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Old Voters on New Dimensions: Why Do Voters Vote for Pensioners' Parties? The Case of the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the electoral support of the Dutch pensioners' party 50Plus. Due to its open electoral system and aging population, the Netherlands is a key case to study pensioners' parties. Our study shows that this pensioners' party appeals to voters who are characterized by their age and their dependence on the welfare state as well as their policy positions on new lines of political conflict. In particular, their position on the new economic dimension (which concerns welfare state reform) and the new cultural dimension (which concerns immigration and EU integration) is distinct. Moreover, even when the majority of voters for this new party once supported the larger mainstream parties, they are now dissatisfied with the established politics. With rapidly aging populations across established democracies, this study is not just relevant for those studying pensioners' parties, but rather gives an important insight into the electoral dynamics and popular support for mainstream politics, the welfare state, and social security.



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European democracies are awaiting a major demographic shift: Their populations are aging (Bovenberg, 2008). This will have a strong effect on democratic politics (Bovenberg, 2008; Sinn & Uebelmesser, 2003): As the electorate grows older, their economic interests in terms of pensions, health care, and social security become more important. Research into political effects of population aging is still limited (Goerres & Vanhuysse, 2011), and even less is understood about the transformative force of this demographic shift. Clearly, one way in which seniors' issues can become politicized is through pensioners' parties (Hanley, 2010, 2011): These are prolocutor, nonideological parties that articulate the particular interests of senior citizens (Lucardie, 2000). Despite the prediction of gerontocracy—that is, that in countries with a majority elderly population, older sections of the population come to dominate the policy-making process (Sinn & Uebelmesser, 2003)—these

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 Three supplemental appendices (Appendix 1: Items; Appendix 2: Descriptives; Appendix 3: Logistic Regression Models) are available on the [publisher's website](#).

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pensioners' parties actually mobilize voters by arguing the opposite: that the interests of senior citizens are *neglected* by mainstream politics.

Despite that there is a growing literature on the role of pensioners in politics (Bovenberg, 2008; Goerres, 2008a, 2008b; Kohli, 2000; Sinn & Uebelmesser, 2003; Tepe & Vanhuysse, 2009), very little is known about the conditions that drive voters to vote for pensioners' parties. The only studies we know of are those authored by Hanley (2010, 2011), which look at the success of pensioners' parties from a macro-level, systemic perspective. This article represents the first study to analyze the motives of voters of pensioners' parties at the individual level. The core question that this study asks is, "Why do voters vote for a pensioners' party?" These parties primarily mobilize elderly citizens who previously—often for decades—supported the mainstream, establishment parties. The pressing issue is why these voters abandon traditional and mainstream political parties that often were the founders of pension schemes, health care provision, and other welfare support arrangements.

This study analyzes the electorate of the Dutch pensioners' party 50Plus. The Dutch case is of particular interest to students of pensioners' parties. According to Hanley (2011), the Netherlands is the most fertile breeding ground for pensioners' parties in Western Europe. The Netherlands had the first recorded pensioners' parties in the early 1970s; a second generation of—very successful, yet short-lived—pensioners' parties followed in the 1990s; and the pensioners' party 50Plus entered parliament in the early 2010s: The party won 1.9% of the votes in the Dutch general election of 2012 and in 2017 increased its share of the vote to 3.1%. It also continued to perform well in provincial and European elections (Krouwel & Lucardie, 2008).

Why should one care for a study about a relatively marginal party in a small Western European democracy? We argue that this study has relevance beyond the borders of this particular case. First, this is the first paper to analyze directly what kind of voters vote for these pensioners' parties. Five Western countries have had pensioners' parties represented in their parliament (see Table 1); pensioners' parties have been represented in the European Parliament, and pensioners' parties have run in national elections in 19 European countries from Bosnia Herzegovina to the United Kingdom (Hanley, 2011).

The second reason is that pensioners' parties are new parties that challenge and weaken the mainstream established parties, which will instruct us about the dynamic of new parties and the crisis of the traditional *Volksparteien* (Krouwel, 2012). Particularly because the established parties disproportionately draw their support from older voters, the rise of pensioners' parties has a substantial impact on the stability of party systems and the possibility of the formation of stable governments. The rise of pensioners' parties shows the weakening of the "catchall" electoral coalitions that the traditional people's parties are based on.

Table 1. Pensioners' Parties in Western Democracies With Parliamentary Representation.

Country	Abbreviation	Name (Original)	Name (English)	In Parliament
Croatia	HSU	<i>Hrvatska Stranka Umirovljenika</i>	Croatian Pensioners' Party	2003–present
Israel	GIL	ג'ימלאי ישראל לכנסת	Pensioners of Israel to the Knesset	2006–2010
Luxembourg	ADR ^a	<i>Aktiounskomitee 5/6 Pensioun fir jiddferen</i>	Action Committee 5/6ths Pensions for All	1989–present
Netherlands	AOV	<i>Algemeen Ouderenverbond</i>	General Pensioners' League	1994–1998
	U55+	<i>Politieke Unie 55+</i>	Political Union 55+	1994–1998
	50Plus			2012–present
Slovenia	DeSUS	<i>Demokratska stranka upokoencev Slovenije</i>	Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia	1996–present

^aRenamed Action Committee for Democracy and Pensions Justice (*Aktiounskomitee fir Demokratie an Rentengerechtigkeet*, ADR) in 1992 and Alternative Democratic Reform Party (*Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei*, ADR) in 2006.

Data adapted from Hanley (2011).

Third, studying this group of voters also sheds light on life cycle voting. Our findings contrast with the assumption that older voters are socialized to think about politics according to the lines of conflict of their youth and rather shows that electoral behavior is subject to change in the course of one's life and determined by age-related interests.

Finally, and most crucially, the success of pensioners' parties may indicate the development of a new line of conflict on economic matters. The traditional left–right issue dimension is transforming in saliency and content. Pensioners' parties focus on social-economic issues (pensions, welfare, social security) without explicitly positioning themselves as left or right. We argue that they mobilize voters on a new political line of conflict that divides those who favor maintaining the existing welfare state and those who favor reforming it to ensure its long-term sustainability. This dimension does not divide the interest of different *classes* but rather of different *generations*: Different age groups have opposed interests because of their position on the labor market and the extent to which they are included in the welfare state. Continuing and deepening economic and financial crises increase popular anxieties and fears about the future. This economic insecurity affects older voters, who are more reliant on fixed incomes, more. Understanding why voters in a Western European country vote for a pensioners' party may help to more generally understand the political dynamics of generational and social-economic politics in Western European countries.

