Baby Boomers and the Shifting Political Construction of Old Age

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Employing the political construct of “target” populations, we suggest that the Boomers in old age will constitute a conceptually distinct population from that represented by either their parents or grandparents. A fourfold typology organized along the dimensions posited by Schneider and Ingram (1993) yields categorizations of target populations as Dependent, Deviant, Advantaged, or Contender. Although these authors labeled the aged as Advantaged, categorizations of target populations can and do change over time. Using historical analysis, we explore, first, the transformation of the aged from Dependent to Advantaged and the more recent transformation to Contender status. This latest shift is reinforced by the perceived characteristics of the Boomer cohort itself now entering old age and by economic and political circumstances severely constraining policy agendas and options. We argue that the combination of weakened legitimacy in the face of pressing needs among many of the Boomer population may result in a fracturing of elders’ longstanding singular political imagery. More affluent Boomers will continue to fight for their benefits as Contenders, whereas vulnerable Boomers may be relegated back to the Dependent categorization.

Key Words: Baby Boomers, Aging politics, Welfare state policy

Baby Boomers entering old age will be part of a political landscape far different than that of either their parents or their grandparents. The grandparents, born early in the last century, survived challenging circumstances, partially captured by the “greatest generation” appellation. The parents, born in the interwar period, led a more charmed life, avoiding many of the most trying historical episodes and prospering on the tide of economic and political expansion of the post-World War II years. Prospects for the Boomers are more mixed. They are a large and self-assertive cohort that has faced a much more restrictive economic and political environment than that of their parents.

This article explores how different political life in old age may be for the Boomers, why that will be the case, and what may be the consequences for subgroups of Boomers. It does so by presenting a theoretical framework for understanding shifts occurring in both the social construction and the political presence of the older population. Major
developments in how older people are understood politically, the resources they bring to the political arena, and the make up of that arena will have profound effects on public policies affecting the future old. We present an integrative framework useful for exploring how social construction understanding, resources, and context will shape the political and policy lives of Boomers in old age.

The Conceptual Framework

The analysis builds on the work of Schneider and Ingram (1993), who called for the exploration of how populations targeted by policy initiatives are socially constructed. Then and now, much attention has been paid to the political power of actors in the policy process and to the channels through which they have sought to gain (or forestall) policy activity. To this mix, Schneider and Ingram call for a better understanding of those who benefit from (or are penalized by) policy action, focusing on how a given group is politically constructed. Their central premise is that the reception given to a particular proposal will vary depending on this construction of the targeted group and, in turn, that political actors may frame and design policy proposals differentially.

This framework is useful in coming to grips with the changing political landscape facing aging policy today and certain to face it in the future. We propose that the political standing of the aged has shifted twice over the course of roughly the last 75 years, moving first from a longstanding marginalized existence to one manifesting a robust and established political presence, and second from that widely accepted standing to one now seen as more imposing and threatening to others. The public and the gerontological community have long heralded the first transformation. Although the second one has been widely anticipated in policy elite circles, it represents a critical but less explored challenge to the study of aging politics.

In Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) words, “social construction of target populations refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (p. 334). Where tightly constructed, these shared characteristics may be reified as stereotypes, such as “deserving,” “honest,” “public-spirited,” “stupid,” or “selfish.” While often of substantial size and of some variation in internal make-up, these populations have boundaries and “exist within objective conditions even though those conditions are subject to multiple evaluations” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 335). Some social constructions may remain constant over a long period of time, whereas others may be subject to ongoing debate, manipulation, and reinvention. Some social constructions of the target populations may be “so widely shared that they are extremely difficult to refute,” whereas others may be in contention. Schneider and Ingram identify two dimensions as central to the political construction of groups: how target groups are viewed by office holders and political stakeholders and how powerful a target group is presumed to be. They devised the following fourfold typology for social construction and political power (Figure 1):

Positive and negative construction by political actors is centrally about group legitimacy, in this context whether a given group “should be the beneficiary (or loser) of a particular proposal” (p. 335). Through the process of legitimation, “what is becomes what is right” (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006, p. 57) and, over time, such beliefs can become broadly shared to the point where they become part of the status quo. High status helps underpin an Advantaged grouping, found in the upper-left quadrant of the typology. Moreover, legitimacy’s tentacles can be far reaching, for “when people agree, power or coercion becomes unnecessary; consensus prevails” (Sherman & Kolker, 1987, p. 123).

