Older Voters and the 2004 Election

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For several decades, candidates in U.S. presidential election campaigns have articulated policy issues designed to appeal to older Americans. However, exit-poll data have consistently shown that older people have distributed their votes among presidential candidates in roughly the same proportions as the electorate as a whole, favoring the winner of the popular vote. This happened again in 2004. The percentage of older persons voting for George Bush was slightly more than the national average, suggesting that old-age policy issues are not the predominant factors affecting older voters.

Key Words: Age-group voting, Elections, Politics of aging, Voting behavior

As the 2004 U.S. Election Day approached, pollsters and journalists throughout the country mobilized a perennial cliche: Senior voters are a key battleground in this election. Why has this characterization of older voters become a cliche? What do we know about the voting behavior of older people? How did older persons vote in the 2004 election? Were senior voters, in fact, a key to victory in this particular election? This Brief Report addresses these questions by drawing on exit polls and census data regarding the 2004 presidential election and published research on the political behavior of older persons.

Older People Vote at the Highest Rate

One reason why campaign strategists view elderly persons as a worthwhile electoral target is that they turn out to vote at a higher rate than do members of other age groups. Beginning with the 1976 election, people aged 65 and older have constituted a larger share of those who actually vote than they are of the voting-age population. This is because they have been (a) turning out to vote at a higher rate than the rest of the electorate and (b) increasing their rate while the rates for all other age groups have been declining (Binstock, 2000). The 2004 election showed a somewhat different pattern. For the first time since 1972, all age groups turned out at a higher rate than in the previous election. Still, the 69% participation rate for persons aged 65 and older was higher than the rates for all other age groups and the overall rate of 58% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Consequently, voters aged 65 and older cast 19% of the votes, even though they were only 16% of the voting-age population (U.S. Census Bureau).

Nevertheless, older people are far from the largest age group in the electorate. In the 2004 election, for example, Americans aged 45 to 64 cast 38% of the votes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Therefore, to adequately explain the cliche regarding the importance of senior voters, one must look beyond the size of the senior vote.

Older People Are a Program Constituency

A second reason why older people are viewed as an important electoral target is that they are a readily identifiable benefits-program constituency that has been created by old-age public policies such as Social Security and Medicare (Hudson, 1998). Seniors are therefore a tempting campaign target, particularly because they are potentially “swing voters.” In the aggregate, as will be shown in the paragraphs that follow, they are not committed as a bloc to either Democrats or Republicans. Accordingly, modern candidates for president act as if older people are a constituency that can be swung by “senior issues.” Presidential debates and campaign speeches characteristiclly include discussions of Social Security and Medicare, and the candidates make frequent appearances at gatherings of older people in the months before elections.

Yet Social Security, Medicare, and other old-age benefit programs are not on the ballot. Older voters can vote only for candidates, not for or against program features. Consequently, pre-election opinion polls, such as age-group responses to statements regarding Social Security and Medicare, are of little
value for interpreting whether and how much the votes of older persons may have been influenced by campaigns for the senior vote. One reason, as demonstrated by substantial research, is that a variety of complex psychological and social factors mediate the relationships between attitudes and subsequent behavior regarding the subjects of those attitudes (see Fazio, 1986; Smith & Terry, 2003). A more important reason is that candidate elections present older voters (and all voters) with many stimuli or “cross pressures” that, as subsequently described, have nothing to do with old-age issues. If election-day exit polls included questions that directly probe the voter’s immediate attitudes about the candidates’ positions on old-age issues, they could be a useful source for analysis. The responses, analyzed by age groups, could be compared with the respondents’ choices of candidates. To date, however, the exit-poll questionnaires such as those used in the 2004 National Election Pool (Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004a) have not posed such questions.

Under present circumstances, the best available data as to whether older people respond significantly to old-age issues in casting their ballots are exit polls regarding the distribution of votes among candidates, by age groups. Modern exit polls are representative of the total voting population. They have large samples (e.g., 11,719 voters at a sample of 250 polling places in the national 2004 presidential pool), oversample for smaller subgroups in the population, and have high confidence intervals; see for example, the “Methods Statement” for the 2004 National Election Pool poll conducted for ABC, AP, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC (Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004b).

Previous Presidential Elections

The evidence from many elections has been that older persons do not behave as an old-age-benefits voting bloc. As we can see in Figure 1, voters aged 60 and older (the oldest age range consistently reported in exit polls throughout recent decades) have tended to distribute their votes among candidates in roughly the same proportions as the electorate as a whole.