Pensioners' parties in Western democracies

In examining the electorate of a pensioners' party, we need to assess the extent to which our results are generalizable and how much pensioners' parties across various countries are similar or different in their electoral appeal and programmatic outlook.

So far, seven pensioners' parties have been able to enter parliaments in Western countries. These are listed in [Table 1](#). Three of these parties are Dutch and the other four come from Luxembourg, Slovenia, Croatia, and Israel. Hanley (2010, pp. 4–5) emphasizes that these parties share a common agenda based on the short-term material demands of pensioners: higher pensions; better public services, in particular those used by pensioners such as health care and social care; and measures to combat age discrimination. This is also reflected by the choices some of these parties made. When the Israeli pensioners' party GIL (*Pensioners of Israel to the Knesset*) entered government in 2006 in a center–left coalition, it obtained the portfolios for pensioners and health care. Its manifesto was also singularly focused on pensioners' issues (Iecovich, 2001), even though it had a broader antiestablishment agenda when it emerged in the Tel Aviv city council. Other self-described pensioners' parties also have broader policy agendas. The Slovenian Democratic Party of Pensioners (DeSUS) has—with an exception of a 6-month period—been part of both center–left and center–right governments since 1997 and supplied the minister for foreign affairs, defense, health care, culture, environment, and minister of the Slovenian diaspora (Hanley, 2010, p. 5). This range of portfolio control shows that this party has broad policy agendas. However, the extent to which these parties share a common agenda is an open question.

When comparing the manifestos of these parties, some interesting patterns emerge. Indeed, all of them support higher pensions. The HSU (2017), AOV (1994), U55+ (1994), 50Plus (2012), DeSUS (2009), and GIL (Iecovich, 2001) also advocate for increased government spending on health care; HSU, AOV, 50Plus, and U55+ are specifically against out-of-pocket health care spending that is not covered by the government or health insurance. 50Plus, AOV, and U55+ demand attention to the specific needs of the elderly when it comes to housing or the labor market. When it comes to more general social-economic issues, the ADR, HSU, U55+, and DeSUS explicitly advocate some form of social market economy. Here, the ADR and AOV appear to have the most right-wing profile, explicitly also courting small business owners in their programs and advocating tax reductions in general. DeSUS appears to have the most left-wing profile, as it does not seek to defend only pensioners but also people with disabilities and those living on the minimum wage, social assistance, or unemployment benefits.

The Luxembourgish ADR was founded in order to address the inequality between the private- and public-sector pensions. After this was achieved in 1999, the party continued and broadened its demand beyond pensioners' interests, transforming into a conservative party (see ADR 2006). It campaigned against the European Constitutional Treaty and shifted focus from pension reform to a “sovereignist” agenda, advocating a “Europe of

Fatherlands” (Dumont & Poirer, 2007). The ADR (2013) also takes conservative positions on other issues such as law and order, immigration, civic integration, and the status of the Luxembourgish language. On moral issues, such as the relationship between church and state and the equal treatment of women, the party is more progressive. There are some interesting parallels to the Slovenian DeSUS and the Croatian HSU, which both also explicitly defend their own national languages and cultural traditions while emphasizing more progressive stances on these moral issues. Their Dutch counterparts all advocate stricter immigration policies and tougher punishments for criminals. The ADR is aligned with Eurosceptic British Conservative Party.

All these parties share that they advocate for pensioners’ rights and defend elderly material interests. Most of them also appear to be more conservative on “new” cultural issues surrounding national identity, immigration, and law and order. On the traditional economic left–right dimension, there appears to be more variance. Pensioners’ parties are niche parties (Meguid, 2008, pp. 3–4) and basically reject a class-based approach to politics, refusing to see politics in left–right terms. They do tend to focus on bread-and-butter economic issues and have policy manifestos that are broader than just pensioners’ interests. Primarily, pensioners’ parties mobilize a specific group defined by age, although the ADR in particular appears to have broadened its electoral appeal. This may limit the generalizability of the results of this study: The ADR may have a broader appeal to voters who in other countries may support a right-wing party. DeSUS may appeal to voters who in other countries may support a center–left party. Overall, the Dutch case and the centrist 50Plus in particular appear to be a fairly representative case for pensioners’ parties in general.

The support of pensioners’ parties

Very few specifics are known about electorates of pensioners’ parties besides that they appeal to older voters. In the most advanced study of pensioners’ parties, Hanley (2011) analyzed the emergence and success of pensioners’ parties from a comparative perspective. It looks at the polity level, seeking to explain the emergence of pensioners’ parties in particular political systems. He identifies a number of factors that explain the success of pensioners’ parties. Some of these can be converted into hypotheses about the supporters of pensioners’ parties.

First, there must be a demographic base for pensioners’ parties. The larger the constituency of senior citizens, the more likely the success of a pensioners’ party (Hanley, 2010, 2011). To some extent this is paradoxical: Traditional political science theory argues that people are socialized politically early in life and thus will continue to think about politics in terms of the lines of conflict that structured their politics and their party vote during the

formative years of adolescence and young adulthood (Goerres, 2008b). As political identities of citizens are supposed to be determined by their formative experiences early in life, the question is how these political identities are weakened and transformed. Voters' political identities and allegiances are the product of formative experiences and therefore are only likely to change when the economic or political context changes. In order to be mobilized as "pensioners" or "older" voters, senior citizens have to identify as such, which assumes some sort of collective identity. However, older voters are often very diverse in terms of their social status, social identity, and ideological outlook (Iecovich, 2001, p. 99; Van Holsteyn, 2009, p. 31). Pensioners' parties are particularly successful among older voters that have lost their old attachments to the parties they were socialized to vote for in their youth (Van Holsteyn & Stipdonk, 1995, pp. 137–138). In the Netherlands, voters who turned 65 in 2012 (those born just after the Second World War) are actually the voters who were socialized in the 1960s, a period of dealignment (Lijphart, 1968). Therefore, they are more independent from established parties than voters from earlier cohorts (Van Holsteyn, 2009, pp. 31–32).

It is likely that the relationship between age and voting for pensioners' parties is nonlinear: Reforms of pensions, such as raising of retirement age, often most markedly (and negatively) affect not those who have already retired—their benefits are generally protected—but those who are relatively close to retirement. It is therefore likely that support for a pensioners' party among those aged between 55 and 65 is as large as among the oldest voter segments (past retirement age).