Power is most usually thought of in its rawest form of one party prevailing over another in an open and visible process. Yet, there are more subtle

| Social Constructions and Political Power: Types of Target Populations |
|---|---|
| **Constructions** | **Positive** | **Negative** |
| **Advantaged** | **Dependents** | **Deviants** |
| **Contenders** | **Power** | **Strong** |
| **Weak** |

Figure 1. Fourfold typology of target populations. Source: Schneider and Ingram (1993), p. 336.
faces of power, ones that will be seen as highly relevant to the political place of the Boomers. Gaventa (1995) speaks to three dimensions of power, only the first of which centers on observable behaviors such as voting, jobs, influence, and resources that parties can bring to bear in a bargaining situation.

A second dimension speaks to nonevents, situations in which certain options never appear and certain actors are shut out of the process. This dimension calls attention to whom and what gets left out—individuals whose concerns never appear on the visible agenda. In Schattschneider’s (1960) words, there is “a mobilization of bias” resulting in “nondecisions” around preferences that are never heard. The third dimension is yet more profound and subtle, yielding a situation in which one party shapes the debate and, in turn, the preferences open to a second party (Gaventa, 1995).

Political Construction of the Aged Over Time

It is appropriate that Schneider and Ingram, writing in 1993, find older Americans to be in the Advantaged category. Elders and their needs were viewed positively, and their political presence was significant. Yet, in historical perspective, that is not where they began; and, in contemporary perspective, it seems increasingly that is not where they continue to belong. Elders’ political journey from Dependent to Advantaged and soon to Contender is explored below. The Boomers—who they are and what they portend—are central to the second transformation.

The Aged as Dependents

Historically, and well into the 20th century, the aged were firmly ensconced as Dependents. Their numbers were relatively few, urbanization and changing family structures undermined long-standing sources of economic support, and their collective existence was highly marginalized (Lubove, 1968; Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965). In 1900, the aged constituted only 4.1% of the U.S. population; average life expectancy at birth was 47.3 years; and there were just over 100,000 Americans aged 85 years and older (Federal Interagency Forum on Age-Related Statistics, 2010; National Center for Health Statistics, 2011).

Although the poverty that many elders faced was widely recognized, the first official estimate of older Americans’ economic well-being came from Shearson’s (1938) “Economic Status of the Aged.” She divided the U.S. older population into two groups: the “self-dependent”—those who supported themselves—and the “dependent,” those who relied on other sources of support. Among the noninstitutionalized 65 years and older population, 66% were dependent and 34% were self-dependent. Yet, even among the self-dependent, as many half may have relied on relatives and friends for income (Shearson, 1938).

The confluence of job loss, diminished family resources, and poverty informed the public’s sympathetic view of the aged’s problematic existence. In Haber’s (1983) words, the old were consciously omitted from “the redeemable,” that is, those expected to earn their own support, or, as put by Franklin Roosevelt, “poverty in old age should not be regarded as a disgrace or necessarily as the result of a lack of thrift or energy . . . it is merely a byproduct of modern industrial life (quoted in Rimlinger, 1971, p. 212). Those dire straits translated into a policy status—however demeaning it may have been—that made possible legislative enactments denied to most others. The combination of pressing needs, dreaded alternatives, and positive standing made elders “a group quintessentially deserving” of public entitlement (Gordon, 1994, p. 225). Steiner’s (1966) review of public assistance policy sounds a similar note, finding that anti-tax opponents of welfare spending at the state level (where most such policy was historically made) seldom carried the day when the image in question was “that of a respectable, aged, white, literate citizen in his ‘golden years’” (p. 3).

