POLITICS AND AGEING

by

Susan Tester

There is a persistent myth that 'pensioner power' could be mobilised in Britain. People aged 60 or over, more than 10 million individuals, form a quarter of the electorate. According to popular assumption, they could exert a powerful influence on the political scene if only they could be organised to act, and vote, as a bloc. However, a study of the 1987 general election, carried out by the Centre for Policy on Ageing*, and commissioned by Channel 4's 'Years Ahead' programme, shows that grey power is most unlikely to succeed in this country.

One of the main reasons for this is the diversity of interests within the 'elderly' age group. The greatest differences are between the social classes; varying conditions of life depending on manual and non-manual occupations continue into retirement. It would be unrealistic to expect many common interests between the retired barrister and the former labourer, for example. Similarly, there are wide differences between younger and older generations of pensioners. A recently retired fit and active professional couple with substantial occupational pensions and savings will have a completely different lifestyle from that of the very elderly frail widow living alone and depending on supplementary pension. Older people are no more likely than any other age group to vote as a section.

Even if common interests were perceived by large numbers of older people, there are few formal organisations through which political action might be launched. Retirement usually marks the end of political action through trades unions or professional groups; it also reduces social networks and financial resources that would make participation feasible. Then there are other factors such as unwillingness to identify oneself as elderly, or mobility problems or lack of access to transport, which can inhibit the political participation of older people.

Comparisons are often made with the United States of America where grey power is thought to be much more influential than in Britain. The political systems of the two countries are however very different, the American system being much more propitious for pensioner action. In the United States, political allegiances tend to be based on interest groups or

sectors of society, whereas in Britain they are still largely based on social class. It is easier for American politicans to canvas the votes of elderly people as a group.

Further, the voting process in the United States is much more specific than in Britain, and includes voting for many individual posts and offices, even for the local ratcatcher. In Britain the whole process is much more general. One 'X' on a ballot paper represents our opinion on a wide variety of issues, including those mainly relevant to older people, such as pensions, and those affecting the whole population, such as defence. Nor is it necessarily the 'ageing' issues which determine the way an older person votes, as our study shows.

There were two main aims of the study. First, we examined the ways in which politicians addressed older age issues and the extent to which they did so. Secondly, we investigated the political opinions and voting patterns of older people. The study was carried out at national level by examining the party manifestos, media coverage and opinion polls. Then we chose three constituencies as case studies: Worthing, where people of pensionable age constitute 43 per cent of the electorate; Milton Keynes as a contrast, with only 14 percent; and Greenwich, closer to the national average with 23 per cent of voters over pensionable age. The constituencies also varied in their political complexions. In these constituencies we interviewed candidates, studied the campaigns of the main parties, attended meetings, held group discussions with pensioners, and commissioned exit polls.

Where politicians' attention to older age issues is concerned, this proved to be very limited. There was little indication that older people were considered a potentially powerful group of voters who must be wooed. The party manifestos' content on 'ageing' issues focused mainly on pensions; the Conservative party promised to maintain the value of the state retirement pension, while the Labour and Alliance parties intended to increase it. Other issues which the parties considered relevant to pensioners included health and social services. Clearly, in the minds of the manifesto writers older voters were associated with welfare issues. In media reports and analyses of the election campaigns very little coverage was given to older age issues.

The case study areas were selected using demographic criteria, to examine whether local campaigns would vary according to the proportion of pensioners in the electorate. Our findings show that this was not the case. The campaigns were surprisingly similar in all three of these very different constituencies.

Few aspects of the campaigns were directed to older voters as such. Local candidates followed the national party line. Conservatives defended the government's record whereas Labour and Alliance candidates advocated increasing resources or improving services. Public meetings were held in each

constituency, but only one such meeting was specifically for pensioners. A standard component of all the local campaigns was the visit to homes or sheltered housing for elderly people.

The limited consideration by politicians of issues relevant to older people was almost invariably focused on the negative aspects of ageing. Candidates' attitudes to older voters were paternalistic. The politicians seemed to view elderly people simply as 'welfare objects', who receive pensions and services and live in special housing. This focus on welfare issues reflects an outdated stereotype of old age as a contingency, something which may happen to a minority of people who can then be helped with cash and caring services. It does not take into account the fact that most people now live for many years after retirement, and that survival into the eighties and beyond is quite common. Economic factors have led to a reduction in employment possibilities for older people and early retirement or permanent redundancy for those in their fifties. The proportion of 60-65 year old men in employment has steadily decreased.