H1. Age hypothesis: Voters older than 55 have a greater propensity to vote for a pensioners' party than those younger than 55. For voters younger than 55, the older they are, the greater the propensity that they vote for a pensioners' party.

Hanley (2011) proposes that the constituency of pensioners' parties cannot be identified simply by their age but also by their nonparticipation in the labor market: It is particularly those voters dependent on the fixed incomes of social security or pensions who are attracted to the agenda of pensioners' parties.

H2. Activity hypothesis: Economically inactive voters have a greater propensity to vote for a pensioners' party than economically active voters.

Pensioners' parties do not just need a demographic base, but this base must be subject to some "social strain" (Hanley, 2011; Hauss & Rayside, 1978). In the case of pensioners' parties, there must be a political conflict about welfare state provisions and policies regarding pension rights, health care, or social security benefits. Such a conflict should cut across the

traditional class divide and add an intergenerational dimension. The politics of retrenchment can create a division between those who seek to maintain existing welfare state arrangements and those who seek to reform it (Hanley, 2010, 2011; Kohli, 2000, p. 280). Pensioners, as “insiders” of the current welfare state, have an interest in maintaining their fixed state-provided income and public health care provisions. These interests may conflict with interests of younger voters who are still active in the labor market and may have not (yet) built up the same rights as existing pensioners and may therefore have an interest in welfare state reform (Enyedi, 2008, p. 293; Hanley, 2011).

There is evidence that in the Netherlands a crosscutting conflict concerning the welfare state has developed since 2009 (Otjes, 2015, 2016). In addition to the aforementioned traditional economic left–right dimension, there was a novel second economic dimension. It taps into an intergenerational conflict between those who are willing to reform the welfare state in order to ensure its long-term sustainability and those who oppose reforms because such reorganizations go against the interest of those who are currently within the existing welfare state support systems. Parties and voters are divided over issues regarding the raising of the retirement age, labor market reform, and strengthening individual responsibility and contributions for health care provisions. Such a division between welfare state insiders and outsiders of the welfare state is more likely in conservative welfare states like the Netherlands (Van Kersbergen & Vis, 2014, p. 65).

H3. New economic hypothesis: The more voters are opposed to welfare state reform, the greater their propensity to vote for a pensioners’ party.

While economics may matter, cultural issues may also matter. Political scientists have emphasized the increased importance of a “new” cultural dimension since the 1990s (Kriesi et al., 2008): This is also precisely the period in which we have witnessed the rise of successful pensioners’ parties (see Table 1). This new cultural cleavage divides cosmopolitan voters who favor globalization, in the form of open borders to (labor) immigration and EU integration, from nationalist voters who favor national demarcation, in the form of restricted immigration and the retention of national sovereignty. As we saw above, pensioners’ parties tend to be more conservative on these issues advocating restrictive immigration measures and stricter law and order policies. In this way, they may appeal to older voters, who may feel that open borders to capital flows and labor migration will undermine national levels of welfare state provisions and will therefore adopt the more conservative position on this new cultural dimension. Having been relatively well protected socially throughout their life—both in the labor market and with regard to pensions—these voters are now experiencing the pressures of

globalization, which exposes national welfare states to increased immigration and trade. These outside pressures may—in the eyes of these voters—threaten their position in the welfare state, either as the result of retrenchment in response to increased trade or by reducing their share of the “cake” as immigrants compete for the same limited budget for social security. As retired people can do very little to improve their economic position and status as they are outside the labor market and state-dependent, they seek protection: protection in the form of the welfare state (see hypothesis 3) but also in the form of closed borders against immigration and further globalization.

H4. New cultural hypothesis: The more voters are opposed to globalization, the greater their propensity to vote for a pensioners’ party.

It is important to assess the extent to which the dimensions that used to structure the political space still affect the propensity of voting for a pensioners’ party: Before 2000, the Dutch political space was traditionally understood to be structured by an economic dimension dividing a pro-market right and a pro-government left, in addition to a cultural dimension dividing religious and secular voters (Kriesi et al., 2008). We expect that these traditional dimensions matter less when explaining voting for pensioners’ parties. Citizens for whom these dimensions are still important are more likely to remain loyal to parties that primarily mobilize voters on these traditional issue dimensions.

Finally, Hanley (2011) proposes that the success of pensioners’ parties is correlated with party system fluidity, that is, the extent to which voters are actually open to voting for new parties. Pensioners’ parties do not just reflect a demand for a new kind of redistributive politics; rather, it needs to be understood in part as a growing demand for antiestablishment protest parties. Following Lago and Martínez (2011), we propose that voters may turn to new parties out of general political distrust of and dissatisfaction with established parties and politics.

H5. Dissatisfaction hypothesis: The more voters are dissatisfied with traditional politics and existing established parties, the greater their propensity to vote for a pensioners’ party.

Case selection

In many ways, the Netherlands constitutes an ideal place for new party emergence due to its open electoral system (Hug, 2001): Since the Second World War, 21 new political parties have entered the Dutch Parliament,

including the three pensioners' parties and parties specifically oriented to the interests of farmers, shopkeepers, and animals (Krouwel & Lucardie, 2008). The Netherlands is a particularly important case to study pensioners' parties. According to Hanley (2011), the Netherlands is the most fertile breeding ground for pensioners' parties in Western Europe due to its fluid party system and a large retired population that is well organized, receiving a large share of the nation's social security spending.¹ The only factor positively influencing the success of pensioners' parties that the Netherlands lacks is being a Central or Eastern European country. In this region, pensioners' parties are even more successful.² However, as we want to analyze the possible development of a new cleavage, we opt for the most fertile territory in Western Europe.

As far as can be assessed, the Netherlands witnessed the formation of the first pensioners' party (Hanley, 2010, 2011): In 1971, no fewer than five parties ran in the parliamentary elections specifically advocating senior's issues but failed to win seats.³ In 1994, the Netherlands saw another "flash" of pensioners' protest against health care and social security reforms advocated by the government (Van Stipdonk & Van Holsteyn, 1996): Two pensioners' parties entered Parliament in 1994, winning a combined 4% of the vote. However, soon after their entry onto the national political stage, these parties fell apart due to internal, personal conflicts.