Given these economic and social circumstances, the aged were without autonomous political influence. Their small numbers and marginal status placed their fate largely in the hands of others: family members within the informal world and public relief within the formal world. Yet, it was this very plight and the understanding that it was due to no fault of their own that made elderly people a resource to reformers and advocates in the 1920s and 1930s. Providing an impetus to policy action was “the appearance of a new social insurance leadership, which adopted old-age pensions as the primary objective” (Lubove, 1968, p. 137). Yet, the cornerstone of the proposed New Deal program, in keeping with Steiner’s comment earlier, was Old Age Assistance (OAA), a noncontributory welfare program based on the immediate and indisputable levels of poverty among older people. Witte (1962), an architect of SSA’s enactment,
later argued that in the absence of OAA, the entire Social Security package might have failed.

**The Aged as Advantaged**

A series of fundamental developments in the post-World War II years propelled the older population toward and into the Advantaged category, where Schneider and Ingram located them in 1993. Contributing to elders’ rising political advantage were notable improvements in their economic and social well-being. The older population’s poverty rate continued to decline, falling to 15% in 1979 from 25% in 1969 and 35% in 1959 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010), whereas private pension coverage doubled between 1945 and 1980 (Employee Benefit Research Institute, 1998). Especially revealing is Upp’s (1982) updating of the Shearson dependency data from the 1930s. She notes the dramatic decline in “dependent” older adults, reporting that only 1.5% of the 23.7 million persons aged 65 years and older had no income of their own. Social Security benefits accounted for most of this improvement, constituting half of all income for just over half of the older population by 1978 (Upp, 1982). These positive economic developments, in conjunction with increasing life expectancy and postponement of chronic illness and disabilities until late in life, represented the “democratization of aging” (Treas & Bengtson, 1982) and the establishment of retirement as a desired and full-blown social institution (Ekerdt, 1989).

A host of policy enactments in the post-World War II period contributed to the improvement in elders’ well-being. The 1965–1974 decade saw an explosion of legislative activity, much of it on behalf of the aged to the point where age-related expenditures rose from $46 billion, or roughly 22% of overall federal spending in 1971, to $360 billion, or 29% of federal spending by 2000 (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2001).

The aging’s entry into the Advantaged category—at least through the early 1980s—owes more to their positive construction than to their power, with policy elites and reformers seizing on that legitimacy to further their policy goals. Consolidation of their Advantaged status during the 1980s resulted from an extraordinary and symbiotic interplay between political legitimacy and power, manifested in the expansion of policies on behalf of elders and in political mobilization in defense of those policies.

Enactment of Disability Insurance in 1956—only for workers over 50—initially emerged as an early retirement program for older people in physically demanding jobs who could work no longer (Berkowitz, 2000). In the defining policy case of Medicare, elders were expressly chosen as the program’s sole beneficiaries because of their known and politically unique vulnerability (Marmor, 1971). The Older Americans Act was of symbolic importance in recognizing the “dignity” of the aged, with only $7 million initially appropriated to further that dignity (Hudson, 1994). The Age Discrimination in Employment Act—covering workers beginning at age 40—was predicated on the widely held misperception that one’s abilities might begin to decline and employers might act on that belief to the detriment of those workers (McCann & Ventrell-Monsees, 2010).

Major liberalizations in Social Security benefits between 1967 and 1972 faced little opposition, both because of the aged’s economic vulnerability and the political popularity of such increases (Tufte, 1978). Public awareness of the consequences of poorly funded corporate pension plans and their onerous vesting requirements—leaving millions of Americans at risk for poverty in old age—led to passage of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act in 1974. Perhaps most telling was the transformation of Richard Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan, designed to replace the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, into the Supplemental Security Income program for the “adult” public assistance categories—the poor aged, blind, and disabled. The substitution of poor elders for single mothers as principal beneficiaries of an income guarantee was entirely about social construction, with former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Wilbur Cohen exclaiming: “It’s not even controversial! It’s not even controversial!” (quoted in Burke & Burke, 1974, p. 198).

