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Spotlight on Older Voters: Today and Tomorrow

by ROBERT H. BINSTOCK

Older voters have frequently been in the spotlight over the past three decades, a period in which the population of those age 65 and older has increased by 50%. During political campaigns, a perennial cliché mobilized by journalists and political consultants has been that “seniors are a key battleground in this election.” This perception will undoubtedly flourish in both the near-term and longer-term future due to the current politics of healthcare reform, the growing political interest in curbing the costs of Medicare and Social Security and the emergence of 76 million baby boomers into the ranks of older voters.

ROOTS OF MISPERCEPTION

Up to now, assertions about the power of older voters have missed the mark. As one of many examples, in July 2008 the prominent political consultant Mark Penn proclaimed that “America as a nation has never been older and the power of the senior vote has never been greater.” But he was wrong.

In the 2008 presidential election, older persons were the only age group to give a majority to the losing candidate, John McCain. Among all voters, Barack Obama beat McCain by a margin of 53% to 46%. Yet, persons age 60 and older gave 51% of their votes to McCain and 47% to Obama. Among voters age 65 and older, McCain was favored even more: He received 53% of their votes compared with Obama’s 45%.

One root of the erroneous “senior power” cliché is that older persons turn out to vote at a relatively high rate. Since 1992, older voters have participated at a higher rate than all other age groups (although the turnout among voters ages 45–64 has been nearly as high). Even so, older persons are far from the largest age group of voters. In the 2008 election, Americans age 65 and older cast only 19% of the votes, compared with 39% by 45–64 year-olds, and 32% by 25–44 year-olds.

Another root of the attention that political consultants and strategists pay to older voters is that they are a readily identifiable benefits-program constituency created by the existence of Social Security, Medicare and other old-age polices. Elders are, therefore, a tempting electoral target—“the senior vote”—because in theory they may be swayed by campaign efforts focused on old-age benefits issues.

But this theory has not held up in practice. Over the past 40 years there has been no evidence that older persons vote as an old-age benefits bloc. In fact, there has been evidence to the contrary, such as the 59% President Reagan received from older voters in 1984 even

though he had frozen the annual cost-of-living adjustment in Social Security benefits during his first term, and proposed substantial future benefits cuts.

THE SPECTER OF DEATH PANELS

This pattern might change in 2010 when older voters may well react to a threatening old-age benefits issue that surfaced in the 2009 healthcare reform deliberations and debates. From the outset of these discussions, President Obama frequently conveyed a message that the costs of reform would be offset substantially by savings in the Medicare program.

This strong, overarching message from Obama was complemented in the summer by popular fears that government “death panels” would be established to decide whether to “pull the plug on granny”—fears planted and fanned by Republican opponents of reform.

Various late-summer polls showed that many elders had such concerns. Their fears were culturally ratified when the September 21, 2009, *Newsweek* cover featured the story title, “The Case for Killing Granny”, along with a photograph of a pulled plug.

A distinct possibility in the 2010 elections is that these fears will be invoked successfully among older voters by Republican challengers to incumbent Democratic members of Congress, especially those freshman incumbents who won't be able to benefit from Obama's coattails as they did in 2008. A fear of older-voter backlash may have already influenced some of these House Democrats to vote against healthcare reform.

BABY BOOMERS AND CHANGING POLITICAL COHORTS

Another portent of change is that the aging of the baby boom generation will add substantially to the number of older voters in the future. In 20 years, when all boomers will be age 65 and over, older voters will be 23% of the voting age population (compared with just 9% today). If older boomers tend to vote as a bloc (unlike older voters to date), they could strongly influence the outcome of elections as well as the policy agenda regarding old-age benefit programs.

Yet, although it is common for social observers to discuss boomers as a cohort that is monolithic in its tastes and propensities, this has certainly not been true politically so far. In 2008, for instance, they split their votes evenly between Obama and McCain. However, the future state of the old-age entitlement programs (Social Security and Medicare) and the content of policy agendas concerning them (which might be drastic) could well have a politically cohesive effect on baby boomers when they are old, leading to intergenerational political conflict.

Finally, the most important indicators of how older persons will vote in the future may be the historical and political periods in which various segments of this population were socialized to politics when they were youngsters. In the 2008 election, voters in their late 60s were the most heavily Republican. When this cohort was in its teens, it was socialized to politics during the eight years of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. Eisenhower was the first Republican president in 20 years, following the five consecutive terms served by Democrats Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. The Eisenhower cohort's comparatively strong affinity for Republican presidential candidates was apparent in both 2004 and 2008.

By the same token, we can expect that very soon the aggregate leanings of older voters will be heavily influenced by Democratic-leaning Kennedy and Johnson cohorts of elders. The 2008 election returns foreshadowed this process of change. While voters ages 65–74 gave McCain 54% of their votes, the Kennedy cohort, ages 60–64, voted in favor of Obama, 50% to 48%.

In the wake of the Kennedy/Johnson cohort, we can expect a longer-term influx of Nixon, Reagan and (George H.W.) Bush older cohorts predisposed to lean Republican. In the years ahead, we can expect the basic partisan leanings of older voters to be constantly in flux as new cohorts join the mix and older ones leave it. ❖

Political scientist Robert H. Binstock, a member of the Aging Today editorial board, is a professor of aging, health and society at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland. OH. His latest book, coauthored with James H. Schulz, is Aging Nation: The Economics and Politics of Growing Older in America (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).