Political Activism and the Aging of the Baby Boom

By John B. Williamson

Will there be an increase in the level of political activism among the elderly when the baby boomers retire? If so, what forms will this activism take? Will there be an increase in the confrontational activism of the 1960s, or will boomer activism take more passive forms? The goal of this article is to address these questions and offer observations about some of the factors likely to shape the direction of political activism among boomers as they move from midlife to late life.

Many analysts have made arguments consistent with Karl Mannheim's (1952) suggestion that the world view of each generation is in large measure shaped by events unique to the period during which it comes of age. In the present context, the argument is that the confrontational activism of the boomers during the 1960s and early 1970s is likely to show up again when the boomers reach old age.

A variant of this view, leading to a somewhat different conclusion, is that the boomer generation is made up of two minigenerations, a younger group born between 1955 and 1964 and an older group born between 1946 and 1954. The political and economic experiences of these two groups have been different (Bouvier and De Vita, 1991). The older boomers have economically benefited from better timing with respect to when they entered both the housing market and the job market (Cornman and Kingson, 1996). The economic consequences of these differences will persist into old age, leading to a cumulative disadvantage for the younger group and increasing inequality between the two segments of the boomer generation (Light, 1988; O'Rand, 1996). The resulting inequality will influence the level, form, and goals of political activism for each group, making generalizations about the boomers as a whole suspect.

Yet another view is that over the 40-to-50-year period from young adulthood to old age, a number of events typically take place that all but erase any long-term impact that activism in early life has on activism in late life. This view agrees that some boomers will persist as activists throughout life, but asserts that, at least in the aggregate, levels of activism during the 1960s
are of little use in forecasting the level of activism when boomers retire.

**Will Activism Increase?**

Those arguing that there may be little if any increase in activism with the retirement of the boomers point out that even during the 1960s activism was not as pervasive as suggested by many retrospective television and film portrayals of the era. While there were many mass demonstrations, most of those involved were college students. A majority of boomers were not in college, and most college students were not activists. Many who attended a few demonstrations had far too casual an involvement to be described as activists. While there may be some disagreement as to how activist the boomer cohort was during the 1960s, there is general agreement that the level has greatly diminished since then. Given the low level of activism at midlife, questions can be raised about any predicted upsurge in activism as the boomers move into old age.

However, there are reasons to believe that there may be at least some increase in the level of senior activism with the aging of the boomers. Even if there were no increase in the proportion of the elderly population politically active, there would be reason to expect an increase in the amount of activism on demographic grounds alone. The elderly boomers will make up a substantially larger share of the population than do today’s elderly.

Some analysts do, however, have a different take on this projected demographic change. Drawing on the work of economists such as Mancur Olson, they argue that as the size of the elderly population increases, the proportion who make the effort to be politically active will decline (McKenzie, 1993). Why? As the size of an interest group increases, it tends to become more heterogeneous and more difficult to mobilize for collective action.

**Will a Senior Protest Movement Reemerge?**

Under the leadership of Maggie Kuhn, the Gray Panthers organized many protest demonstrations by older people on behalf of older people during the 1970s (Powell, Branco, and Williamson, 1996). But this country has not seen mass involvement of older people in protest activity since the 1930s when the Townsend movement called for enactment of a national pension system (Holzmann, 1963). The evidence from the 1930s suggests that if conditions are right, mass protest by older people can take place despite the more general trend for vigorous forms of political involvement to decline in old age.

The Townsend movement was only one (but the largest) of many mass protest movements made up largely of older people during the 1930s (Williamson, Evans, and Powell, 1982). Are we likely to see the reemergence of such groups when the boomers retire? It could happen, but it is unlikely. The senior protest movements of the 1930s were a product of a confluence of historical events and conditions that are unlikely to be reproduced during the 2030s. Those movements were in large part made up of the elderly and near elderly who were in very desperate economic circumstances because of the Great Depression. There was no federal pension system. The assumption was that older workers who could not afford to retire would continue to work during old age, but the Depression made it all but impossible for many to obtain work. Another important difference was that large mediating institutions that today speak in behalf of the elderly, such as the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Council of Senior Citizens, did not exist.

During the 2030s conditions will most likely be quite different. One difference is that most elderly boomers will be covered by Social Security, and many will be eligible for other private pension benefits as well. There were no federal health insurance programs in the 1930s, but the boomers will have Medicare and Medicaid. During the 2030s the elderly will be more heterogeneous racially (Day, 1992; Kingson, 1992). This increased racial heterogeneity may inhibit political mobilization. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, approximately two-thirds of the elderly were poor; today the figure is down to about 13 percent (Hudson, 1996). Given current trends, in 2030 a much smaller proportion of the elderly will be poor than during the Depression, and many more will be af-
fluent. However, as the boomers age, economic inequality will increase (Congressional Budget Office, 1993), making it more difficult to mobilize the elderly.

While we have no way of forecasting economic conditions during the 2030s with any confidence, we can say that the demographic conditions for the employment of older workers will be more favorable than they are today and much more favorable than they were during the 1930s. Because of the smaller cohorts that follow the boomers, many employers will be hard pressed to fill all of their openings. We are already seeing evidence that some employers are looking to the elderly to fill jobs that once would have been filled by teenagers or young adults. There is every reason to believe that this trend will continue. In short, if the 2030s does experience a reemergence of a mass protest movement of senior activists, the confluence of causal factors and historical events responsible will be quite different from those in the 1930s.

