

Tekst 5

Europe

Charlemagne | Europe's worrying gerontocracy

- 1 **S**EEN from afar, Europe looks like a "gerontocracy", an American newspaper reported in 1963. Europeans were young in years and outlook (their median age was just 32). But their leaders included the 87-year-old Konrad Adenauer in Germany; Charles de Gaulle in France (then 72, and destined to hang on to the presidency for six more years); and the baby of the bunch, Britain's 68-year-old Harold Macmillan.
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- 2 Today Europe again faces rule by the elderly. Not because its leaders are all ancient: modern politicians tend to flaunt pregnant wives and school-age children, and disport themselves in cycling shorts and running kit. Now it is the voters who have aged. By 2050, more than a third of potential European Union voters will be over 65. And because older voters turn out more reliably than the young, they could wield crushing power.
- 3 That alarms those worried about Europe's pension and welfare systems. David Willetts, a British Tory, has caused a stir with "The Pinch", a book accusing baby-boomers (a huge cohort born between 1945 and 1965) of stealing their children's future. Boomers own more than half of Britain's £6 trillion (\$9 trillion) of personal wealth, he claims. Mr Willetts (born in 1956) fears that an army of retired boomers may vote for whopping sums to be spent on health care and pensions, against the wishes of younger taxpayers who might prefer spending on things like education.
- 4 Such fears are inspiring bold thinking. Ary Lans Bovenberg at Tilburg University in the Netherlands (born in 1958) wonders if parents should be given an extra vote at elections for each young child in their charge. An economist at Vienna University, Dennis Mueller (born in 1940) notes that the old have to take driving tests to keep their licences. What about citizenship tests before they are allowed to vote, similar to the civic quizzes faced by many immigrants? Some political parties, including Labour in Britain, have suggested that the legal voting age should fall to 16.
- 5 Such solutions tend to have drawbacks. They discriminate against those who cannot have children. Or they insult older voters who have served their countries for decades. In 2008 Austria became the first European country to allow 16-year-olds to vote in national elections. A lot of them promptly voted for far-right parties, which got more support from the young than from the old.
- 6 It is easy to be gloomy about the idea of a gerontocracy seizing power in the European Union. Eurobarometer opinion polls, which survey 1,000 citizens in each of the 27 EU members, offer rich seams of evidence that political and

- economic preferences vary with age. 12, older voters are less satisfied with their lives and more pessimistic about the economic future.
- 7 Overall, Europeans are less entrepreneurial and less mobile than Americans. The averages conceal age differences. A 2007 Eurobarometer found 61% of Americans would rather be self-employed. Europeans under 24 came close to American levels of enthusiasm for the risky freedom of the entrepreneur. But older Europeans preferred having a regular salary, thank you.
- 8 And yet a fixation on age risks missing a more serious problem facing Europe. It is true that Eurobarometer surveys show opinions varying with age. But such differences are trumped by those based on nationality. Take enthusiasm for self-employment. Older Europeans are less keen than the young on going it alone, but not by much. Yet at Europe's extremes the gaps are huge: 57% of Portuguese fancy being self-employed, but only 30% of Belgians. (The survey found Belgians especially keen on fixed working hours, a finding that rings true for anyone needing a Brussels plumber at the weekend.)
- 9 A recent Eurobarometer asked if governments should make it easier for older people to keep working after their retirement age, if they wished. It found small differences by age, but astonishing gulfs by nationality. Almost nine out of ten respondents in Britain, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands said oldies should be helped to work if they wanted. At the other extreme, 55% of Greeks were opposed. That may be because Greeks lead the EU in believing the lump-of-labour fallacy: a huge majority agree that, as older people work longer, "fewer jobs will be available for younger people". The fallacy that working oldies would automatically steal jobs from the young is also popular in Cyprus, Hungary, Portugal and Italy, even though those countries face very different rates of ageing. In other words, national political cultures matter more than age.
- 10 Spain's government appears scared even to debate a higher pension age. Others are braver. In Nordic countries legal retirement ages are increasingly pegged to life expectancy.
- 11 Gerontocratic rule certainly poses long-term dangers. But Europe must above all avoid being pulled apart, as some countries tackle ageing better than others. Old age is not the enemy of reform: ignorance, selfishness and timidity are. The old have no monopoly on these vices and may have picked up some wisdom. In the coming decades, Europe will need much of that.

The Economist, 2010

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- 1p 10 What is the main point made in paragraph 2?
- A Older voters have a lot of political power nowadays.
 - B Political authority has finally come to rest with the young.
 - C The elderly abuse the legal power they have.
 - D The political control exerted by the elderly in the past still influences the present.

- 1p 11 How can paragraphs 4 and 5 be characterised best?
- A They advocate the necessity for age-controlled voting.
 - B They contradict the need for a shift in political power.
 - C They discuss reactions to the current demographic situation.
 - D They show the political benefits of an ageing society.
- 1p 12 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 6?
- A Consequently
 - B For instance
 - C Nevertheless
 - D Obviously
- 2p 13 Geef van elk van de volgende beweringen aan of deze wel of niet in overeenstemming is met de inhoud van alinea 7 tot en met 10.
- 1 Young Europeans resemble Americans with regard to entrepreneurship.
 - 2 The majority of Northern Europeans are against a flexible retirement age.
 - 3 Certain European nations consider the elderly unwelcome players on the labour market.
 - 4 The average age in northern European countries is significantly higher than in the South.
- Noteer het nummer van elke bewering, gevolgd door “wel” of “niet”.
- “a more serious problem” (eerste zin alinea 8)
- 1p 14 Leg in je eigen woorden uit wat dit serieuzere probleem is.
- 1p 15 Which of the following can be concluded about Europe’s political future from the last paragraph?
- 1 Political reform can only be achieved by young politicians.
 - 2 Bridging the generation gap will consolidate European unity.
- A only 1 is true
 - B only 2 is true
 - C both 1 and 2 are true
 - D neither 1 nor 2 is true
- 1p 16 Which of the following quotations is meant to be taken completely seriously?
- A “and the baby of the bunch, Britain’s 68-year-old Harold Macmillan” (paragraph 1)
 - B “because older voters turn out more reliably than the young, they could wield crushing power” (paragraph 2)
 - C “older Europeans preferred having a regular salary, thank you” (paragraph 7)
 - D “a finding that rings true for anyone needing a Brussels plumber at the weekend” (paragraph 8)