

Dr. K. Purdam (Social Statistics) and Professor A. Esmail (Public Health Medicine)

Too Old To Vote? – Understanding the Barriers to Voting in Late Old Age

Aim

To examine the levels of voting amongst the older old (age 75 years and older) and the challenges they can face.

Introduction

Voting in elections is a key aspect of civic engagement. However the UK has an ageing population. 1 in 3 babies born are expected to live to 100 and by 2050 19 million people will be aged 65 years and older. Only limited research has been conducted into the long-term impact of an ageing population on democratic elections. Whilst it is known that older people are more likely to vote compared to younger people, there is evidence of a decline in voting levels in late old age (amongst people aged 75 years and older) in many European countries (Bhatti and Hansen 2012).

Turnout in elections is associated with a number of factors as well as age including: qualification level, socio-economic status, household type, political knowledge, social networks, type of election and how close the electoral contest is (Smets and van Ham 2013). In addition, older people can face a number of barriers to voting including: mobility, access to polling stations and health related problems including visual impairment (Mattel et al. 2013).

Despite the importance of connected communities and civic engagement, some commentators suggest that there is an emerging intergenerational divide in terms political priorities in the UK (Clery et al. 2017; Hobolt 2016). The issues facing older people and the policy challenges of an ageing population are considerable including terms of: health, housing, social care and pensions. Whilst many older people have been less affected by the recent recession than younger age groups, in part because of the triple lock protection for pensions, 1.6 million pensioners live below the poverty line (60 per cent of median income) (ONS 2017). Many older people experience high levels of social detachment and loneliness (Scharf et al. 2002). Furthermore research has highlighted how nearly one million older people aged 65 to 89 years old have unmet social care needs (Age UK 2014).

Research Questions

- (1). How do the levels of voting amongst the older old (aged 75 years and older) in the UK vary in terms of age, gender, household type, health, social class, previous voting history, election type and marginality?
- (2). How do the older old view voting and what challenges do they face including in terms of health?
- (3). What are the implications of an ageing electorate for the debates about connected communities and intergenerational divisions?

Methodology

This interdisciplinary research will use a mixed-methods approach, bringing together survey data about the older old and evidence from three focus groups in a case study area of the North West of England. The focus on those people aged 75 years and older is designed to capture those in older age and the different challenges they may be faced with including health issues.

(i) Survey Data Analysis - secondary data analysis will be conducted on the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). ELSA is a longitudinal survey of an original sample of 11,500 people age 50 and over. There have been eight waves dating back to 2002. The study includes questions on civic engagement and voting. Exploratory analysis will be also conducted on the British Election Study and Understanding Society in order to compare voting patterns across different age groups.

Longitudinal and multi-level statistical modeling techniques including risk models will be used to identify the different factors associated with voting in late old age and how it may have changed during people's lives.

(ii) Focus Group Discussions - in order to capture the detailed circumstances and experiences of the older old, three focus groups will be held with people aged 75 years and older. Each group will involve around ten people. The aim will be to include older people from a range of backgrounds, of different ages and to include people who live with family, those who live in sheltered accommodation and those who live alone. The focus groups will examine the older peoples perspectives on voting and civic participation and how this might have changed during their lives. The discussions will also explore the barriers older people can face to voting including in terms of health. The focus groups will take place in the North West of England. The participants will be recruited through neighbourhood groups and networks. Incentives and transport costs will be paid to the participants.

Research Outputs

- (i) A summary briefing report for stakeholders and policy makers highlighting the key findings.
- (ii) An article in a leading academic journal such as Electoral Studies or Ageing and Society.
- (iii) An academic blog and social media profile for raising awareness of the research.

Dissemination Plan

The research will link with Manchester City Council's Age Friendly and Ageing Cities initiatives as part of the World Health Organisation. The public face of the project will include a website and social media postings. A widely circulated practitioners briefing highlighting the key findings will be disseminated through key policy and stakeholder networks including: the Electoral Commission, the Hansard Society, Age UK, Independent Age, the Local Government Association and the World Health Organisation's Ageing Cities programme.

Time Table - 5-Month Project (January – May 2019)

- Month 1 – Recruitment of researcher; analysis of English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and other survey data; design of focus groups.
- Month 2 – Further analysis of secondary data, focus group planning.
- Month 3 – Delivery of three focus groups and qualitative data analysis and write up.
- Month 4 - Article writing, MICRA seminar presentation.
- Month 5 - Blog and press release, finalisation of article.

Costs

Total funds requested £5,860

The resources requested relate to the employment of a research assistant for six weeks (£5,410) and the costs of running three focus groups including incentives (£300), travel (£150) and refreshments (£100) for the focus groups participants.

Applicants and Roles

Dr. Kingsley Purdam (Social Statistics) will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the project. He will devote 20 per cent of time throughout the project. He will contribute to the fieldwork, oversee the quantitative data analysis and lead on the writing of the research outputs. The project will be conducted as part of Dr. K. Purdam's research leave at the University of Manchester.

Professor Aneez Esmail (Public Health Medicine) will contribute to the data analysis with a particular focus on the health barriers older people can face and he will also contribute to the writing of the research outputs. He will contribute five days to the project. His costs will be part of his research time covered by the University of Manchester.

Research Assistant (Social Statistics) - the researcher will be recruited from the SOST PhD student group and employed on a casual contract. If needs be the role will be divided between two PhD students. The role will provide valuable practical work experience.