Pensioners' issues returned to the center stage of Dutch politics during the global financial crisis. In 2009, the Dutch government decided on a program of public investments to prevent a recession. The center-left government decided to cover these investments by raising the retirement age in the long term. The cabinet fell before these plans could be implemented, but this put the pension age on the political agenda. In the 2010 election campaign, both the incumbent social-democratic Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) and Christian-Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appel*, CDA) as well as opposition parties, the social-liberal Democrats 66 (*Democraten 66*, D66) and the center-right Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD), spoke out in favor of pension reform. Opposition came from the left-wing populist Socialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP) and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV). The right-wing minority government that was formed after the elections of CDA and VVD, supported by the PVV, was deeply divided over pension age issue. The government nevertheless proposed the measure, courting the support of the PvdA to get the measure through the legislature (Afonso, 2015). Within 2 years the right-wing minority government fell over social security cuts. During the 2012 election campaign, it became clear not just that political parties were divided along the traditional economic left-right dimension but that on a large number of reform measures and budget cuts, a second dimension became visible, dividing the anti-reform parties PVV and the SP

from their mainstream competitors. The issue of raising the retirement age also returned to political agenda. However, since the PVV had tolerated raising the retirement age by the government they supported and the SP endorsed it in their long-term social-economic plans, the political space was created for another party to politically exploit this issue.

Parallel to this politicization of pensioners' issues, a new pensioners' party had already emerged in 2009. This party was the brainchild of political entrepreneur Jan Nagel.⁴ This new party 50Plus first competed in the 2011 provincial election. It won sufficient seats in provincial councils to obtain a seat in the indirectly elected Senate. After the party's viability was established during the provincial elections, 50Plus competed in the 2012 snap elections for the *Tweede Kamer*, winning two seats.⁵ In 2015 the party won sufficient seats in provincial councils to gain a second seat in the 75-seat Senate. In 2017 the party doubled its seat total in the national elections. What made 50Plus a more stable force for pensioner's rights compared to the previous parties for the elderly that did not stand the test of time?

We suggest that the successful emergence of 50Plus could be explained by its position in the Dutch political landscape in the 2012 election. [Figure 1](#) provides data on the alignment of parties' positions on the old and the new

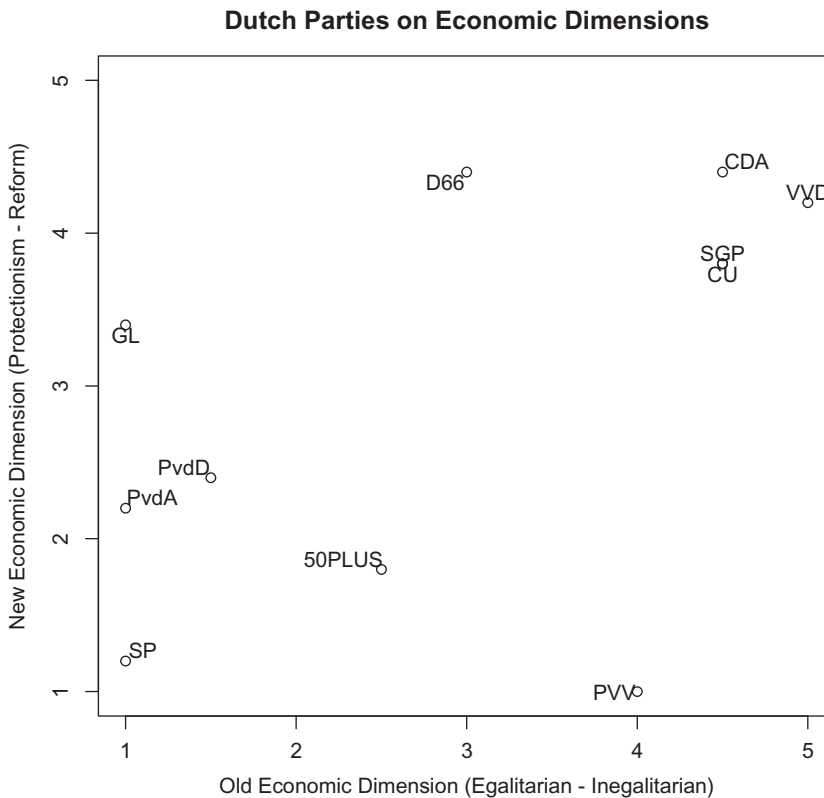


Figure 1. Dutch party positions on two economic dimensions.

economic dimensions (based on Election Compass party positioning): A number of parties, such as VVD, CDA, and D66, were in favor of welfare state reform to ensure its sustainability yet opposed to more income redistribution. The PVV opposed both socioeconomic redistribution as well as reform measures. The Labour Party and SP opposed the long-term reforms but favored traditional economic redistribution. As can be seen, 50Plus took a relatively centrist position on the old economic dimension but clearly opposed reforms to the welfare state. Figure 2 shows the position of parties on the old and new cultural dimensions. Here, 50Plus does not have a clear separate niche: Like most parties, 50Plus has a secular position on the old cultural dimension but takes a centrist position on the new cultural dimension.

Data

As pensioners' parties have quite small bases of support, they tend to be underrepresented in representative surveys with probability samples: There are too few respondents who voted for minor parties to perform in-depth analysis. To overcome this restriction, we use a data set of users of the Vote Advice Application (VAA) Election Compass (*Kieskompas*) during the