It is during this time that the power dimension of the aged emerges and in so doing completes elders’ movement from the Dependent to the Advantaged category. To this point—and with the partial exception of Medicare, involving much activity by union retirees through the National Council of Senior Citizens—the power dimension is largely absent from age-based enactments. This relative power vacuum can be seen in both of the arenas where population-based power would manifest itself: electoral behavior and interest group activity. Through the mid-1960s, seniors voted less frequently than all but the youngest voters, and their organized political presence was virtually nonexistent, a reality captured by Pratt’s
labeling the 1945–1964 decades “the dismal years.”

In the ensuing years, however, political activity of seniors has notably increased both in absolute terms and relative to the activity of younger people. By the early 1990s, seniors began voting at higher rates than the middle aged, a trend that continues today. Perhaps more strikingly, older people’s voting participation has increased over the past 40 years, whereas that of all younger groups has fallen off (Campbell & Binstock, 2011). Seniors’ involvement in more active forms of political participation has also increased. They are now as active as the middle aged in expressed political interest and in contacting public officials.

The presence of the organized aging in politics has grown yet more remarkably over this time period. AARP’s founding in 1958 partially brought the dismal period to a close, but its political involvement was limited during its early years. Indeed, as recently as 1972, AARP opposed as inflationary a Democratic proposal to increase Social Security benefits by 20% (Pratt, 1976). The Great Society’s active policy agenda brought many additional aging-oriented organizations into existence. Their number and size have grown to the point where today over 60 such Washington-based mass membership organizations, research associations, and advocacy groups have created an entity of their own, the Leadership Council of Aging Organizations, “dedicated to preserving and strengthening the well-being of America’s older population” (Leadership Council of Aging Organizations, 2011).

The intriguing question is at what point do increased mass political participation and imposing organizational presence translate into political power. That the heightened political activity involving the old came at nearly the same time as major new public policies enacted on their behalf strongly suggests the presence of such power. However, in the spirit of “correlation is not causation,” the reasons for the upsurge in both politics and policy require disentangling. Fortunately, several such investigations have taken place, and they speak to each of the twin pillars of Schneider and Ingram’s Advantaged category: positive social construction and political power.

The conventional model of democratic politics points directly to the first dimension of power: citizens express interests through voting for political parties, organized interests press their cases with those voters and parties, the prevailing party (or set of parties) employs its majority to enact policies, those policies become law, and the voters and interests react to them, with those reactions informing the subsequent elections and modifications to policy. In this telling, the policies are the resultant of the ongoing political process. However, more recent scholarship, much of it involving the aged, at least partially reverses this causal chain, proposing that the policies themselves have an important independent effect in shaping political preferences and activities.

Thus, Walker (1983) determined that more than one-half of the 43 aging-related interest groups in his study came into existence after 1965, the watershed year when Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act were enacted. In Walker’s words, “in all of these cases, the formation of new groups was one of the consequences of major new legislation, not one of the causes of its passage” (p. 403, emphasis in original). In the wake of the Older Americans Act passage, the state agencies charged with administering the law formalized their trade association, the National Association of State Units on Aging; similarly, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging came into existence shortly after the AAAs were created by 1972 amendments to the Act (Hudson, 1994).

The independent role of policies rather than power is seen most importantly in the expansion of Social Security beginning in the late-1960s and in political events subsequent to that expansion. Campbell (2003) juxtaposes public opinion and voting data with Social Security program expansion, determining that the levels of political consciousness, participation, and issue salience followed rather than preceded the years of program liberalization. She concludes that Social Security, by improving the economic well-being of seniors, fostered both interest in and time for political involvement. In her estimation, public policy both created mass-level and organized senior power: “with government benefits conferred on the basis of age, a political identity is forged” (p. 74) and “senior mass membership groups did not create Social Security policy. Rather, the policy helped create the groups” (p. 77).

These analyses suggest that the aged’s elevation from the Dependent to the Advantaged category was ushered in more by policies promoting what Pierson (2007) labels material and cognitive incentives than through the exercise of political power, either through voting or lobbying. Yet, in a critical iterative fashion, these policies—widely predicated...
on elders’ longstanding vulnerability—set the stage for building what has emerged as a powerful political presence. In the initial stage, policy played a critical role in the creation and expansion of the organized aged, but in an equally important second stage, the aged’s mass and organized presence became critical to the further expansion and preservation of those very same policy benefits.