**What Forms Will Boomer Activism Take?**

It is quite possible that any increase in activism among elder boomers will focus on issues that are not aging related. The boomers are very diverse, and they will carry many of their midlife social and political interests into old age. While the attention given to aging issues will increase, it would be a mistake to assume that their activism will focus on Social Security and Medicare.

However, to the extent that the aging boomers do focus on aging issues, these are likely to be Social Security, Medicare, and taxes. At the national level there may be an increase in activism linked to Social Security or Medicare policy debates about such concerns as the proposed privatization of Social Security (Williamson, 1997). More common may be activism at the local level around such issues as school bond referendums. In some communities the elderly are more likely to oppose tax increases linked to spending on schools than are younger voters (Button, 1992). As the boomers retire, we may begin to see more evidence of senior opposition to increased local taxes to support schools, particularly in Sun Belt retirement communities.

What many commentators have in mind when discussing the prospect of boomer activism is the confrontational protest activism associated with the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement during the 1960s. There is now much empirical evidence that the more active forms of political involvement, which would include participating in protest demonstrations, decline with age (Jennings and Markus, 1988).

While vigorous forms of political involvement tend to decline during late life, more passive forms of political involvement persist well into old age. This includes voting and contacting public officials (Binstock and Day, 1996). Voter participation rates remain high through the decade of the 70s. As the older boomers will on average have better health, be better educated, and have higher incomes than today's elderly, their voter participation rates may increase relative to today's elderly.

A form of passive political activism that has not received adequate attention to date is checkbook activism. Many boomers who were participating in protest demonstrations during the 1960s are today writing checks to support the work of various political and social causes. This money is being used to pay for mass media ads, Washington lobbyists, and other forms of activism tailored to the realities of policy making in contemporary America. If current trends continue, retired boomers will have more income and wealth than today's elderly. It may turn out that the checkbook activism of elderly boomers will prove to be more influential than their attendance at protest demonstrations was during the 1960s.

Given the rate of change with respect to computers, television, and telecommunications over the past couple of decades, we have reason to believe that developments over the next few decades may have a profound impact on the political activism of elderly boomers. Many of these boomers will be very much at home with fax machines, e-mail, and the Internet (including electronic bulletin boards, list servers, and home pages). Many will have access to much easier to use forms of the Internet than are in place today. These changes will facilitate efforts to organize the boomers (Emerman, 1997). The current
trend in telecommunications will also make it easier for older boomers to put political pressure on their elected representatives. This cyber (or e-mail) activism may be viewed as a passive form of political involvement when compared with the protest demonstrations of the 1960s, but in the years ahead it may turn out to be even more influential.

WILL BOOMER ACTIVISM BE PROGRESSIVE?

The senior activism of the 1930s was largely informed by progressive redistributive goals. For example, the Townsend movement called for a highly redistributive national pension (Williamson and Pampel, 1993). A progressive social justice agenda undergirded much of the boomer activism of the 1960s and early 1970s in connection with the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's rights movement.

Based on this evidence, does it make sense to expect any upsurge in activism associated with the retirement of the boomers to be informed by a progressive agenda reminiscent of the 1960s? Probably not. One reason is that there has already been a shift to the right in political ideology as the boomers have moved from youth to middle age. More boomers identify themselves as being conservative and fewer identify themselves as being liberal than was the case during the 1960s. There has been a decline in the proportion who identify themselves as being Democratic and an increase in the proportion who identify themselves as being Republican.

As the boomers move from middle age to old age, it is likely that the trend toward increasing economic inequality will continue (Easterlin, Macunovich, and Crimmins, 1993). Those who are well educated, and particularly those with sought-after skills, will continue to accumulate assets at a much more rapid pace than those with less education and employed in less-favored industries. This increasing economic heterogeneity will make it difficult to unite the boomer elderly behind a progressive social welfare agenda. The more affluent (and also more influential) segment of the boomer generation may oppose redistributive policies.

The response to enactment of the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act of 1988 serves as an example of the kind of activism we may see more of with the aging of the boomers. Within a year, Congress repealed the act in large measure in response to opposition from the elderly themselves, or more accurately, opposition from the affluent elderly and organizations speaking on their behalf. This legislation would not have been opposed by the elderly had it been funded by intergenerational transfers; but it became very unpopular among the more affluent elderly once it became clear that it would be funded by the elderly themselves and would involve transfers from the more to the less affluent elderly (Hudson, 1996).

While some boomers always have and always will support redistributive social policies, it is not obvious that a progressive agenda will typify elderly boomers as a group. The popularity of the idea of partially privatizing Social Security among many boomers, particularly affluent boomers, suggests that elderly boomers may not be strong defenders of the redistributive goals of Social Security as currently structured.

CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that there will be a sharp increase in political activism among the baby boomers as they move into old age. We will not see a return to the mass protest activism of the senior movement during the 1930s or even to that of the boomers themselves during the 1960s. However, it is possible that there will be an increase in some less physically demanding forms of activism. The boomers will be more affluent than today's elderly, and the proportion who are wealthy will be greater; this situation could lead to an increase in checkbook activism, efforts to promote various social causes and movements through charitable contributions. The boomers will be more literate than today's elderly with respect to modern forms of telecommunications. Current technologies such as fax and e-mail as well as other forms yet to emerge could lead to an increase in cyber activism. In the event that there is an increase in activism as the boomers move into late life, it may not be progressive and it may not focus on aging issues.

John B. Williamson, Ph.D., is professor, Department of Sociology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass.
REFERENCES