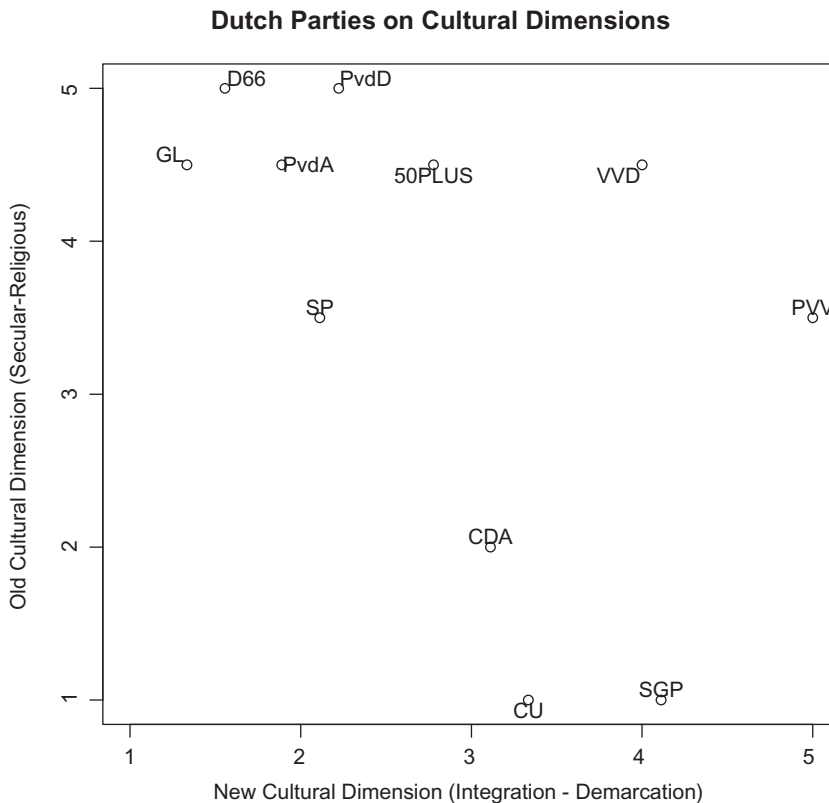


Figure 2. Dutch party positions on two cultural dimensions.

election campaign of 2012. This data set includes 30 questions on policy issues, and respondents were also questioned about their propensity to vote for a number of political parties. A substantial number of users also answered additional questions including demographic items and attitudes toward politics. Supplemental online Appendix 1 lists the items used in this study. Note that the Election Compass does not generate a probability sample of the population. VAAs suffer issues such as undercoverage and self-selection that may bias estimates, like many online surveys (Bethlehem, 2010): Higher-educated, younger men are overrepresented in a data set of VAA users compared to a probability sample of national election studies. However, a real asset of these large, opt-in data sets is that they allow one to study marginal groups, such as supporters of fringe parties, which are only found in limited numbers in probability samples. To improve the representativeness of this non-probability sample, we use two methods to ensure that our results are generalizable: raking and matching.

Matching sampling, which is also called case control sampling, is used in medical research or psychological experiments: One sample is subjected to a stimulus and another sample identical to the first sample on all relevant variables is not (McCready, 2006, pp. 150–151). A similar strategy could be employed to create a set of respondents that is equivalent to a probability sample: A sample is selected from the larger, non-probability panel of respondents, in this case these are the VAA users, by matching each of them individually to a respondent in a probability sample (Daniel 2012, p. 91). Ideally, one would look for an identical twin of each respondent in the probability sample within the non-probability sample. This method is used to construct a sample that is equivalent to a representative sample from a large, but unrepresentative panel (e.g., Rivers, 2006). A problem with a matching sample is that it can be unstable; if two respondents from the VAA sample match a respondent from the probability sample equally well, one can only select the final respondent randomly. This means that coefficients and estimates can differ from sample to sample. In order to address this, we bootstrap our results: Instead of basing our conclusions on one single randomly drawn sample, we draw 100 samples and look at the average coefficients, diagnostics, and estimates from those 100 samples.

We employ this strategy on the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES), a representative sample of Dutch voters (Van Der Kolk, Van Erkel, & Van Der Velden, 2014). We match every respondent in this sample on four variables (age, gender, education level, and party choice in 2010). The 2012 DPES has 1677 respondents. For every respondent in this sample, we identified a user in the VAA database that had the same gender and level of education and voted for the same party in the 2010 parliamentary election. When there was more than a single match, the respondent with the closest

age was selected. When there was more than one respondent with the same age, a respondent was randomly selected. Only 4% of the respondents in the DPES could not be matched to a user in the VAA. Such cases were excluded from analysis. We repeated this process 100 times to prevent a single biased matched sample from influencing the results. All the estimates presented are the average estimate over these 100 samples. [Figure 3](#) shows the relationship between age in the VAA sample, the DPES, and the average for the actually constructed samples. It shows that the VAA sample has younger voters (the groups between 25 and 55 are overrepresented compared to those in the DPES). In the constructed sample we were able to compensate well for the underrepresentation for the groups aged between 18 and 25 and for the groups between 60 and 80. For the group older than 80, insufficient matches were available among the 182 eligible respondents older than 80. Results concerning respondents older than 80 should be treated with some caution. Supplemental online Appendix 2 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables that were employed.

Next to our matching methodology, we also construct a weighted data set using raking. We follow the method used by [Wheatley \(2014\)](#). Raking is an iterative procedure that compares the distribution of variables from a probability sample with the distributions of the same variables in a non-probability sample. In this case, we grouped age in nine quintiles, gender in two groups, and education in three groups. Again, we use the DPES as the probability sample and the VAA data set from the 2012 elections for the non-probability sample. Raking generates weights for every combination of variables. These reflect whether that group (for instance, higher-educated

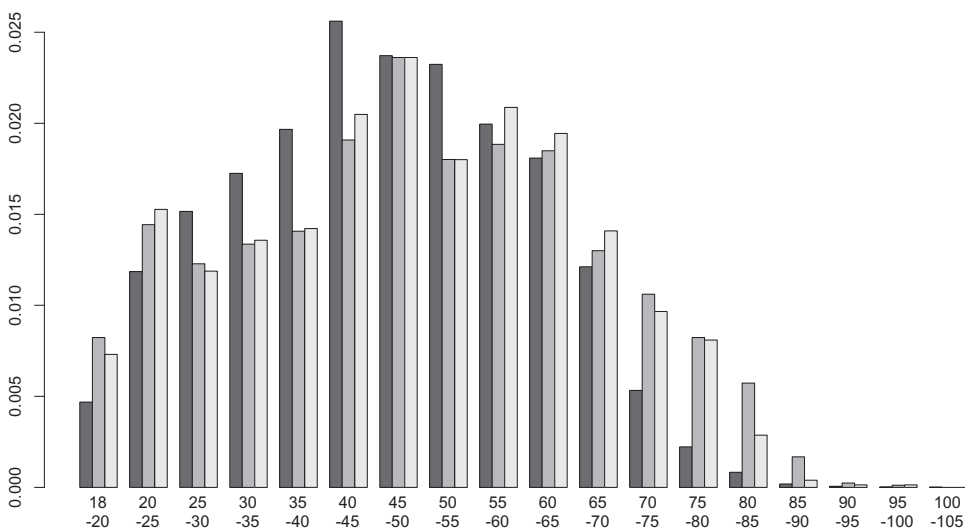


Figure 3. Age distribution in Vote Advice Application data (black bars), Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey (dark gray bars), and matched sample (light gray bars).

women between 18 and 27) are over- or underrepresented.⁵ Supplemental online Appendix 2 gives the descriptives of the variables employed in the matched data set. Following Wheatley (2014), we limit the weight to a maximum of 20.