There are thus as many as 13 or 14 million people in the post-work stage of their lives, who are not necessarily in poor health or in need of services, and who live in ordinary housing. A more positive approach to old age by politicians would address the challenge of how to make it possible for these people to lead active and fulfilling lives for as long as possible. But these positive aspects of ageing were hardly touched on at all by politicians during the 1987 general election campaign.

Turning to older voters, previous research shows that the older people are, the more likely they are to vote Conservative. This may be partly because those who tend to vote Conservative, particularly the middle classes and women, live longer. Another explanation is that the present generations of pensioners base their political beliefs on a different set of reference points from younger voters, and were influenced particularly by the two world wars and the 1930s depression. Older people are also considered to be conservative in their voting behaviour, maintaining allegiance to one political party.

Analysis of the ITN Harris exit poll taken in Great Britain on general election day confirms these conservative trends of older voters. Although 42 per cent of the respondents polled voted Conservative, 47 per cent of the over 65s did so, compared with only 36 per cent of the 18-29 age group. Voting for the Alliance parties showed a steady decrease from 26 per cent of the 18-29s to 19 per cent of the over 65s. Older people were thus less likely to vote for a new grouping such as the Alliance. They were also less likely than younger people to vote tactically. These patterns were repeated in the case studies.

Most opinion pools asked which issues were important in influencing people's votes, and usually found unemployment the most frequently mentioned issue. The findings

varied by age. Older voters were more concerned than younger people about pensions and law and order. In our case study, exit polls respondents were asked which of three issues was most important to them in deciding how to vote; 33 per cent said unemployment, 26 per cent education and 19 per cent pensions. Not surprisingly, the under 60s were more likely than the over 60s to name unemployment or education. But the greatest differences between these age groups were on the pensions issue: 51 per cent of the over 60s but only 5 per cent of the under 60s considered pensions the most important.

A considerable proportion of respondents in the national ITN Harris exit poll and in our study areas had decided which party they would vote for well before the election date was announced. This applied particularly to older voters who were thus least likely to have been influenced by the campaign. They were also less likely than younger people to vote on the issues, and tended to vote for a party because they usually did so.

Group discussions with pensioners in the study areas revealed negative attitudes to politicians. Older voters had little faith in candidates who, as experience over the years had shown, only appeared during election campaigns to canvas their votes, but took little interest in them at any other time. The pensioners almost invariably felt that politicians did not understand their problems and did not care about them. They were also disillusioned by the style of present-day electioneering, especially by smear campaigns against individuals, and thought that the quality of politicians had declined. This lack of confidence in politicians did not however prevent older voters from turning out to vote, since they tended to be just as conscientious in doing so as younger people.

It is clear that the findings of this study of older voters and the 1987 general election are largely negative. Old age was not a major issue in the campaign, nor did older voters as a section have much influence on the outcome. These findings confirmed our expectations. They reflect society's attitude to older age, and the stereotyping which leads to the assumption that older people have so much in common merely on account of their age that pensioner power could readily be mobilised. In fact, apart from their slight tendency to vote for the Conservative party, older people voted in much the same way as any other age group.

We conclude that the improvement of living conditions for elderly people is unlikely to be achieved through the electoral process. A general election campaign is probably the occasion most unsuited to this objective because so many other issues are at stake for politicians, and because older people are unlikely to act in a common interest through the ballot box. It is much more a question of changing society's attitudes to ageing and educating the whole population, not just elderly people, about the realities of old age in the 1980s and 1990s. To achieve such aims it will be necessary to keep older age issues in the public and political eye

continuously rather than during the brief period of an election campaign.

One way of attaining a higher profile for ageing issues would be to initiate a national body such as a council or commission on ageing. The advantages and disadvantages of this proposal are now under discussion. At a more local level it will be important for groups of older people, and for those professional or voluntary workers who come into contact with pensioners, to raise awareness of ageism and try to combat it. Schools, colleges, the media, advertisers and many other organisations have a role to play in changing attitudes and politicising the whole population about old age. Younger people should learn to appreciate that they too can probably look forward to years of life after retirement. In the longer term present and future pensioners could benefit from the creation of real opportunities for older people to enjoy more constructive and dignified lives.

__Susan Tester__ is a Policy Development Officer at the Centre for Policy on Ageing and is co-author of __Polls Apart? Older voters and the 1987 general election.__ by Eric Midwinter and Susan Tester, published by the Centre for Policy on Ageing, July 1987, 7.80.
