many of whom are widows, face a different set of life contingencies than do most elderly men. Related to these contingencies are special needs, such as those relating to living alone and the quality of life in nursing homes. Given the disproportionate representation of women among the elderly, it is possible that gains in influence for the aged will focus increasingly on the needs of elderly women.

Our analysis has implicitly assumed that during the next fifty years there will be no significant change in the definition of what it means to be elderly. However, it is possible that over the next few decades there may be a change in the age at which old age is seen as starting (Dowd, 1980). Conceptions of old age have changed in the past and could change in the future. The change could go in either of two directions with quite different implications. The most likely trend would be an upward shift with respect to when old age begins. The shift in mandatory retirement for the private sector from age 65 to 70 might contribute to such a trend. There has been some discussion about increasing the incentive to put off the start of Social Security benefits; if the incentive for a delay becomes substantial, this too could contribute to a trend toward later retirement.

It is likely that sixty-five will continue to be the most frequently used age to indicate the point at which a person moves from the status of being middle aged to being old, but there is by no means universal agreement on this. When people aged 65 are asked whether they consider themselves old or elderly (Cutler, 1974), a majority say they do not. With improvements in health status and economic status, it is possible that an increasing proportion of those who are 65, 70, and even 75 will consider themselves middle aged rather than old. Such a trend would be particularly likely as a consequence of medical breakthroughs that significantly extend life expectancy. If a shift were to occur and the shift were significant, we would have to qualify many of our projected trends with respect to the political power and influence of the elderly. For example, we have projected an increase in the proportion of voters who are elderly from 15 percent in 1980 to 20 percent in 2030. But if the definition of who the elderly are shifts during this time from age 65 and over to age 75 and over, there may be a decrease in the proportion of elderly voters.

Our discussion of trends in the power and influence of the aged has to this point implicitly assumed that any changes in the social, political, and economic environment will be more or less comparable to those we have experienced during the past thirty years or so. This is a reasonable assumption when attempting to make statements about conditions five years in the future, but it is a risky assumption when attempting to look fifty years ahead. Clearly, we are in no position to specify what unexpected events or social changes will occur, but it
is possible to explore a few alternative scenarios. This provides some idea of the kinds of modifications in our projections that may be called for.

A fundamental determinant of the political influence of the aged some fifty years hence will be the state of the economy between now and then. Alternative economic scenarios have profound implications for any changes in the influence of the aged. Consider first the case of a zero-growth or slow growth economy during much of the next half century. If the economy continues to perform more or less at the level of the 1970’s during the next fifty years, there will most likely be little by way of real gains in benefit levels for Social Security recipients and little if any expansion of existing social programs for the aged. For demographic reasons the actual level of government spending on programs for the aged might increase, but this would be to provide basically the same benefits presently being provided to a larger number of recipients. It would also be consistent with this economic scenario for there to be some modest overall reductions in average benefit levels while at the same time there was an overall increase in federal budget allocations for such programs. It is possible that there would be an increase in the political influence of the aged. However, this influence would more likely be reflected in the ability of the aged to defend their share of the federal budget than in the ability to get new programmatic initiatives enacted or benefit levels for existing programs increased.

In the event that the American economy turns out to be strong over much of the next fifty years, the resulting increase in productivity could lead to an increase in the funds available for social programs. Given that the elderly tend to be viewed as a deserving and legitimate constituency, it is possible that there would be significant programmatic gains. The social, health, and income support programs for the aged might well go beyond what is presently available in such advanced welfare state nations as Sweden.

There are some analysts who are forecasting an economic collapse on the order of the Great Depression of the 1930’s at some point in the not too distant future. This would have a profound impact on the standard of living and the political influence of the elderly. One source of the strength of the aging lobby in recent years has been the support it has had from other segments of what is referred to as the social welfare lobby. In an extreme economic situation, it is possible that the elderly would be abandoned by their coalition partners; each segment of the social welfare lobby would be so involved in defending the interests of its specific constituency that there would be little time, money, or interest in supporting programs and legislation that primarily benefit other interest groups.