During the 1980s and 1990s, positive construction and political power came together to realize the full-blown political institutionalization of older Americans. Elders became invested in their programs, creating a dynamic captured by the title of Campbell’s book: How Policies Make Citizens. Organizations—both of and for older people—solidified their positions, ingratiated themselves to political officials, and protected the programs that created both the constituency and the organizations. This is true political Advantage.

The Aged as Contenders: Looming Boomers

Events now unfolding make clear that political and policy success has consequences. The ascendancy of the aged has created new political realities that will test and may threaten their Advantaged status in domestic social policy. The once insulated and autonomous place enjoyed by the aged will increasingly find itself under pressures created both by their successes and by the nation’s fiscal challenges to which they are seen as contributing. These tensions have been growing in recent years and have been subject to much scrutiny. Although today’s realities may be manageable, the long-term trend may be unsustainable. That future is centrally about the Boomers and why their politics of aging will be categorically different from that of either their parents or their grandparents.

In the typological terms in play here, the move from Advantaged to Contender involves, in the first instance, a loss of political legitimacy. In particular, the question becomes whether “the aged” are viewed as less deserving of or entitled to benefits than was earlier the case. If a loss of such legitimacy is playing out in one or more political circles, the power dimension takes on new importance. Put differently, high legitimacy obviates the need for power and, in its absence, power must take center stage. In this new political world, where conflict may replace consensus, the Boomers will be the Contender cohort.

Whether the aged have a declining level of political and policy legitimacy is a function of both audience and context. There is a clear divide between public opinion, which continues to express strong support for older people and their needs, and elite opinion, where a sizeable group of commentators and officials question the levels of need among many older people (Schulz & Binstock, 2006). The larger landscape in which aging politics plays out is changing in ways that bring new stressors to this policy arena. The public opinion that is supportive of older people and programs also expresses deep concerns about the viability of these programs and, among younger respondents, belief that the programs will be there for them.

Among the elite actors are found growing and insistent arguments that the programs are unsustainable in purely fiscal terms and increasingly hard to justify in social welfare terms. In the eyes of these observers, aggregate improvements in well-being among the aged have exacerbated targeted inefficiencies long associated with broad-based entitlement programs. Thus, Peterson (1996) asserted that “the long gray wave of Baby Boomers retiring could lead to an all-engulfing economic crisis—unless we balance the budget, rein in senior entitlements, raise retirement ages . . . .” More recently—and as fully seen in the 2011 deficit ceiling imbroglio—Biggs (2010) of the American Enterprise Institute argues that the U.S. fiscal gap is being driven by federal spending rather than a shortage of tax revenue: “the long-term budget challenge can be summarized in one word: entitlements. Without Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, the budget would be roughly in balance over the coming decades” (p. 1).

As the policy legitimacy of the aged comes into question—reluctantly among most of the public, eagerly among many of the elite actors—the power dimension comes increasingly into play. New actors become aware of their stake in the aging policy system, both those who may be able to benefit from participating in it and those who find its dominance and expansion inimical to their interests. Under these conditions, program defenders must bring to bear political resources that were not needed earlier. In short, power must be exercised, to overcome opposition, to divert attention, or to redefine the issues in question.

During most of the Advantaged years, these pressures were little in evidence. In her definitive treatment of the first four decades of Social Security policy, Derthick (1979b) notes how contained decision making was around the program—confined largely to program executives, tax-writing committees in
Congress, and program trustees. Equally important was the widespread impression, if only partial reality, that there were more winners than losers in how Social Security worked, resulting in “distributional biases” leading to potential conflict being muted. A similar, if more minor, tale played out with the birth and development of the “aging network,” spawned by the Older Americans Act of 1965. As captured by her title, The Aging Enterprise, Estes (1979) recounts how the network emerged as a noncontroversial and self-contained entity, building over time a political and programmatic infrastructure. Even in the early years of Medicaid, a second-tier public assistance program, the modal policy framing held “the elderly as too deserving for stigmatized Medicaid” (Grogan & Andrews, 2010, p. 282).