To identify the party preferences of voters, we employ propensity-to-vote (PTV) variables (Van der eijk, 2002). As the relationship between party preference and party choice is quite strong, we prefer vote propensities over vote intention variables, as the number of voters for smaller parties are very small in representative samples and consequently also our matched data (Van der eijk, Van der brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006, p. 425). We employ ordinary least squares regression with robust standard errors in order to compensate for the fact that the PTV variables have skewed distributions (following Van Spanje & van der brug, 2009).⁶

We include a number of simple variables, and we use a single item to measure political satisfaction. We include separate terms for age and age-squared. We also include a dichotomous item for economic activity or participation in the labor market.⁷ As control variables, we also added gender and education level (dichotomized to reflect the difference between higher- and lower-educated voters). In the regression models, in order to aid comparison, all independent variables have been recoded so that they have a minimum of zero and a maximum of one.

Dimensionality of the Dutch voter space

We propose that the PTV for pensioners' parties is larger for groups that are characterized by particular policy positions. As far as possible, we have operationalized these policy dimensions by means of multi-item indices. The underlying assumption for employing these policy issues is that they measure a latent policy dimension. We justified selecting these deeper-lying dimensions on basis of a deductive reasoning presented above.⁸ To test this deductive reasoning on the dimensionality of the political space, we use Mokken scaling (Mokken, 1971). This method has been used previously to test the quality of the spatial models in voting advice applications (Otjes & Louwerse, 2014). We prefer this method to alternatives, as Mokken scaling has fewer assumptions about the way the data are distributed compared to factor analysis or other alternatives (Van Schuur & Kiers, 1994). One can best understand Mokken scaling by thinking of the quality of exams. It is a method to construct a scale that runs from items that most respondents answer correctly ("easy" items) to items that most respondents answer incorrectly ("difficult" items). The number of times respondents who answer the difficult questions correctly but get the easy questions wrong is used as the measure of scale quality. This is the H-value. An H-value below 0.3 means that the scale should not be used. In this case, models run from, for

instance, left to right instead of from easy to difficult. We use Polytomous Mokken scaling as these items have multiple, ordered answer categories (Van der ark, 2007).

We create four issue scales: first, an old economic dimension that consists of two items concerning redistribution, like progressive taxation; second, a new economic dimensions that consists of five items concerning welfare state reform, such as raising the retirement age; third, an old cultural dimension that consists of two items concerning moral issues, such as same-sex marriage; and finally, a new cultural dimension that consists of nine items that concern issues such immigration and EU integration. Mokken scaling cannot be applied to weighted data. Therefore, we can only test the scalability on the matched data. As can be seen in Appendix 2, all these dimensions meet the basic requirements of scalability (an H-value of at least 0.3).

Results

Table 2 shows the propensity of voting for 50Plus for those who voted for different parties in the 2010 election: It gives us some insight about which parties lost voters to 50Plus. The pensioners' party scores best among those voters who previously voted for the PVV. Programmatically, there is considerable overlap between the radical right-wing populist PVV and 50Plus. Both parties opposed welfare state reform, in particular, raising the retirement age. The PVV also has a very conservative position on the new cultural dimension. 50Plus also appeals to voters of the SP and the CDA.⁹ This makes sense, as the SP also opposed welfare state reform and the CDA has the overall oldest electorate. Those who reported voting PvdA and VVD in 2010 report a lower propensity to vote 50Plus. Previous D66 voters, a party that strongly advocated raising the retirement age and several other welfare state reforms, have the lowest propensity to vote for 50Plus.

Table 3 shows the result of the regression analysis on basis of the matched sample (Model 1) and the raked sample (Model 2). Every variable has a significant effect. The signs for each analysis are in the same direction and substantively there are no differences in interpretation between the two

Table 2. Propensity-to-Vote Variables for 50Plus Among 2010 Voters of Six Parties.

Item	Mean Matched	Mean Raked
CDA	2.71 (0.01)	2.19
PvdA	2.32 (0.01)	2.12
SP	2.43 (0.02)	2.47
VVD	2.02 (0.01)	2.21
PVV	2.75 (0.02)	2.66
D66	1.97 (0.02)	1.92

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	Matched	Raked
Intercept	-0.25*** (0.04)	0.64*** (0.12)
Age	9.00*** (0.08)	6.56*** (0.29)
Age-squared	-6.91*** (0.10)	-4.01*** (0.39)
Inactivity	0.37*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.04)
Political satisfaction	-0.80*** (0.02)	-0.81*** (0.06)
New cultural dimension	1.46*** (0.03)	1.23*** (0.08)
Old cultural dimension	0.69*** (0.02)	0.40*** (0.06)
New economic dimension	-1.37*** (0.03)	-1.33*** (0.08)
Old economic dimension	0.56*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.06)
Gender = female	-0.31*** (0.01)	-0.23*** (0.03)
Education = higher Education	-0.30*** (0.01)	-0.36*** (0.03)
R^2	0.17	0.12
N	1533	33019

*** $p < .01$ < ** $p < .05$ < * $p < .1$.

models (i.e., the strong effects in Model 1 are also strong in Model 2). We discuss the results of Model 1 in detail.

First, there is a complex relationship between age and propensity to vote for 50Plus, shown in Figure 4. Obviously, younger voters have a lower propensity to vote for 50Plus: Voters aged 20 almost have zero chance to vote for 50Plus. This propensity increases almost linearly until those born in the 1960s. They report, on average, an estimated 2.5 in 10 chance of voting for 50Plus. After that cohort, the propensity to vote does not increase and voters born earlier have a similar propensity to vote 50Plus. As we noted above, results for ages older than 80 should be treated with some caution due to sample size; the standard errors also become larger. This shows that in line with the hypothesis, this pensioners' party is indeed mainly a party for older voters. The economic inactivity variable indicates that those who do not work have a greater propensity to vote 50Plus than those who do work. This also confirms our hypothesis.