It is entirely possible that in fifty years the elderly will have considerably less political influence than they do today. This might occur if inflation were to be defined as a sufficient threat to the social order as to justify draconian measures to bring it under control, a response that would be much more likely in
the United States than in Sweden given the influence of Lockean individualism extolling self-reliance in the American context. In such a situation there would be a great effort to minimize spending on social programs as part of the effort to bring inflation under control. One step might be to eliminate or drastically cut back on a variety of social service programs associated with the welfare state including many that presently provide benefits to the elderly. If the inflation problem were viewed as sufficiently threatening, it is possible that the automatic cost of living provisions presently associated with the Social Security pension would be eliminated. We cannot say for sure that even so-called "hyper-inflation" would lead to efforts to strip the elderly of the benefits from the various social programs on which they have come to depend, but such an outcome is possible. Were such a situation to arise, there would be strong resistance from the elderly, but in any showdown with other segments of the population it is quite possible that the interests of the elderly would suffer.

Another event that could drastically alter the projections we have made would be a major war, particularly if it resulted in a loss of a substantial fraction of the population. If the United States were subjected to a loss of life comparable to that experienced by Germany or the Soviet Union during World War II, it is possible that in the aftermath there would be a great focus on the needs of the next generation at the expense of the elderly. There might be a marked increase in birth rates and a focus of national resources on building schools and pediatric health clinics, in short, an emphasis on providing for children at the expense of the elderly. Today in many third world nations there is little by way of government resources allocated to programs for the elderly; the focus is almost exclusively on the younger generation. This might also occur in the United States in the aftermath of a major war.

Alternatively, it is possible that under the right circumstances the increase in power and influence of the elderly could be far in excess of that which we have described as most plausible in light of existing evidence and present trends. A great deal of research is going on today in an effort to understand the process of cellular aging (Rosenfeld, 1976). It is possible that at some point during the next few decades this research will lead to a substantial increase in life expectancy. Some optimists assert that it may be possible to extend the human life expectancy to 150 years in the foreseeable future. If such advances were made, it might become common to remain politically active to well over age 100, and the elderly would constitute a much more substantial fraction of the electorate than our projection would suggest.

Other technological advances could contribute to an increase in the influence of the elderly even in the absence of any significant increase in life expectancy. For example, advances in telecommunications and computer technology could make possible some form of "electronic democracy" through the use of a combination of television and interactive computers. With such a technology it would be possible
for the voting public to be consulted on a regular basis as opposed to the present policy of voting once every couple of years. It might be possible to significantly expand the range of issues on which the voting public is consulted.

Any such change in the electoral process could significantly change the relative political influence of different age groups. It would tend to increase the influence of those who have the time and interest to follow the issues and debates on television, possibly in the context of all day televised hearings. It would also increase the influence of those who would otherwise find it difficult to make it to the polls to vote due to health problems and lack of adequate transportation. For these reasons among others, we would expect an increase in the political influence of the elderly.

The recent introduction of cable television is another innovation that could significantly affect the political influence of the elderly. It offers the potential for age-specific programming. Eventually we may find an entire network devoted to concerns of older people, presenting an "elderly perspective" on world, national, and local issues. Such programming might lead to a significant increase in age consciousness among the elderly and provide a very effective tool for the political mobilization of the elderly around issues of common interest. Age specific programming could be a particularly potent political tool if used in connection with interactive computer and telecommunication technology. It might be feasible for the elderly to hold video political meetings with like-minded persons who are widely dispersed geographically.