Today’s emerging Contender policy landscape is far different. Building during the 1980s, its arrival has been secured through a vortex of complementary pressures: demographic (emergence of the Boomers), economic (anemic economic growth), fiscal (unprecedented budget deficits), and political (embedded left-right conflict). Appropriately, Derthick (1979a) was among the first to see this, as found in her Public Interest article, “How Easy Votes on Social Security Came to an End.” Aggregate improvements in elder well-being and codification of “successful aging” set the stage for “greedy geezer” and allied epithets directed toward an allegedly coddled older population.

A more sanitized version of this caricature was soon found in the “generational equity” construct, which directly challenged retirees’ singular legitimacy by calling into question the distributional costs of aging programs, positioning the old against the young. The competing paradigm put forth by program supporters—“generational interdependence” (Williamson & Watts-Roy, 1999)—also acknowledged program costs but held that these costs were borne willingly rather than grudgingly by the young. In this framing, the first group sought to undermine the aged’s policy legitimacy, whereas the latter sought to maintain it; both, however, acknowledged secular forces that were calling historical legitimacy into question.

At least a partial offset to this more contested social construction of the old is found by ongoing and perhaps heightened manifestations of political power, the combination representing the essence of Contenderdom. Each of three power dimensions are at work as the Contender status realizes itself. Most basic to the first dimension is that there now is resistance to what an aged constituency may desire in politics, a presence that was earlier missing. Here, where the exercise of power finds “A prevailing over B,” a first chapter was the creation of the Greenspan Commission in 1983, which imposed both benefit cuts and tax increases on Social Security beneficiaries. Repeal of the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Care Act (MCCA) of 1988 because of its financing provisions famously found elders pounding the car of House Speaker Dan Rostenkowski (Himelfarb, 1995). More recently, the successful push-back against George W. Bush’s plan to partially privatize Social Security highlighted elders’ power base. AARP, after lying low in the wake of having supported the MCCA, led a concerted effort to derail the plan (Campbell & King, 2010).

These actions speak to the growing inability of aging interests to control “their” political agenda. During the Advantaged period, frontal attacks on aging-based policy were rare; even in the odd MCCA episode, Congress thought it was doing elders a favor. In those instances where limits were being imposed on program growth, the political pattern was one of blame avoidance, as in using the prospective payment method to rein in Medicare spending (Morgan, 2010). Those options are less on the table today. Democratic pressure to add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, dating back to the 1990s, only occurred through an open struggle in which the ultimate trade-off to Republicans was administration of the program entirely through private insurance companies. In the case of Medicaid, the earlier period of liberalization has ceased, with the contemporary framing now being “elderly people as too well off and overburdening Medicaid” (Grogan & Andrews, 2010, p. 288).

Finally, issue framing has become critical in the newly expanded political world of aging policy. Is Medicare about “out of control entitlement spending” or is it only a piece in the very different puzzle of ever-escalating health care costs across the board? Is Social Security a major driver of the federal government’s growing level of debt or is it the main pillar of a threatened retirement income disaster facing the Boomers as they enter old age? Is the move to so-called consumer-directed long-term care and payments to family members about client autonomy and choice or is it a subterfuge enabling the public sector to transfer care burden and responsibility to the informal sector?

When the overt exercise of power is required and both agenda setting and issue framing become contested, the world of Advantaged politics ceases
to exist. As Schneider and Ingram contend, the Advantaged can keep unwanted items off public agendas and control the terms of debates when contested items surface. This has most prominently been true in the case of Social Security, the cornerstone of the old age benefit edifice. Teles (2007) sees Social Security as having been at the heart of an “entrenched liberalism” in which change was fundamentally hindered by beneficiaries’ “mobilized expectations of unchanging benefits; future recipients’ expectations, rooted in experience, of future benefits; and uncertainty about the effects of any alternative” (pp. 167–168). That in 2005 a conservative movement was able to move privatization “from the outer margins of polite discourse to the top of a president’s policy agenda is a political victory of the first order” (p. 173). It also encapsulates elders’ political shift from the Advantaged to Contender category.