We also examine a number of opinion variables: first, the new economic dimension. There is a significant negative relationship between the extent to which voters favor reforms of the welfare state and their propensity to vote 50Plus. As we hypothesized, those who are most opposed to welfare state reforms have a significantly greater propensity to vote 50Plus than those least

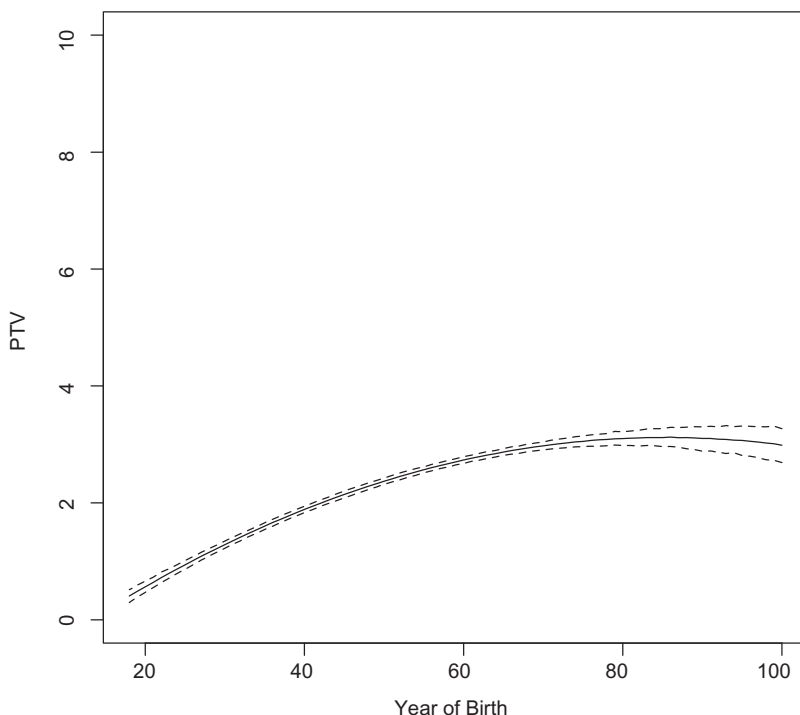


Figure 4. Propensity-to-vote (PTV) for 50Plus and age. Zelig simulation of the relationship between age and propensity to vote for 50Plus. Based on 1000 simulations of Model 2.

opposed. The result for Model 2 is in the same direction. This shows that in line with our expectation, this pensioners' party mobilizes voters who are opposed to reforms of the labor market, social security, health care, and pension system that would ensure long-term sustainability of the welfare state at the expense of who currently depend on the welfare state.

Next to the new economic dimension, we examine the effect of the two "old" dimensions that used to characterize the Dutch party system: the traditional economic dimension (concerning redistribution) and the traditional cultural dimension (concerning morality). These traditional cleavages both have a smaller impact on voting 50Plus than the new economic and new cultural dimensions, but they are still significant. Traditional economic left-wing voters have a significantly greater propensity to vote for 50Plus than voters on the traditional economic right wing of the political spectrum. The relationship between preferring 50Plus and the old cultural dimension indicates that the party tends to have a stronger attraction to secular voters. Overall, we find that in terms of the old dimensions that used to characterize Dutch politics, 50Plus more strongly appealed to voters of the traditional secular center-left. While the party attracted voters of the traditional left on economic issues, the party attracted voters with more right-wing positions on the new cultural dimension, which taps into voters' preference for national demarcation (more restrictive immigration

policies and less European integration) versus global integration (open borders to immigration and pro-European integration). Both samples indicate that 50Plus voters are significantly more in favor of national demarcation, strongly indicating an inclination for social protectionism in the mind-set of likely 50Plus voters. In fact, this factor of national demarcation is the largest and most significant factor explaining the propensity to vote 50Plus in the matching analyses. This expectation is in line with the new cultural hypothesis: 50Plus attracts voters who favor closed borders.

Following this abandonment of traditional political parties, we analyzed the relationship between political satisfaction and vote propensities for 50Plus and find that, independent of their policy preferences, likely 50Plus voters are significantly more politically dissatisfied. This effect is significant in both the matched and raked sample. When we include two structural variables in the analysis—education and gender—it emerges that 50Plus particularly appeals to lower-educated voters and does significantly worse among the female electorate. It seems that 50Plus is the party of the lower-educated, dissatisfied male population.¹⁰

Discussion

Despite that this study concerned a minor political party in a smaller West European democracy, its findings do have relevance beyond the borders of the Netherlands. First, this is the first study to provide an in-depth analysis of the electorate of a pensioners' party. The open electoral system allows political mobilization on pensioner interests, which provides a real-world laboratory to explore voter shifts among aging populations. We substantiated and qualified a number of expectations about pensioners' parties that so far were only addressed in macro-level studies: Indeed pensioners' parties attract older, nonworking voters and mobilize voters on new political conflict lines. Given the unstable performance of pensioners' parties, one can question the extent to which pensioners' parties attract a similar electorate in every country, but it seems reasonable that pensioners' parties mobilize older voters who are dependent on the welfare state when there is political conflict about reforming the welfare state. It also confirmed the hypothesis that pensioners' parties tend to attract voters who are opposed to immigration and favor a defense of national identity. Mobilization through pensioners' parties reflects one way in which elderly voters, traditionally aligned with established, pro-European parties, express their opposition to a world that is changing due to EU integration, immigration, and globalization.

This article shows the political relevance of new and growing economic line of conflict in Dutch politics that exists in addition to the left-right dimension (Otjes, 2015, 2016). As we have seen here, this line of conflict does not divide *classes* but rather *generations*: It pits the interests of older

voters who feel that their protected position on the welfare state and the labor market is under pressure against the interests of younger generations who feel that the welfare state is not economically sustainable. We showed the relevance of this dimension by looking at the voters of a party that focuses on economic issues without taking an explicit position on the left–right dimension. For its voters, the reform dimension (that taps into this generational cleavage) is more important than the traditional left–right redistribution dimension.

But the results also provide an answer to the puzzling phenomenon that particularly older voters abandon established political parties they supported for decades to vote for a new party. We showed that voting for pensioners' parties (primarily among older voters) cannot be explained by the lines of conflict that used to structure the political space (the “old” economic and cultural dimension) but rather by “new” dimensions that have come to structure new policy issues such as welfare state reform and globalization. This shows that the development of new political issues undermines not just the relationship between established parties and young voters (Wagner & Kritzinger, 2012) but also the relationship between established parties and older voters when the specific interests of older voters are put under pressure. Voters over their life cycle have different substantive interests: As citizens grow older and become dependent on fixed incomes they have a greater propensity to vote for a party that seeks to protect the interest of older voters and those who depend on the welfare state. With increasingly aging voter populations that remain politically engaged, we may now only have seen the beginnings of movement that substantially transforms the conflict-dimensionality and voting patterns of European democracies.