There are many reasons why older persons do not vote as a self-interested bloc in response to old-age policy issues, even though many commentators assume that seniors have Social Security and Medicare on their minds as their paramount concerns. First, a birth cohort—diverse in economic and social class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education, health status, family status, residential locale, political attitudes, partisan attachments, and many other characteristics—does not suddenly become politically homogenized when it reaches the old-age category. Second, old age is only one of many personal characteristics with which seniors may identify. Third, even if some older voters primarily identify themselves in terms of age status, age-identity self-interest may not be the most important factor in an electoral decision. Of greater importance may be partisan attachments, the characteristics of candidates, policies unrelated to old-age interests (e.g., foreign policy), altruism, and many other campaign stimuli (see Simon, 1985). Fourth, self-interests and the intensity of such interests regarding old-age policy issues vary a lot. Some older persons have more at stake than others in proposals to reduce, maintain, or enhance benefits. For instance, Social Security is 83% of income for elders in the lowest income quintile, but only 20% for those in the highest quintile (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2004).

Finally, it is usually difficult for voters to sort out any differences between the candidates’ positions on senior issues. In 2000, for example, both Al Gore and George Bush promised they would establish prescription drug coverage under Medicare, but only policy wonks were able to sort out the fine points of difference between the candidates’ proposals. In 2004, however, there were distinct differences between the candidates’ positions on old-age policies. President Bush promoted his proposal for partially privatizing Social Security and asserted that current seniors and near seniors would be protected from benefit reductions. Senator John Kerry implied that Bush’s proposal would lead to large benefit cuts for these same groups. Bush also took credit for the new outpatient drug coverage legislated the previous year in the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act (MMA) of 2003. Kerry vowed that he would make feasible the importation of drugs from Canada to make up for poor drug coverage in the MMA.

The 2004 Election

Regardless of these opposing positions, the preponderance of the history and analysis of electoral behavior by older persons summarized herein would lead one to expect that, in the 2004 election, (a) seniors would vote for the winner of the presidential vote, and (b) the leading positions on old-age issues, they could be a useful source for analysis. The responses, analyzed by age groups, could be compared with the respondents’ choices of candidates. To date, however, the exit-poll questionnaires such as those used in the 2004 National Election Pool (Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004a) have not posed such questions.

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popular vote, as they have been doing for many years; and (b) older persons would distribute their votes among candidates much as the electorate as a whole would.

According to the consolidated exit poll financed by the television networks, major newspapers, and magazines (Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004c), this is just about the way it worked out. As usual, the majority of seniors voted for the winner of the popular vote. Moreover, Table 1 shows that voters aged 65 and older distributed their votes among the major candidates in almost precisely the same proportions (52% for Bush, 47% for Kerry) as did the overall electorate (51% for Bush, 48% for Kerry). Also as usual, the youngest age group (without long-term partisan attachments) deviated the most from other groups and from the overall distribution of votes.

However, when voters between the ages of 60 and 64 years are added into the older persons category, the consolidated senior (ages 60+) vote tally for Bush increased from 52% to 54%. This was due, as can be seen in Table 1, to the considerably higher proportion of votes—57%—that persons aged 60–64 cast for Bush. Clearly, the present cohort of 60- to 64-year-olds is more conservative than their elders. Perhaps this is because they are the first birth cohort to reach this age range that was socialized to politics as youngsters during the 8-year Republican presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, following 20 years of Democratic presidencies (Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman from 1933 through 1952).

What, if anything, can one conclude about older voters in relation to the old-age policy issues highlighted in the campaign? In the aggregate they were apparently neither thrilled by the new Medicare drug coverage nor inclined to punish Bush for its inadequacies. They did not seem scared (yet) by Bush’s avowed intent to partially privatize Social Security.

### Did Older Voters Win the Election for Bush?

Was the fact that voters aged 60 and older supported Bush by several more percentage points than did the electorate as a whole a decisive factor for Bush? The ballots of voters aged 60 and older accounted for 24% of those cast in the election (Seelye, 2004). If they had been distributed in the same proportions as the overall national tally—51% for Bush and 48% for Kerry (rather than the actual 54% for Bush and 46% for Kerry)—Bush’s margin would have been smaller by 1.4 million votes than it was. Nevertheless, Bush still would have had 1.9 million more nationwide popular votes than Kerry (author’s calculations, based on data from the Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004c, 2004d). However, in some states (e.g., Ohio) the choices made by older voters appear to have been decisive in determining electoral vote results (Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll, 2004c, re: Ohio). This phenomenon is unlikely to be a consequence of state-level variations in the response of older voters to the candidates’ national campaigns regarding Social Security and Medicare. Although speculations regarding such specific age-group outcomes in states are necessarily beyond the scope of this Brief Report, these variations offer interesting avenues for further research.

### References


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### Table 1. Nationwide Percentage Distribution of Votes for U.S. President, 2004, by Selected Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Kerry</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>45–59</td>
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<td>18–29</td>
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<td>65–69</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
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Source: Edison/Mitofsky Exit Poll (2004c); Lenski, J. (personal e-mail communication to the author, September 12, 2005, from the staff of Edison Research).