

Age over youth? How the 'grandfather effect' is shaping world politics

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As millennial and post-millennial voters become the largest group of voters around the world, Flinders University experts warn that the 'grandfather effect' has seen people from previous generations retain or

elected to office at an advanced age.

This follows a new study of 1,000 young voters which has busted the myth that younger voters prefer young political leaders—which is evident with only a handful of world leaders being aged under 39 years.

The political science study found that age (up to 70 and older) and experience won the youth vote, provided the older candidates have left-of-center policies that support younger voters' positions on social and identity issues.

"Although older candidates with left-wing policies were preferred, this was often but not always necessarily the case with younger candidates," says Flinders University Associate Professor Rodrigo Praino, an electoral behavior analyst at the College of Business, Government and Law.

"We set out to explore why younger voters are drawn to older male candidates in more than one advanced western democracy—raising questions about whether there is something 'different' about the voting habits of millennials and post-millennials."

While large numbers of young voters support [young leaders](#) running for office—such as Jacinda Adern in New Zealand in 2020—they can also show strong support for relatively older candidates such as Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK—and even candidates aged 80+ such as Germany's Greens MP Hans-Christian Ströbele.

"Our study shows that millennials and post-millennials do not seem to display any kind of intergenerational bias against older candidates," says Associate Professor Praino.

"In other words, the young voters today appear to be happy to support

older candidates, provided their policy stances are in line with what the young voters feel is important to them."

Millennials or Gen Y voters born between about 1981 and 1996 are now aged in their 20s and 30s—and post-millennials (Gen Z) born between 1997 and 2012 are coming into voting power. They follow Gen X (1965-1980) and Boomer generations, many of whom are retirees or heading into retirement.

The Flinders University study shows that contrary to the descriptive representation literature, young voters are "significantly more likely to support older candidates if they are aware that these candidates champion general left-wing policies," says co-author Professor Charlie Lees, now based at the University of London.

"All things being equal, younger voters do not prefer younger candidates to older candidates," he says.

The study sought to understand younger [voter](#) turnout and engagement in the [political process](#) to examine possible increased representation for younger citizens in positions of power and national decision-making.

"Even though [young voters](#) are often described as disengaged and disinterested in conventional political participation, they are known to be able to mobilize in remarkable, non-conventional ways," the researchers conclude.

The article is published in the *International Political Science Review*.

More information: Charles Lees et al, Young voters, older candidates and policy preferences: Evidence from two experiments, *International Political Science Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/01925121221139544](https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121221139544)

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