Limitations

This study has two limitations: The first is the country studied and the second are the data used. This article analyzed the support for a pensioners' party in a single country (the Netherlands). As pointed out above, these parties differ for instance in their left–right positions; moreover, they operate in different party systems. Therefore, their electorates are unlikely to be completely identical. The Dutch 50Plus is selected as a representative (centrist) case where, for instance, the Luxembourgish ADR is more right-wing on economic issues and the Slovenian DeSUS is more left-wing. As we discussed above, however, while these parties may differ on the left–right division, all these parties favor more welfare spending on pensioners and the preservation of national identity, these factors were identified in this study as two crucial predictors of support for a pensioners' party. Future research may want to study the extent to which the patterns found here can be found in other countries.

The second limitation of this study are the data. We used data from a non-probability sample (from a VAA): higher-educated, young men tend to be overrepresented in VAAs. Despite that two methods were used to make the data more representative for the population (through weights and through matching sampling), the sample is unlikely to be as representative as a true probability sample. The number of respondents in the VAA older than 80, for instance, is so small that the uncertainty about estimates for this group is substantive and conclusions should be treated with caution. This data source was chosen for the simple reason that no other data set concerns sufficient questions about this pensioners' party (such as a propensity to vote question) or has sufficient respondents who support 50Plus.¹¹

Conclusions

This article examined the voter base of the Dutch pensioners' party 50Plus—which can be compared to similar parties across the continent—and we showed that voters who have the largest propensity to support 50Plus share five key characteristics. First and least surprising, their age matters: Older voters are more attracted to the party than younger voters, and the party particularly appeals to voters born before 1950. Second, economic inactivity: 50Plus voters are more likely to be retired (or unemployed at an earlier stage of their life) and dependent on pension schemes or social benefits. We also found that the pensioners' party attracted voters with a particular value profile, especially on new issue dimensions that have developed relatively recently. Evidence shows that 50Plus voters oppose globalization in the form of EU integration and immigration. Moreover, the propensity to vote for 50Plus increased with opposition to welfare state retrenchment: The party especially mobilizes voters who oppose raising the retirement age, cuts to the health care system, and labor market reforms. As traditional parties of government were implementing such reforms, likely 50Plus voters showed a general discontent with the established parties. We also found that this pensioners' party more strongly appeals to lower-educated, secular, and male voters. Particularly voters with a secular egalitarian profile vote 50Plus.

Notes

1. Hanley (2011), who looks at the average share of social expenditure spent on pensions between 1990 and 2006, shows that the Netherlands with 49% is above the average of 44%. The Netherlands also scores above average when it comes to pension spending as the share of total security spending for OECD countries between 2007 and 2011 (OECD, 2014).
2. In Central and Eastern Europe, pensioners' parties are more successful due to electoral fluidity in these systems, the specific circumstances of their transition to democracy (which saw the formation of many parties), and the relative uniformity of pensioners in

the region due to their reliance on government pensions, which came under question after the transition to democracy (Hanley, 2011).

3. General Seniors' Party Netherlands (*Algemene Bejaarden Partij Nederland*, ABPN) won 0.43% of the vote; the Seniors and Labour Party (*Bejaarden en Arbeidspartij*, BAP) won 0.34% of the vote; Seniors' Party 65+ (*Bejaardenpartij 65+*, BP65+) won 0.09% of the vote; Seniors' Party General Interest (*Bejaarden Partij Algemeen Belang*, BPAB) won 0.03% of the vote; and National Party of Seniors (*Landelijke Partij van Bejaarden*, LPB) won 0.03% of the vote. Source: Kiesraad (2015). Combined they gained just less than 1% of the vote; this would have been enough for a seat if they would have run as a combined list instead of separately.
4. Nagel was a former Labor Party senator and founder of Livable Netherlands, a centrist populist party that advocated democratic reform, served as launching pad for Pim Fortuyn, and won two seats in 2002 elections but disintegrated soon after. Nagel persisted: In 2005 he founded a Party for Justice, Action and Progress (*Partij voor Rechtvaardigheid, Daadkracht en Vrijheid*, PRDV). As the party leadership decided that the level of popular support in opinion polls was insufficient, this political project was put on halt. Nagel used the existing PRDV party organization to form 50Plus in 2009. Originally the party was called the Independent Seniors and Children's Union (*Onafhankelijke Ouderen-en KinderUnie*, OOKU).
5. 50Plus recruited prominent journalist and former VVD spokesperson Henk Krol as its top candidate. After the elections, the party went through an instable period. The party surged in the polls after the new government announced an agenda of new austerity measures. The leader Krol came under fire because as an editor of a magazine he had not paid pension contributions for his employees. He left Parliament and was succeeded as party leader by MP Norbert Klein, who then came into conflict with the MP who succeeded Krol, Martine Baay. After a few months, 50Plus split into two parliamentary groups. Baay was affiliated with the 50Plus extra-parliamentary party. After a few months Baay left the Parliament because of health reasons and was succeeded by Krol. In the 2014 European Election, the party ran an incumbent VVD MEP as its top candidate and obtained 3.7% of the vote, just 0.1% short of winning a seat in the European Parliament.
6. Weights are derived from the DPES for two reasons: First, it allows one to deal with covariance of these variables. Second, it ensures that the differences analyses based on the matching and the raking results are not the result of differences between the DPES and census data.
7. Supplemental online Appendix 3 replicates the analysis looking at vote choice instead of PTV variables for the raked and the matched data set as well as for the DPES.
8. It divides those who get their income from their own business, a public-sector job, or a private-sector job (coded 0) from those who do not work (because they are disabled, on social security, pensioned, studying, or a homemaker; coded 1).
9. An inductive Mokken scaling analysis, Automatic Item Selection Procedure for the 2012 Election Compass data, yields very similar results.
10. 50Plus is much more popular among CDA voters in the matched data than in the raked data. This may have to do with the differing ways in which these methods approach the age variable.
11. Fewer than 20 respondents voted for 50Plus, for instance, in the 2012 DPES.

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