

Policy Debate of the Hour

Aging Europe and the Politics of Who Votes

Key Messages

- Under-50s have become a minority of voters, weakening younger citizens' electoral weight
- Turnout has fallen among under-50s while rising among older voters, further amplifying the mere impact of aging
- Each new cohort enters the electorate less likely to vote and does not catch up later
- Youth disengagement is strongest where population aging has advanced the fastest
- Party manifestos have shifted toward issues that concern older voters, especially pensions and retirement



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Europe's aging population is usually discussed as a fiscal, healthcare, and labor-market challenge. Yet it is also a democratic challenge: as the electorate ages, the voters who are most likely to decide elections increasingly belong to older cohorts. Political parties may respond to those incentives, and younger citizens may find fewer of their priorities reflected in electoral debate. This can create a self-reinforcing cycle: older voters become more pivotal, parties place greater emphasis on older-voter issues, and younger citizens become less likely to participate.

In Barilari, Mastroiocco and Paradisi (2025), we study this mechanism using individual-level data from the European Social Survey and party manifesto data for 14 European countries between 2002 and 2018.¹ The evidence shows that the age profile of voters has changed substantially over a short period. Figure 1 illustrates this clearly: In 2002, people under the age of 50 still made up a small majority of voters in the countries we study. By 2018, they accounted for less than 45 percent of voters. People aged over 50 had become the clear majority of the active electorate.

¹ These are Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

This change is partly mechanical: European societies have aged. But this demographic trend is not the full story. Electoral participation has moved in the same direction: turnout has declined among people under 50 while increasing slightly among older citizens. As a consequence, the political weight of younger citizens has therefore fallen faster than population aging alone would imply.

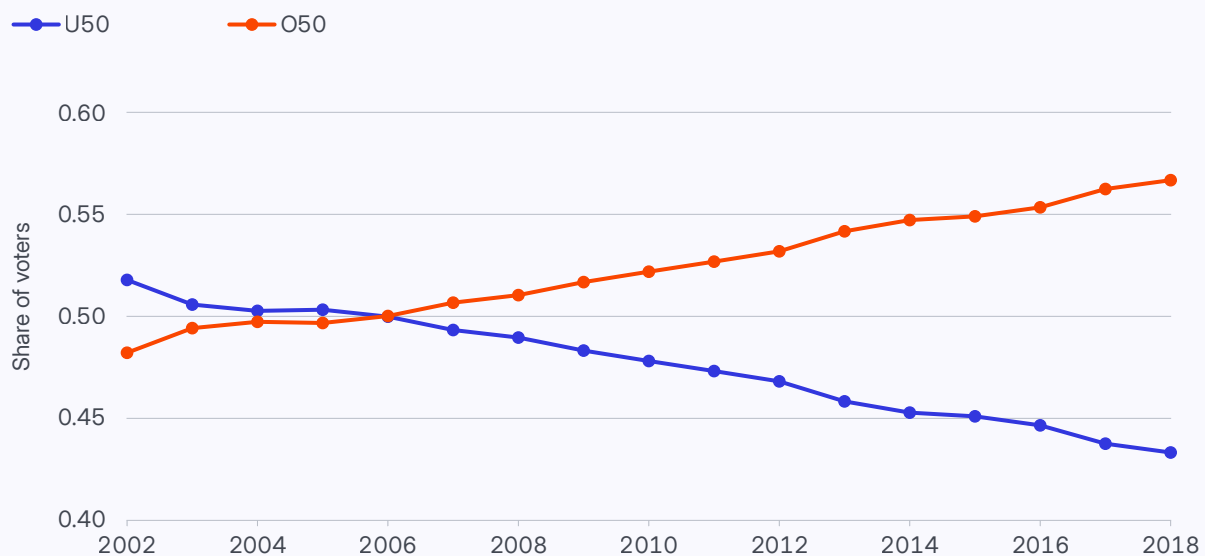
Aging Has Changed the Electorate

The first fact is the simplest: the voter population has become older. In the early 2000s, under-50s narrowly outnumbered over-50s among voters. The two groups reached parity around 2006. Since then, the gap has widened steadily in favor of older voters. By the end of our sample period, voters over 50 represented more than half of those who turned out, while under-50s had become a minority.

This distinction between eligible citizens and actual voters is crucial. Democratic representation is shaped by those who participate, not only by those who have the right to vote. If all age groups voted at similar and stable rates, population aging would still tilt the electorate toward older voters. But when younger participation falls at the same time, the tilt becomes sharper and politically more consequential.

Figure 1

Share of Voters by Age Group (Under and Over 50) in 14 European Countries, 2002–2018^a



^a This figure presents the trends in the share of under-50 and over-50 voters. We measure the share of voters of each age group by interacting their turnout propensity with the population's demographics.