The Boomers as Contenders

In image and reality, the Boomers bring to aging politics a set of characteristics that will reinforce the political understanding of the aged as Contenders. Just as Dependent and Advantaged positionings fundamentally shaped political and policy realities for the old historically, Contender status will do the same for the Boomers moving forward. Of several possible consequences, the most fundamental may be the fracturing of the old as a singular political constituency.

This potential unraveling will result from the interplay of population, political, and policy characteristics. Prevailing perceptions of the Boomers seem certain to have political consequences, and understanding them as a cohort brings an important gerontological lens to the political analysis by Schneider and Ingram. As employed by Schneider and Ingram, “the elderly” is a life stage rather than a cohort construct. But unlike the “silent generation” that preceded them, the Boomers come with negative political baggage associated with their alleged self-absorption and strong sense of entitlement (Gillon, 2004). In the present context, those alleged characteristics strongly reinforce the Boomers’ Contender status. They do so, first, by undermining the elder’s longstanding legitimacy based on an earlier construction founded on notions of vulnerability and sacrifice and, second, by emphasizing material gains and a collective selfishness associated with the imagery of power and “taking care of Number One.” That there is extensive empirical data underscoring much greater heterogeneity of the Boomers than these stereotypes suggest (Hughes & O’Rand, 2004) is only partially relevant. To the degree that the existing stereotype prevails, the higher the likelihood that negative political consequences for older Boomers will follow.

A related issue centers on the degree to which Boomers define themselves as old. Evidence suggests that the generation that embraced the youth movement of the 1960s is not ready to symbolize the aging of America. According to a 2009 Pew Survey, the typical Baby Boomer believes that old age does not begin until age 72, and the vast majority of Boomers report feeling younger than their chronological age, typically by about 9 years. If Boomers choose to redefine old age as the boosters of successful-aging constructs suggest, that redefinition will be a far cry from the old as Dependents and a near cry from the old as Advantaged. Older Boomers resisting the longstanding singularity of old age as a political marker could bring notable policy consequences, certainly when combined with other economic and political realities that will accompany their later years.

It is, of course, the case that large numbers of this cohort are far from well-off and do worry about what awaits them in old age. Aggregate well-being of the old has improved, but elders of color, older women, and those with health and social concerns will continue to be at risk (Gonyea, 2005). Further, Baby Boomers today face declining fortunes as a result of the plummeting of housing and investment markets. Many Boomers have watched as the home equity they may have counted on as their principal retirement asset has fallen. Stagnating incomes, the shift from defined benefit to defined contribution pension plans (thereby shifting risk to employees), and low savings rates have led to a significant portion of Baby Boomers failing to accumulate sufficient retirement savings. A 2010 Employee Benefit Retirement Institute study found that almost half (47%) of early Boomers, those now on the verge of retirement, are at risk for not having enough income to meet basic retirement needs and uninsured medical expenses (VanDerhei & Copeland, 2010). And a Harris Poll revealed that one-in-four Baby Boomers have no retirement savings at all (Taylor, 2011). Given these financial pressures, it is not surprising that a recent Associated Press poll finds that 43% of Boomers are worried about being able to pay medical care costs in old age (Kerr, 2011).
These realities will not go unrecognized even by those who are critical of the volume of age-based public spending. But that recognition will bring with it proposals to target benefits on such individuals and reduce them for elders who are reasonably prosperous. As levels of inequality rise among the old, what Crystal (1984) labeled “the two worlds of aging” will further separate, undermining the longstanding political singularity of the old. Economic bifurcation will have political consequences.

