

Britain's politicians should take note: The 'grey vote' is not as grey as we think

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A new [report](#) from Demos & Ipsos MORI finds that, contrary to popular belief, a large part of the support for pensioner spending comes from voters at the other end of the age spectrum, with those born between 1980 and 2000 three times as likely to choose pensions than unemployment benefits when asked to pick priorities. **Duncan O'Leary** and **Bobby Duffy** examine the implications of this and find an underlying principle: The desire for a reciprocal welfare system, which protects people when they need it and encourages the right behaviour in others.



There are some things we think we know about politics. Turkeys don't vote for Christmas – and the strength of the 'grey vote' means pensioner benefits will be protected. Older people are growing in number and more likely to turn out at elections, so the politics follows. Except it is not nearly as simple as that. As a new Demos/Ipsos MORI [report published](#) this week shows, a large part of the support for pensioner spending comes from voters at the other end of the age spectrum. When asked to pick priorities for extra welfare spending, those born between 1980 and 2000 are three times as likely to choose pensions than unemployment benefits. This is despite record figures for youth unemployment in recent years.



These figures tally with polling showing that young people are much more likely than older people to think that pensioners are being asked to do too much to bear the burden of deficit reduction. Older people are more likely than younger groups to say that the balance is about right. Focus groups reveal that people want to protect pensions not just because they think they will benefit one day or even that their own parents or grandparents will benefit now – but because they think older people more generally need and deserve the support.

Self-interest is of course a factor. It is true that older groups are most likely to put pensions top of the list, while young people put child benefit top of their priority list. But what the 'grey vote' narrative misses is the degree to which different generations worry about one another. People vote with their values, not just their interests.

Why do young people prioritise pensioners and what might this tell us about support for working age welfare, which has been plummeting in recent years? The answer is that people tend to see others as deserving of support for one of two reasons: either than people are in need through no fault of their own, or because that have contributed and are therefore entitled to a payout.

Older generations do well on both of these criteria – they are widely regarded as having 'put in' to the system and to be in need of support due the vulnerability that old age can bring. Families with children present a dilemma, with people worried about children finding themselves in poverty through no fault of their own, but reluctant to give to parents who may not have worked. The unemployed tend to come bottom of the list, with people sceptical either that they are really unable to help themselves, or that they have contributed to the system in the past.

This scepticism about the unemployed is instructive in the context of some of the coverage of the 2012 British Social Attitudes data. Newspaper reports in the last week have tended to identify a 'softening' of attitudes on welfare, but the nature of the shifts in opinion are important. People *do* appear to have become more inclined to put additional resources into the system and are more likely to agree, for example, that 'cutting benefits would damage too many people's lives' (47% in 2012 compared to 42% in 2011).

However, whilst there appears to be growing recognition of hardship, there are still the same fears about many benefit claimants themselves. On questions such as whether 'many people who get social security don't really

deserve any help' or 'most people on the dole are fiddling one way or another' there has been hardly any change at all. People appear no less worried about the underlying fairness of the system, despite recognising the role that welfare can play in a difficult economic climate.

When we asked focus group participants to pinpoint their concerns, different generations tended to focus on different specific problems. For example, older people worry that recent immigrants will draw out of the system before they have put into to it, baby boomers feel they are entitled to far too little having funded the system for many years and younger groups worry the short-term incentives to work are not strong enough to encourage the right behaviour. But all of these problems have their roots in the same principle: the desire for a reciprocal system, which protects people when they need it and encourages the right behaviour in others.

The public, of course, are not always right. Research shows that people tend to overstate the generosity of the system to individuals and the costs of working age welfare to the taxpayer. A third of people think we spend more on Job Seekers Allowance than pensions, when in reality we spend fifteen times as much on pensions. As Edmund Burke once said, 'Your representative *owes you*, not his industry only, but *his judgment*; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion'.

Of course policymakers should not suspend their own judgment or bow to myths about the welfare system. However, a widening gap between people's expectations and experience of welfare must be taken seriously. This is not simply so that welfare-advocates can construct more persuasive arguments, but also to learn about where the system is not meeting people's priorities and why. Britain's politicians should take note too. The 'grey vote' is, in fact, much less grey than they think.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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