One goal of this article has been to forecast future trends in the power, autonomy, and political influence of the aged. We anticipate that our analysis of the factors likely to play an important role in determining these trends will prove to be of greater value than our specific projections based on what seem to be reasonable assumptions with respect to a number of these factors at this point in time. Thus our major objective has been to describe the factors which will be important determinants of these trends. Given the uncertainties associated with a number of these factors, such as the state of the economy, any long term projections of the political influence of the aged must remain tentative.

NOTES

1. For men between the ages of 60 and 64 labor force participation rates declined from 82 percent in 1957 to 63 percent in 1977 (Rones, 1978). However, there are some who anticipate that the trend toward early retirement may be soon ending because of severe inflation (Cuniff, 1980).
2. For a classic, but now somewhat dated, discussion of the social roles and social status associated with work see Friedmann and Havighurst (1954).

3. In 1900 life expectancy at birth in the United States was 47 years; by 1980 it had increased to 73 years. However most of this increase was due to reductions in mortality during the early years. During this period of time life expectancy at birth increased by 26 years, but life expectancy at age 45 increased by only 5 years. One projection is that life expectancy will increase to its upper limit of 85 years by the middle of the next century (Fries, 1980). However, some such as Rosenfeld (1976) argue that it may be possible through advance biological science to substantially increase the human life span. Were this to prove possible, life expectancy might increase to something well above 85 years.

4. The average yearly immigration rate per 1000 U.S. population was 10.4 between 1901 and 1910, 5.7 between 1911 and 1920, 3.5 between 1921 and 1930, and 2.1 in 1977 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979b). However, such estimates do not take into consideration the number of illegal immigrants which seems to be increasing. Between 1930 and 1950 the immigration rates were below 1.0, but since 1950 the rates have been increasing. In 1900 some 34 percent of those age 60 to 64 were foreign born, and by 1970 only 10 percent of those in this age group were foreign born (Uhlenberg, 1977).

5. The dependency ratio was 18/100 in 1980 and a recent projection puts the ratio at 31/100 for 2030. Looked at in another way, in 1940 there were nine persons age 20 to 64 for every person age 65 and over; today the ratio is six to one and by the year 2030 it will be three to one (Califano, 1981:283).

6. Another spending related indicator is the amount political parties spend in their efforts to obtain the vote of a specific interest group. In the 1976 presidential campaign, Carter allocated much less to the so-called "senior desk" than to desks for other special interest groups such as Jews, labor, and minorities (Riemer and Binstock, 1978).

7. For demographic reasons it is likely that the fraction of the federal budget going to Social Security benefits will continue to increase even if there is no real increase in benefit levels to individual recipients. Because Social Security is such a big program, it is possible that the overall proportion of the federal budget going to programs for the aged will continue to increase even if there are sharp reductions in programs other than Social Security. The economic burden of a "mature" Social Security system is not unique to the United States; the same problems are being faced in most other Western industrial nations (Ross, 1979). In the popular press there are some who argue that the elderly have emerged as the only constituency of needy Americans that continues to command widespread support in Congress (Roberts, 1981), but more common are the reports that the elderly are already getting more than their share (Chapman, 1981).
8. A reply to this argument is that there has been a substantial increase in in-kind benefits to the elderly during the past twenty years in the form of health insurance, housing subsidy, food stamps, and other sources (Schulz, 1980). If these contributions to standard of living are taken into consideration, a case can be made that there has been significant improvement in the relative economic position of the elderly during this period of time (Johnson and Williamson, 1980).

9. By the late 1970's there was evidence of an increase in the size of the elderly poverty population reversing a twenty year trend. Between 1978 and 1979 the proportion of the elderly who were poor increased from 14 to 15 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980b).

10. Anthropologists report that old age often begins at an earlier age in a primitive tribe than in contemporary industrial societies. Among the Igorot tribe a person was considered old at age forty-five (Simmons, 1945). Hippocrates asserted that old age begins at fifty-six (de Beauvoir, 1972). For Romans (Fischer, 1978) old age seems to have begun at age sixty; the same was also true in colonial America (Demos, 1978).
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