Source: Barilari et al. (2025); EES ERIC (2002–2018); Eurostat (1960–2025).

Turnout Decline Is a Cohort Pattern

A common interpretation of low youth turnout emphasizes the fact that participation increases with age. Indeed, citizens generally become more likely to vote as they move through the life course. Yet focusing on age-related increases obscures an important trend. Our evidence highlights the importance of cohort replacement: each successive cohort enters the electorate at a lower level of participation than the one before it, and these initial deficits are not fully overcome later in life. Consequently, turnout rises within cohorts as they age, but successive cohorts remain less likely to vote than their predecessors. This dynamic is well depicted in Figure 2.

This cohort pattern changes the policy meaning of youth disengagement. If low turnout were only a lifecycle effect, today's young nonvoters might become tomorrow's reliable voters. Instead, lower initial engagement appears to persist. Cohorts that start with weaker electoral participation remain less represented as they move through adulthood.

The pattern also varies across countries in a way that links political disengagement to demographic change. Countries that aged faster experienced larger declines in the turnout ratio of under-50 to over-50 voters. In our long-difference analysis, a one-standard-deviation increase in the share of people aged 50 to 70 is associated with a two-percent-

age-point decline in the turnout ratio of younger to older voters.

This finding is consistent with a feedback mechanism. In countries where older voters become more central to electoral competition, younger voters may perceive the political system as less responsive to their concerns.

Political Agendas Have Also Aged

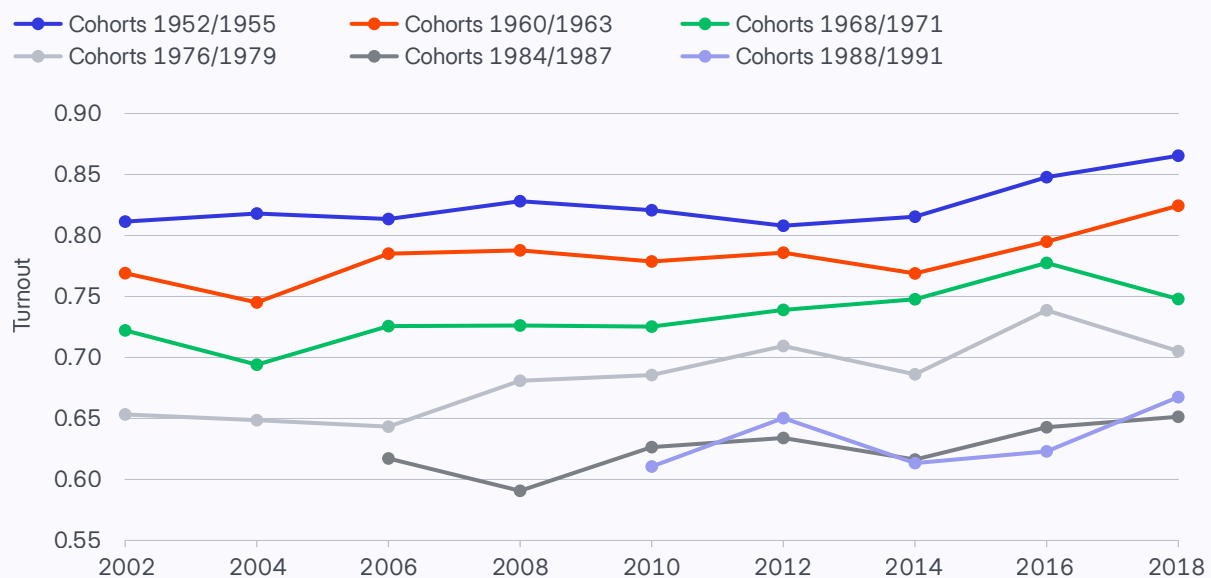
The second part of the analysis asks whether the supply side of politics has moved with the electorate. Drawing on the Manifesto Project Database (Lehmann, Burst, Regel, Volkens, Weißels and Zehnter 2023) to track the salience of topics in party manifestos, we focus on retirement and pension policy as issues likely to be especially relevant to older voters, and unemployment policy as an issue with higher salience for younger workers and labor-market entrants.

As Figure 3 shows, the shift is clear. Pension and retirement terms have become more prominent in party manifestos, while unemployment terms have declined. This is not simply a generic change in the length or style of manifestos: the share of stopwords remains essentially flat. The language of electoral competition has moved toward older-voter issues.

The content of pension-related language is also revealing. Parties increasingly mention welfare expansion related to

Figure 2

Turnout Trend by Cohorts, 2002–2018^a



^a This figure presents the evolution of turnout over the lifecycle of some groups of cohorts. The graph plots the turnout trends for eight different cohort groups. For the youngest groups, we plot the line starting in the year in which the youngest cohort in the group is at least 22.
Source: Barilari et al. (2025); EES ERIC (2002–2018).

retirement rather than emphasizing fiscal restraint. This matters because population aging raises pressure on public finances. Yet the electoral logic points in the other direction: as older voters become more pivotal, parties have stronger incentives to protect or expand policies that are especially valuable to them.

