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Young versus Old?

Society and Political Parties in the context of Demographic Change – A Comparative Study of Germany and France

Thesis Abstract

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Age-based and generational conflicts seem to be gaining prominence in media discourse. Demographic change is altering the age structures of numerous societies and new media formats and platforms increasingly enable age-structured and mutually isolated public spheres. This dissertation therefore examines the extent to which age-based and generational conflicts influence politics in Germany and France.

The starting point of the study is the assumption that societal conflicts can only become politically effective if they are both socially embedded (demand side) and politically mobilized (supply side), for example by political parties. On the demand side of political competition, generational and age-related conflicts can, based on a chronologically structured review of the literature, largely be categorized into two types: distributional conflicts – e.g. regarding the welfare state, housing, or wealth distribution – and attitudinal differences.

The theoretical framework for the analysis of the demand side draws on approaches from the fields of political demography and political socialization, particularly the “impressionable years” model and life-cycle effects. Methodologically, cross-national survey data is analysed both graphically and using regression models. A conceptual contribution of the study lies in the differentiated treatment of gross and net cohort effects.

Structural conflict potential in distributional matters is reinforced by demographic change in both countries. Although France is demographically better positioned than Germany, systemic factors, such as higher youth unemployment and lower electoral participation among young people, tend to increase conflict potential. In contrast, in terms of political attitudes, only moderate differences between birth cohorts can be observed in both countries. These differences mainly appear regarding sociocultural issues. Moreover, generations are internally highly stratified, which further complicates political mobilization along age lines. Overall, while there is structural conflict potential on the demand side, it remains only moderately politically exploitable.

The analysis of the supply side begins with an examination of party incentive structures, followed by four qualitative case studies (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Freie Demokratische Partei, Parti Socialiste and Renaissance). The analysis is based on party manifestos and expert interviews conducted in the context of the 2021 elections in Germany and 2022 elections in France. The data is examined using a qualitative content analysis. The parties studied in Germany and France employed age-specific communication strategies but made little to no effort to mobilize voters along age-based conflict lines.

In summary, age and generational conflicts had only a marginal influence on politics in Germany and France in the context of the 2021 and 2022 elections. Although structural conflict potential exists, it was hardly mobilized in political practice. To better assess future developments, research should also take into account parties at the margins of the party system and analyse whether and how generationally shaped collective identities are forming and can be politically mobilized.