Political tensions in Washington, including but extending well beyond age-related concerns, will further undermine elders’ earlier Advantaged status. Political attacks have both budgetary and ideological underpinnings. Having long hesitated to touch “the third rail” associated with aging policy expenditures, critics first took aim at age-based entitlements because, in the words of bank robber Willie Sutton, “that’s where the money is.” The more recent heated debate, while nominally about money and budgets, focuses on the respective roles of the public and private sectors in American life. In this larger and contentious struggle, old age interests become one of many in a contest more about values than populations. Where actors’ value preferences are distinct—as George W. Bush thought was the case in appealing to middle-aged Boomers as he tried to partially privatize Social Security—they might be drawn directly into the fray. But older people are arrayed across the political spectrum much like the rest of the population; in Binstock’s (2000) words, “members of the Baby Boom cohort are diverse just like older cohorts” (p. 28). Under these circumstances where core values are in play, the aged control neither the agenda nor the terms of the debate. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in 2011’s debt ceiling debate where “the center has shifted to the right” and “where every outcome for liberals is a loss at this point” (Thrush, 2011).

Cohort characteristics and political context will fundamentally shape policy developments in the Boomers’ old age, ones that will create additional levels of jeopardy for age-based programs. One centers on populations and the other on values. Competing with elders for political and budgetary support will be what are sometimes referred to as the new risks facing the welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 2009). These risks reflect societal changes of recent decades, including changing family roles and structures, labor market shifts, and immigration challenges. New welfare state needs will pressure traditional welfare state patterns, ones heavily targeted toward the old.

Partially reflecting these new issues, the values element may bring pressures on aging programs from the left as well as the right. Progressives are concerned with the needs of people with multiple vulnerabilities who are not included among the aged. In defending the larger welfare state enterprise, progressives will press for new protections for these often ignored constituencies. On the right, conservatives scoff at the idea that the aged are somehow under-attended or at special risk. In their view, the larger aging enterprise is something of a gated policy community, consisting of largely of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, with a sign at the door stating “we have ours, please leave us alone.” The right sees these programs as contributing to deficits, being target inefficient, and stunting economic growth. If the aging were something of an ideological loss leader in the 1930s and 1960s, useful for getting other populations in the door, that is certainly not the case for the Boomers now cast as Contenders.

These pressures of identity, competition, and constraint are likely to have combined and profound effects on aging policy moving forward. As to the dimensions invoked in the present analysis, elders’ political legitimacy will be under ongoing threat, and their ability to set and control agendas will be severely tested. Within the cells created by those dimensions, there may be an unprecedented fracturing of the aged as a singular target population. Efforts to rein in federal spending for the old will emerge principally through means-testing mechanisms. Some of these will occur on the benefits side, with formula adjustments reducing or eliminating benefits for more affluent elders. Others will take place on the financing side, with additional taxes and premiums imposed on those who are better-off.

Within limits, these moves could manifest themselves as “targeting within universalism,” a strategy favored by progressives to further both inclusion and relief (Skocpol, 1992). Yet, such moves run the political risk of alienating higher income program participants, reducing their political support, and incrementally moving longstanding social insurance programs in the direction of public assistance. Programmatically, such a transformation would likely take decades, but as a matter of political construction, it could evolve much more quickly.

This potential fracturing of aging politics and politics leads to a final visit with Schneider and Ingram’s formulation. As suggested, elders understood as a
single population have attained (or been reduced to) Contender status in recent years, reflecting rising concerns about their collective needs and requiring them to exercise power that was long latent. However, the exercise of power generates further resentment and conflict, bringing with it renewed examination of elders’ overall economic profile. Under prevailing political circumstances that reexamination may lead to a splintering of older people’s political construction. Whereas more affluent Boomers will wrestle with old age identity and their attachment to public benefits, less affluent elders will identify as old and be in need of those benefits. For the first group, maintenance of benefits will continue to require a muscular political presence; for the latter group, their needs will continue to be acknowledged by others. The logic of this divide, in short, is that the more affluent will remain as Contenders, whereas the more vulnerable will return to their original categorization as Dependents, relying on the goodwill and charity of the larger public to assure a modicum of well-being.

The heyday of the Advantaged aged—created over the course of some thirty years by economic growth and public policy—is to be supplanted by a dual construction created by economic stagnation and fiscal pressures in which some old will contend and others will be dependent.

References

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