The manifesto shift is stronger in countries that have aged more: here, parties place significantly greater emphasis on pension-related issues relative to unemployment-related issues. Demand and supply therefore seem to move together: younger voters participate less, and parties speak more to older electorates.

This does not imply that pension policy is unwarranted or that older voters' interests should count less. Retirement security is a central component of social insurance. The concern is representational balance. If younger cohorts vote less and parties respond by shifting attention away from younger-voter priorities, democratic systems may underinvest in policies whose benefits arrive over longer horizons.

Policy Implications

Population aging should be treated not only as a budgetary challenge, but also as a challenge to democratic representation. Aging changes who votes, and changes in who votes can alter what political parties choose to emphasize. When

lower turnout among younger cohorts compounds demographic aging, policies with long-run payoffs for younger and future generations may receive too little attention.

First, governments and electoral authorities should monitor age and cohort participation more systematically. Aggregate turnout can look stable while the composition of voters changes substantially. Regular reporting of turnout by age group and birth cohort would make it easier to detect whether representation is becoming less balanced over time.

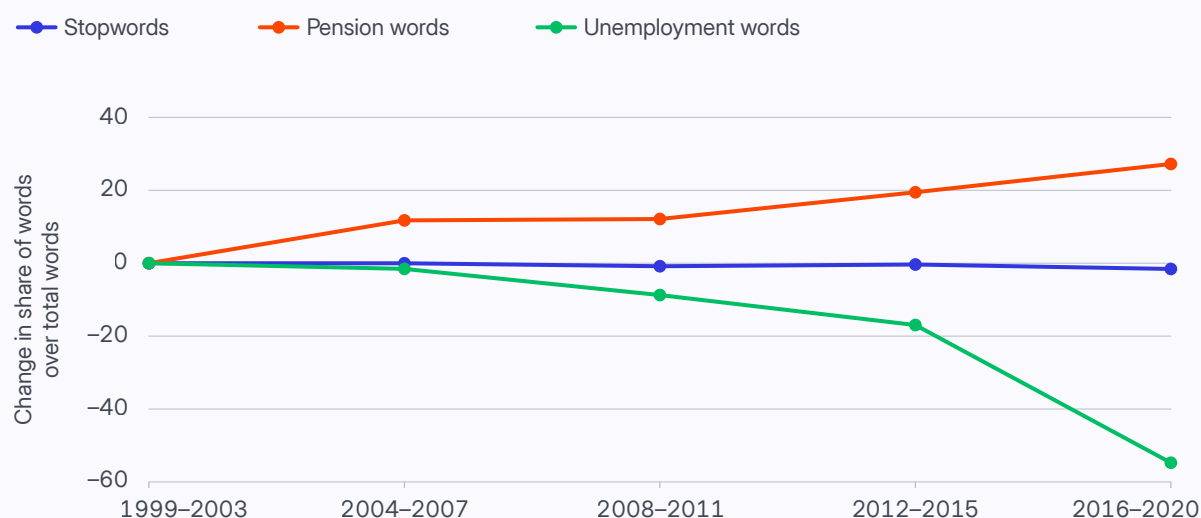
Second, reforms that reduce the cost of voting for younger citizens deserve renewed attention. The cohort evidence suggests that early engagement matters: if citizens enter adulthood disengaged from elections, they may remain disengaged.

Third, fiscal and social policy debates should make intergenerational trade-offs explicit. Protecting older citizens from poverty is a legitimate and important policy goal. But when pension commitments crowd out investments in education, housing, childcare, labor-market entry, or climate adaptation, younger citizens may see politics as unresponsive to their needs.

Finally, political parties have a responsibility to represent older voters without allowing younger citizens to disappear

Figure 3

Policies Discussed in Manifestos – Pension and Unemployment, 1999–2020^a



^a The figure illustrates the changing frequencies of words related to "pension," "unemployment," and stopwords in political party manifestos across various electoral cycles, in comparison to the baseline period 1999–2003. We construct this figure by counting the occurrences of "unemployment," "pension," and stopwords in the manifestos, alongside the total word count. The dataset is then organized at the electoral cycle level, which typically spans four to five years, to create a more structured panel. We then calculate the shares by dividing the counts of "unemployment," "pension," and stopwords by the total word count in the manifestos for each electoral cycle.

Source: Barilari et al. (2025); Lehmann et al. (2023).

from the agenda. Aging societies need durable welfare states, but they also need young citizens who believe that democratic politics speaks to them. Otherwise, Europe risks a cycle in which young people vote less because politics seems less relevant, and politics becomes less relevant to them because they vote less. •

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